

MIDSUMMER IN GLEN BRITTLE.

BY H. C. BOYD.

“But in the prime of the summer time
Give me the Isle of Skye.”

So sang Alexander Nicolson more than forty years ago—better known, perhaps, as Sheriff Nicolson, as true-hearted a son of Skye as ever lived. He knew it and loved it with all the passionate soul of the Celt, and nothing in Skye held his affections more deeply than the range of A'Chuillion—The Coolin. Many of its peaks he was the first to climb, and one of them, the highest of the range, was subsequently named in honour of him, its pioneer—Sgurr Alasdair, or the Peak of Alexander.

From Nicolson's day the popularity of the Coolin may be roughly dated. It is now unquestionably accepted as the finest climbing ground in the British Isles. Men who have made big mountaineering reputations in the Alps come to the Coolin, and are conquered by its spell; year after year they return. The beauty, the mystery, the savage grandeur of these hills, the serrated ridges and shattered pinnacles, the wild corries, the majestic gloom of Loch Coruisk, exercise a perpetual fascination.

Glen Brittle is beyond a doubt the best centre for those who wish to see and do the Coolin. Sligachan, though it has great charms of its own, with its outlook on the princely peak of Sgurr nan Gillean, suffers from the disadvantage of lying at one extremity of the range, and the long walks over the rough moorland before reaching the hills are rather trying. Glen Brittle is free from these drawbacks. It is close to the centre of things. True, it has no hotel, and it is somewhat difficult to reach; but once you are there, and if you are content with the simple accommodation and homely fare of the shepherd's cottage, with its stores of scones and fresh eggs and

unlimited supplies of rich milk, your lot is one to be envied.

It is an enchanting spot. You are surrounded by meadows of soft green grass, brilliant with countless daisies and other wild flowers, rich pasture for the sheep of the glen. The grassy slopes mount straight above you to some of the wildest corries of the Coolin, above which again are to be seen the black rocky crags of Sgurr Alasdair and Sgurr Dearg, wreathed with mists or piercing the blue of the summer sky. Seaward stretches Loch Brittle, with its firm hard beach of the finest sand, washed from the mountain tops. Further out at sea one can see the low lying shores of Canna and the graceful mountain outline of Rum, and, in the far distance, bounding the horizon, the long sweep of the outer Hebrides. In such a scene and amid such surroundings you can lazily dream through a summer day, listening in peaceful content to the murmuring life of the glen and the songs of the thrushes in the trees. If it is wet, and the burns come roaring down in spate, you can ply the rod for brown trout. But wet or fine, if you are a lover of the hills you will attempt to scale the peaks.

June is proverbially the month to see Skye at its best, and it was in June of last year, during the glorious midsummer week, that I made my first acquaintance with Glen Brittle. We were a party of six, with headquarters in Mr Campbell's cottage, half of us, however, sleeping for preference in a tent perched on a grassy knoll close at hand. Collarless and hatless, and in the oldest of clothes, we lived a thoroughly primitive life, free from the trammels of civilisation. And what days we had! Skies almost cloudless, a clear cool air, and brilliant sunshine, tempered by refreshing breezes from the sea.

We had been greatly attracted by a recently published account of some very fine climbs to be had on a ridge of Sgurr Sgumain, above Corrie Lagan. So to Corrie Lagan we bent our first steps. The lower part of the Corrie is walled in by what has been described as the grandest precipice in the Coolin, a notable feature of which is a

magnificent pinnacle called the Cioch, about half way up the face. Below this pinnacle stretches a gigantic slab of bare rock, lying at an angle so steep that it would be hardly possible to ascend it but for the presence of a deep fissure or crack running right up it, which affords secure holds for the hands and feet. This crack we followed. The climbing was not difficult, and growing impatient of its simplicity we diverged to the right, and climbed the rock by a series of chimneys and clefts, till we reached a spot where it was necessary to traverse out horizontally on to the slab. This movement required care and some delicacy of balance, and the situation was a sensational one, as practically the whole height of the slab lay below. Our leader, safeguarded by a strong hitch of the rope, succeeded in climbing from this point to a position of perfect security in a deep gully above, bounding the top of the slab, and once he was up, his companions, held by the rope, followed rapidly. The gully led gently downwards to the right, and abutted on a knife-edge of rock, beyond which rose the strange pinnacle of the Cioch, our immediate destination. A short vertical climb brought us to the broad platform which formed the top.

