

A WEEK'S CLIMBING IN SKYE.

BY JOHN R. LEVACK, M.B.

GRAND as the Cairngorms undoubtedly are, and especially so in winter, when they afford almost boundless scope for snow work, they are lacking in one thing—the facilities they give for good rock-climbing are meagre and unsatisfactory, and the climber who would indulge in this fascinating branch of his sport must go afield. To nowhere can he go where the conditions desired are so nearly perfect as on the Coolin in Skye.

Accordingly, a party of three, Messrs. William Garden, W. A. Reid and the writer, under the leadership of the first named, set out for the "Isle of Mist" one day last September, bent on a week's "ridge-wandering" over the most wonderful hills in the British Isles. As we wished to be as close as possible to the great peaks, we obtained accommodation at the shepherd's house at Glen Brittle, and Miss Campbell, the shepherd's sister, had everything in readiness for us when we arrived at 1 a.m. from Portree, after a six hours' heartbreaking drive. Without doubt, the proper way to reach Glen Brittle from Portree is to drive to Sligachan, stay over night, and walk the rest of the way next day.

Our lodging was situated within a mile of the western slope of Sgurr Dearg, whilst the tops of Gobhar, Bannachdich, Alasdair, and Sgumain, less than two miles away, could be seen from a grassy mound in front of the house. On looking out next morning we found everything shrouded in dense mist, and it was past mid-day before we set out to explore the burn coming out of Coire a' Ghreadaidh. This burn has cut out a rather remarkable gorge in the foot hills, in some parts about 100 feet deep, but, as one follows it up into the corrie, it comes to the surface again and tumbles in noisy fashion over the

Sgurr
Sgumain.

Sgurr
Alasdair.

