

BEN NARNAIN AND BEINN DOIREANN.

BY JAMES STEWART.

SOME time ago I contracted a malady the symptoms of which manifest themselves periodically in an intense desire to roam over the mountains, and its hold upon me becomes stronger as the years roll by. As the holidays come round, I, in company with one or two kindred spirits, invariably hie to the hills, for, as the poet says:—

“The breath of those great mountains
Is life and health to me.”

On Christmas Day of 1909 I formed one of a party of four who descended on Arrochar by the early train from Glasgow. The morning was very dark and rather unpromising on our arrival, but by the time we had rounded the head of Loch Long it was more hopeful. We turned on to the hill where Allt Sugach comes tumbling down from the corrie of that name. Even at this season the colouring of the hillsides was pleasing; the rich bronze tint of the withered brackens, together with the grey green hues of the lichen-covered rocks, prevailed at the outset, whilst higher up the pristine whiteness of the snow gave a lighter touch to the scene.

A short scramble up the burnside brought us within the crescent of the corrie, and the snow which had previously been present only as a beautiful vision began to assert itself in a more materialistic sense. Courses of streams and tracks of bog were cunningly hidden beneath a white covering, and at intervals some unlucky wight, trusting his weight to the apparently firm footing, would find himself crunching through the crust of a snow bridge, and plunging into a burn which had been tunnelling its way beneath, or sinking into a hidden morass.

The cliffs forming the wings of the corrie rose abruptly on either side, and in front of us, heavily coated in snow

from base to summit, rose the ridge which forms the top wall of the corrie, and which unites Crois with Ben Narnain. In a sky of intense blue there overhung this ridge a great white cloud; we afterwards discovered that it was snow blown from the breast of the mountain, which was high above the ridge. All around us little white puffs of snow, raised by wandering whirlwinds, were continually thrown up from myriads of rocky projections, like jets of steam spouting from a host of geysers. So much for the scene in front; looking backward we were charmed with a glorious prospect. Ben Lomond, an ermine robe about his shoulders, his forehead adorned with a single rose-coloured cloudlet, dominated the landscape. As we waited, the sun stole up behind the ramparts of cloud that hung beyond him, and crowned with gold the surrounding snow-clad heights, whilst fairy wands of light changed the stray cloudlets into apparitions of ethereal beauty. And while on high were visions of loveliness, yet the beauty of our surroundings was apparent even in the snow beneath our feet. We dwelt with pleasure on the graceful curves and fantastically fluted ornamentation into which it had been so cunningly shaped by the wind; to describe its marvellous gradations of shade is beyond my power.

After a spell of stiff climbing the summit of the ridge was gained; there we were exposed to the full fury of the blast, as it swept along keen and biting from the snow-clad mountain fastnesses of the frozen north, in search of more genial climes in which to soothe its bitter temper. As it tore along amongst the rocky pinnacles, it roared out a strange weird music which was at once fascinating and fearful. Then came a struggle up the last snow bank, during which we were subjected to a fusillade, the ammunition consisting of chunks of ice and frozen snow, which were hurled along by the gale. Amidst this bombardment we at length reached the cairn that marks the highest point of the hill, 3040 feet above sea level. Our exertions were rewarded by a vision entrancing beyond description. Glancing over the edge of the precipice we saw Loch Long

like a great blue sword cutting deep into the country. At the head of the loch the village of Arrochar, resembling a toy town, snuggled beneath its sheltering trees. Almost due south, and looking so near as to seem within easy jumping distance, Ben Arthur, the grotesque "Cobbler," and his Alter Ego looked festive in their Christmas garb; round towards the west was Beinn an Lochain, and skirting his base, in the depths of Glen Croe, the road wound its way to the shores of Loch Fyne. Our vision rested for a moment on Ben Ime, the highest mountain in the vicinity, then on Ben Vorlich, at the foot of which lies Loch Sloy, from which the Macfarlanes took their war-cry in the fighting days of old. Beyond these in all directions was a veritable sea of mountain giants, their snowy covering bringing out every corrie and crevice with an almost microscopical distinctness. And as we looked upon those stern old mountains, arrayed in the glory of winter, we could say with the poet:—

"Who sees them in their summer hours
Sees but half their beauty,
And knows not half their powers."