It was a sublime situation. One writer has enthusiastically compared the Cioch to one of the Aiguilles of Chamonix, though it is not a mountain summit. It juts out rather more than half-way up the precipice, of which a grand view is obtained. Right beneath us, hundreds of feet below, lay Corrie Lagan, hemmed in by giant walls of rock and jagged peaks; further down were the grassy swards of the glen, and then there was the boundless ocean, shining in the sun, studded with islands. Truly a noble view!

After a short rest we completed the climb to the top of Sgurr Sgumain, meeting with various difficulties on the way. The ridge extending from this summit to the top of Sgurr Alasdair is very narrow and broken, but except at one point it is not really difficult. It may be remarked in passing that the rocks, like all the rocks in Skye, abound in magnificent holds for hand and foot, and hence are

much easier than they look. The predominant feature of the Coolin rock (gabbro) is that the surface is extraordinarily rough, and bristling with sharp excrescences, so much so that a day spent on these ridges leaves the hands, and especially the tips of one's fingers, in a very tender state, and a few days of this work would strip them of cuticle. The use of gloves is almost a necessity, at least until the hands get hardened. We lingered on the way, enjoying the perfect evening on those serene heights, and it was not till half-past eight that we reached the top of Sgurr Alasdair—a noble peak, exceedingly sharp, and bounded by gaunt precipices. Here we crowned the delights of the day by watching a glorious sunset flushing with gold the sea and the distant isles of the West. Then down we rattled by the scree of the great Stone Shoot of Alasdair, the most execrable place on the mountains that it has ever been my lot to be in. Myriads of loose stones, poised at the maximum degree of instability, moved down with us at every step, and at one place a small avalanche of these stones was started, which continued for at least a couple of minutes, with the most deafening clamour.

Our day on Sgurr Alasdair and the Cioch may be taken as typical of many others that we enjoyed, though the weather was not always so perfect. It will suffice for descriptive purposes. The enumeration of other climbs would possess little interest except for mountaineers. But for those who have not seen it, the Inaccessible Pinnacle of Sgurr Dearg deserves a few words. "Inaccessible" no longer, for it is now often climbed, still the name clings to it. But inaccessibility apart, in all truth it is one of the strangest obelisks ever perched on the top of a mountain. Perhaps obelisk is not the correct term, though suggesting something abrupt and towering. In this case the Pinnacle is long and narrow, with practically vertical sides over 100 feet high. If a comparison of the majestic with the familiar is permissible, it may be likened to a huge slice of bread. The route up the longer side affords a most interesting climb, a climb, too, which requires great care, for in places the crest narrows to but a foot in

width, and the drop on either hand is trying to a person with weak nerves. At the top the climber is compensated for his efforts by a luxuriant bed of moss, on which he may lounge in dreamy ease while he feasts his eyes on the sublime mountain panorama stretched out around him.

Truly those were great days, and loth was I to take my leave. I left my companions in Coire na Creiche, where they had moved their tent to spend a couple of those calm midsummer nights amid its fastnesses. I subsequently heard strange tales of the doings of a donkey which they had engaged for the transport of the baggage on the way up. This beast excelled, if possible, the obstinacy of Modestine in the Cevennes. During the night it was tethered to a rock by an Alpine rope, but in the morning neither donkey nor rope was anywhere to be seen, and on the return home the hapless climbers were condemned to be their own beasts of burden. All this I lost.

For me, my last evening in Skye was one of perfect peace, an evening to be remembered. As I tramped down toward Sligachan in the cool of the evening, the mists rolled up from the sea and slowly encircled the bases of the mountains. A long level band of fleecy whiteness extended right across Corrie Bhasteir, and above this the black peaks of Sgurr nan Gillean and Bhasteir, in strongest contrast of colour, thrust their sharp peaks up to the sky. Further off, and perhaps even more beautiful, a similar band of cloud wound round the massive base of Blaven. The rays of the setting sun striking across the low moorland flushed the dark rocks of the mountain with a ruddy glow and the clouds with a most delicate rosy light, save where the nearer slopes cast their shadow on the cloud, sharply changing the rose colour into cold grey. That was a picture for a painter, most fitting as a last impression of Skye, and climax to one of the finest mountain holidays I have ever spent.—*Inverness Courier.*