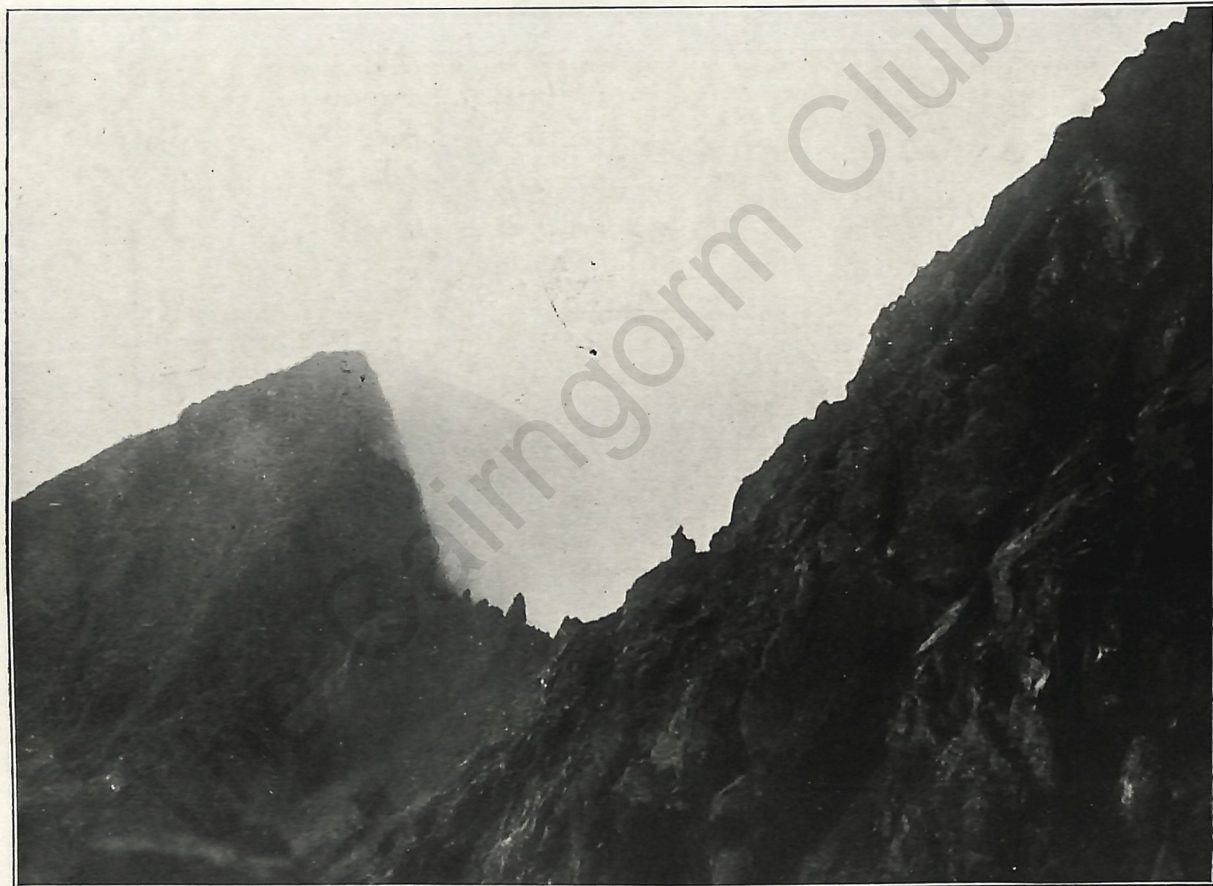


Photo. by

THE SGUMAIN-ALASDAIR RIDGE, SKYE.

W. Garden.

clean bare rock. The corrie runs up on the right to a steep rock face on the north side of An Diallyaid, a spur of the main ridge at Sgurr na Bannachdich.

As we had a rope with us, we could not resist a scramble up the rocks, in spite of the fact that it was now raining steadily, and every little gully on the hill-face streamed with water. A short pitch, with an unstable chock stone, in a steep gully gave some exciting moments, but ultimately the ridge was gained and traversed for some distance, and then we made our way down the scree slopes into Coire an Eich, and so home, drenched to the skin, but perfectly pleased with our first day's introduction to the Coolin. Towards evening the mist cleared off the topmost peaks, whose needle-like points showed black and grim against the evening sky. The mist lingered in the corries, and some magnificent colour effects were witnessed before the sun finally dipped below the horizon.

Next morning we were off at daylight, and crossing the moor we reached the western slope of Sgumain, up which we toiled to the ridge. This we religiously followed to the cairn (3104 feet) on the highest point of the hill. Some interesting scrambling downwards, necessitating the use of the rope, landed us at the top of the Bealach or Col between Sgumain and Alasdair. The ridge beyond this is narrow, and presents, at intervals, rock pinnacles or "gendarmes," which we surmounted one by one, with a single exception which was "turned" on the right. The drop on the Coire Lagan side is perpendicular in places, whilst that on Ghrunnda side is scarcely less steep. Stones dislodged into Coire Ghrunnda bounded off in great and ever-increasing leaps, dislodging others in their train, till finally huge masses joined in the mad rush, and the whole corrie resounded with the roar of the rock avalanche as it crashed to the bottom of the cliffs. Mercifully everything was shrouded in mist, and we were not troubled with the sensational nature of the climb. Once or twice as we looked ahead the topmost rocks of Sgurr Alasdair peeped out above the mist, for all the world like a glorified Mitchell Tower, gleaming in the sun.

The highest point seemed thousands of feet above us and apparently inaccessible.

Soon we came to the "mauvais pas"—the one difficult place on the ridge. The rocks at this point slightly overhang up to the level of one's neck, then slope steeply upwards without a vestige of hand-hold for some little distance. One man alone cannot get up here, but, by getting a "back-up," one of our party could just get a knee on the sloping ledge. By then lying flat on the good rough rock, utilising the friction of "Harris cum Gabbro" to hold the body in position, it was possible to worm one's way slowly upwards till some projecting knobs of rock gave the required hand-holds, and firm anchorage was obtained. The other two members of the party quickly scrambled up, and the ascent of the remainder of the ridge, though steep and requiring care, offered no difficulty, and the cairn on the highest point of Sgurr Alasdair (3309 feet) was reached. The mist cleared a little as we stood beside the cairn, and we obtained a superb view of Sgurr Dearg with its "Inaccessible Pinnacle." Sgurr Tearlach loomed up close at hand, separated from us by the top of the Alasdair Stone Shoot, and, as the day was still young, we determined to include Tearlach in the programme. As we prepared to climb down the steep rocks of Alasdair to the top of the shoot we had the great good fortune to witness the Spectre of the Brocken,—our shadows projected on the mist, which still lay in Coire Lagan. The three shadows looked gigantic and weird, and were inclosed in one large halo. A photograph was taken of the apparition by Garden, with a satisfactory result.