Lying amidst a circle of white hills, Loch Ard, reflecting back the deep blue of the sky, next held our attention; then we looked towards Loch Lomond, over which the lordly Ben kept guard. Long we lingered upon the mountain top, and let the feast of beauty sink into our souls, and reluctantly commenced the descent, which was accomplished without incident.

Beinn Doireann, whose fine pyramidal form as seen from the horseshoe bend on the railway between Tyndrum and Bridge of Orchy presents such a striking feature in the landscape, was our objective on the Glasgow Spring Holiday this year. At Bridge of Orchy station a dense mist overhung everything, and but for the station-master's putting us on to a fence that runs up the hillside to the corrie between Beinn an Dothaidh and Beinn Doireann, we should have had some trouble in discovering the

whereabouts of the mountain. After about fifteen minutes walk we emerged from the mist, and dispensing with the fence as guide, took a way of our own up a small snow-filled gully on the western face of the mountain within a few yards of the cliff, and so on to the top of the ridge. A cairn on a height in front caused some of us to think we had reached the summit in record time, but, like most other mountains, the great reaches that from below appear telescoped up into a little space opened out and stretched themselves before our eyes into their true proportions. From this elevation we glanced upward towards the higher slopes of Beinn Doireann, which we had yet to climb, then we looked down our line of ascent into Glen Orchy, a great cauldron of boiling mists, beyond which rose a wall of rugged mountains. The most prominent summits were Ben Cruachan, Stob Ghabhar and other crests of the Black Mount, and the great white mass of Ben Nevis towering over all. We crossed a snow-field which covered the whole top of the mountain and extended down into the large corrie on its eastern side. With the exception of about twenty yards on a narrow ridge leading to the summit of the mountain, which was frozen hard and slippery, the snow was in fine condition. This ridge was ornamented on one side by a large snow cornice, the other side sloped downward with startling steepness towards the valley, and we were just a little anxious till we got our novice safely beside the cairn.

Whilst we were seated by the cairn, a tall column of cloud rose silently and swiftly from Glen Lyon, waving its ghost-like arms over us, and breathing its chill damp breath on our faces as it floated upward; then it vanished as swiftly and as silently as it came. Excepting this momentary visitation, perfect atmospherical conditions prevailed, and a magnificent panorama of mountain scenery was grouped around. From the distant peaks of Arran in the south to mountains in the north lying away beyond the towering heights of Ben Nevis; and from the Paps of Jura and Ben More in Mull rising out of the western sea,

to the multitudinous summits of Beinn a' Ghlo, and the giant ranges of the Cairngorms on the eastern horizon, every mountain within that wide area was clearly defined. The vastness and grandeur of this scene, the feeling of space which it conveyed, no adjective or combination of adjectives can adequately express. In Glen Orchy the mists had rolled away, and in its depths were a microscopical station and line of railway, along which panted trains of Lilliputian dimensions. Truly man and his works fall into their true perspective when viewed from the mountain tops! Basking in sunshine at the foot of a range of snow-clad heights, Loch Tulla, surrounded by its fringe of forest, and one tiny islet floating on its bosom, made a pretty picture; whilst Glen Orchy, with its river meandering to Loch Awe amidst a host of "proud mountains," formed one of the outstanding features amidst a plethora of scenic beauty.

Traversing Beinn Doireann over its entire length, we descended into the corrie that separates it from Beinn an Dothaidh, where we rested awhile. As I sat amongst some withered heather, watching at times several ravens as they circled about the grim precipices that flank both sides of the corrie, and at times looking across the glen at a range of hills with a very decided snow-line along their sides, and a small lochan nestling at their feet; or listening to the music of many waters as they came tumbling down the hillside, bringing their tribute from the snow-fields on the mountain tops, I fell into a reverie. I wondered whether the spirit of the old Gaelic Bard did not dwell amidst the scenes that he loved so well, and of which he sang so sweetly:—

Ben Doran I saw yesterday
And trod its gorges gray,
Amidst its well-known dells and glens,
No stranger did I stray.
And think how joyful 'twas of yore
To seek that mountain high,
As the sun shone o'er the morning hoar
And the deer were belling by.