The climb down to the top of the stone shoot was short, but required careful management, and we ultimately stood on the top of the shoot, that remarkable gully which stretches downwards in one single sweep to the foot of Alasdair. Its upper part is flanked on either side by the gigantic overhanging cliffs of solid rock of Alasdair and Tearlach, and forms an easy but exasperating way up or down Alasdair. The way up Tearlach was not

very apparent, but by searching the rock face we came on a spot, a little to the Ghrunnda side of the highest point of the shoot, where the scratches of hob-nails were unmistakable. Up we went, and in twenty minutes the cairn was reached. Unfortunately the mist again closed in, and so we did not have the luck to see around us from what is admitted to be one of the best view points in the Coolin. The climb down to the Col again was a little more difficult than that from the cairn of Alasdair, as the holds were not so plentiful, and it took us half an-hour to descend. Then we coiled up the rope and had lunch.

The mist had lifted once again, and we lay on the sun-bathed rocks, at peace with the world and with all men. Now that we had no longer to concentrate our energies on balancing feats on narrow ridges, and on keeping our feet clear of the rope, we had time to look about us. We got another view of the Brocken Spectre, this time over the shoulder of Tearlach, on looking into the Garbh-Coire. After a short rest we turned our steps down the stone shoot, plunging again into dense fog. The sharp boulders forming the slope of the shoot lie exactly at the angle of repose, and, as we stepped forward, the whole mass frequently slid downwards with us. The journey down the Coire Lagan took three quarters of an hour, and was an experience which was both tiresome and monotonous. We hurried down Coire Lagan, and Glen Brittle was reached just before dark.

Next day we were off at sunrise to explore Coir 'a Ghrunnda—a corrie which has only one way in—by keeping to the left high up on the screes of Sgumain. We followed the burn, and had some exciting scrambling up steep rocks before we eventually reached the loch. Mist was over everything as usual, but we struck up the rocks to Caisteal a' Garbh-Choire, which stands sentinel-like at the head of Coir 'a Ghrunnda. Skirting the base of this tower we went up the rocks to the left, and eventually, by a series of steep chimneys, reached a narrow ridge with a cairn on its highest point, the height of which the aneroid gave as slightly over 3000 feet. We hoped we

were on Sgurr Dubh Mohr, and, as the ridge extending to the eastward looked grim and forbidding through the mist, we concluded we had done enough for one day, and attempted to descend again to the castle. This proved rather difficult, and several routes were tried before we reached the Col. The waning light warned us to hurry, for Coir 'a Ghrunnda is no place in which to be benighted. We fairly raced homewards, and reached Glen Brittle about six o'clock. On discussing, after dinner, the events of the day, with the aid of maps and other things, we found we had been on the top, not of Sgurr Dubh Mohr, but of Sgurr Dubh na Da Bheinn, and that the ridge we saw through the mist was that leading to the former peak.

Next day the rain came down in earnest, and we had perforce to stay indoors. It cleared a little about mid-day, so we went boulder-scrambling on the huge rocks that lie scattered below the mouth of Coir 'a Ghrunnda. This filled in the afternoon, and we returned to our quarters before seven o'clock.

Next morning we were out early in spite of the mist, and went up the western slope of Sgurr Dearg. The ridge was traversed, and we eventually found ourselves looking up at the "Inaccessible Pinnacle," round whose perpendicular flanks the mist swirled in the most eerie fashion. The climb of this most fascinating pinnacle we decided to postpone to a more convenient season, and continued our ridge walk towards Sgurr na Bannachdich. Holding too much to the right (we could scarcely see ten yards ahead), we found our progress barred by a vertical cliff, and had to search for a way down. Eventually the Bannachdich ridge was found, and the three peaks were traversed. Sgurr Thormaid, the fourth peak of Bannachdich, showed at times through the mist, but seemed so far away that we postponed its ascent also to a more suitable occasion, and we lunched under some rocks near the highest point of Bannachdich. The rain-drip over our shelter afforded a convenient means, with the aid of a drinking cup, whereby we could allay our thirst. The

descent of the screes of Sgurr Gobhar into Coire na Bannachdich, varied by exciting scrambles over steep rocks, ended a delightful and exasperating day. We turned in early and had a ten hours' dreamless sleep.

We started early next morning with the intention of having a big day. A long walk over the moors brought us to the south-west side of Gars-Bheinn, the most southerly peak of the Coolin. The day was misty as usual, and nothing could be seen of the tops, but we struck up the screes, and soon reached the cairn that marks the southern termination of the main Coolin ridge. From this the ridge runs north-westwards to Sgurr a' Choire Bhig, and then to Sgurr nan Eag. No difficulty was experienced anywhere, but we crossed a deep fissure in the ridge, the bottom of which we could not see, but which was bridged by a convenient slab of gabbro. We dropped stones into this "crevasse," and counted the seconds until they struck the bottom. The average time was $2\frac{1}{2}$ seconds, and so we reckoned the depth of the gap to be about 100 feet.

Beyond the cairn of Sgurr nan Eag the ridge turns northwards and descends rapidly towards Bealach-a-Garbh-Choire. As we clambered downwards we saw nothing, but we heard the roar of a stream, which we recognised as that which comes down off Sgumain into Ghrunnda Loch. Soon the base of An Caisteal was reached, and we got out at last below the mist. The face of Sgurr Dubh Mohr and that of Sgurr Dubh na Da Bheinn were both visible, and the route up the latter was eagerly scanned. It looked terribly steep and uninviting, but the map said there was a way, so on we went. Some rough clambering was met with, but, with the exception of a slimy chimney, no serious climbing was encountered, and we duly reached the summit cairn (3089 feet).

Sgurr Dubh Mohr is a magnificent mountain, but we were denied any view from its peak, as the clouds enveloped us once more. We groped our way downwards to the Bealach again, and so into Coir 'a Ghrunnda. The light was failing as usual as we hurried along round

the base of Sgumain, and it was dark before we got to Glen Brittle.

Next morning, having arranged for a gig to take our baggage to Sligachan, we walked up to Coire na Creich, passed Sgurr an Fheadain, with its famous "water-pipe" gully, into Choire a' Mhadaidh. A toilsome grind up a stone shoot brought us to the Bealach between Bruach na Frithe and Bidean, from which a short climb landed us on the former hill. As we neared the summit cairn the mist made attempts to lift, and we had the most ravishing glimpses of corries, pinnacles, sunlit seas, and distant isles. The Outer Hebrides were at times plainly visible, set like jewels in a glistening sea, whilst the Castles of Bidean and the peaks of Mhadaidh loomed dark and forbidding above the misty swirl that still hid the corries from our sight. A descent was made into Fionn Coire, and so on to Sligachan, where we stayed the week-end.

Sunday was almost cloudless, and Sgurr nan Gillean looked most inviting, but the writer's muscles rebelled after seven days' climbing, and we lazed about the glen, admiring the view from below. Next day was to be devoted to Sgurr nan Gillean, but in the morning the mists were tearing across the ridges on the wings of a hurricane, and the "Pinnacle Route" looked doubtful. We made an attempt, however, and reached the base of the first pinnacle, but found it impossible to keep our feet, and so we regretfully turned our backs on the "peak of the young men," and reached the hotel drenched to the skin.

Thus ended our week in Skye; a week full to the uttermost of strenuous climbing on the most perfect rocks in Britain, of days of mist and of sunshine, of toilsome grinds and exciting climbs, of gloom, and of colours gorgeous beyond belief.