

A WEEK AT SLIGACHAN.

BY JOHN R. LEVACK.

THE Cuillins in Skye, it is well known, exercise quite a peculiar and intense fascination on those climbers who have essayed their steep cliffs and narrow ridges. The mountaineer who once sets foot and hand on those hills discovers, when he returns home, that a new and absorbing interest has been added to his life. However strenuous, however exacting, his everyday work may be, there is always at the back of his mind a memory and a longing—a memory of grand days on the rocks, and a longing to return to them.

Mr. William Garden and I had spent an active week in Glen Brittle, at the south-west side of the Cuillins, whence we had climbed eleven peaks during a week in September, 1908 (See Vol. vi., p. 88). It was quite natural, therefore, for us to return to Skye in the following September, which we did, accompanied by two non-climbing friends whom we had persuaded to accompany us by telling them of the glories of the "Isle of Mist." We arrived at Sligachan on the evening of Saturday, Sept. 11th, and naturally we were anxious for good weather. It was no joke when we looked out next morning to find Glen Sligachan a blur of driving mist and rain, and the hills shrouded to their very bases. Breakfast that morning was a gloomy meal, and reproachful looks from our friends made us squirm with discomfort at the thought of having enticed them across the sea to nothing more than a rainy wilderness. We were cheerful and optimistic, however, and said that fine weather in Skye was worth waiting for. Sure enough, by lunch time, the rain ceased and the clouds broke. The mist slowly rolled up the sides of the Red Hills, and the pinnacles of Sgurr nan Gilleann peeped at times above their billowy shroud. Then the sun came out, and we had a perfect afternoon. We set off for a preliminary walk on one of the Red Hills, Beinn Dearg

Mhor, 2389 feet. This hill is crescent-shaped, and the walk along its ridge is a thing to remember, not only for the superb views of the whole range of the Cuillins across Glen Sligachan, but of the island-studded sea and the distant hills of the mainland.

Next morning we were to begin climbing operations in earnest, and the first expedition was to be a traverse of Sgurr nan Gillean, ascending by the famous north-east ridge or "Pinnacle Route," and descending by the western ridge. Accordingly, as the morning promised well, we had an early breakfast, and shortly after nine o'clock started off across the moor towards the base of the first pinnacle of the mountain.

As we trudged across the moor, the morning mists cleared up and we had every prospect of a perfect day, in striking contrast to what Garden and I had experienced a year before when we attempted the same route in bad weather and nearly got blown off the rocks at the foot of the first pinnacle, besides being drenched to the skin. Now, however, we were in luck. Three other climbing friends accompanied us, and at 11.40 a.m. we roped at the base of the first pinnacle where it abuts on Coire a' Bhàsteir. Five on a rope means slow going, but we had all the day before us and we were in no hurry. The leader mounted rapidly up the steep rocks, and we soon reached the top of our pinnacle (2500 feet). From thence a short dip and a gentle rise took us to the top of the second pinnacle (2700 feet), and then another little dip brought us to the foot of the third pinnacle. Up to this point no serious climbing was encountered, and although we had roped, there was no real necessity for it. But now we were obviously in for something quite different. The third pinnacle rises steeply from the col between it and the second pinnacle, and it looks difficult. But the rocks are so well broken up and so firm that we found no actual difficulty in reaching the top (2900 feet), although the sense of being suspended in mid-air and of clinging to a vertical surface like a fly on a window pane is very real and impressive.

From the top of this pinnacle one cranes one's neck over the highest boulder to see what is beyond. Anyone afflicted with "nerves" or a "light head" shouldn't do it. The topmost rocks overhang, and one looks straight down to the narrow col joining this pinnacle with the fourth one, or Knight's Peak, as it is called, whilst on either side vertical precipices drop some hundreds of feet to the steep screes of Bhasteir and Riabhach Corries. The descent of this overhanging face is the one difficult bit of the Pinnacle route, and obviously a slip here would be awkward.

As we clung to the rocks on the top of our pinnacle, a long discussion took place as to the proper route down. Some of us insisted that the fringe of rocks on the Bhasteir side was the best way; others demanded those on the Riabhach side. Ultimately the leader went down the Riabhach (south) side to prospect, and found the well-known vertical holdless groove in the rocks leading down to a shallow ledge, on which standing room for himself and the next man could just be got. I was third on the rope, and while all this reconnoitring was taking place, I lay on a big slab of gabbro, securely hitched and held by the man above me, whilst I in turn had the rope hitched for the man in front, watching the rock gymnastics below, and filled with a sense of mental and physical exhilaration difficult to describe. The perfect weather, the magnificent scenery, the general sense of contentment and comfort, all combined to give a feeling only to be experienced by those who climb the Cuillins in congenial company and good weather. One by one we reached the col, the last man coming down in grand style with the help of a spare rope hitched above him.

The route now lay up the face of Knight's Peak, the rocks of which are astonishingly steep but so splendidly firm and broken as to be quite easy. The narrow ridge forming the summit (3000 feet) was soon gained, and we looked across the deep gap to the sharp peak of Sgurr nan Gillean itself towering grandly above us. The descent of the west face of Knight's Peak gave us some trouble, as

we kept too far to the south or Riabhach side, and had some exciting moments, clinging to vertical slabby rocks with insufficient holds. But at last we got to the col, and stood facing the wall-like rocks which constitute the commencement of the climb on the Sgurr itself.

A short breathing space was taken to get rid of some of the excitement developed in the descent of Knight's Peak, then up we went and eventually found ourselves just under the western ridge of the mountain, a few yards from the summit (3167 feet). At this point there is a broad scree-ledge below the huge boulders that form the ridge leading to the summit, and between two of those boulders is a gap into which one climbs, and as "one's head is thrust over the edge suddenly there bursts into view, outlined against a background of delicately tinted ocean, such a scene of wonderful mountain landscape as occupies one's senses to the exclusion of all else." The same writer says, "Two mountain scenes stand out far above all others in my memory—one, my first impression of the Matterhorn, and the other this view of the Cuillin."

It is impossible to describe the sensations we experienced as we clambered over the last rocks of the ridge on to the gigantic slab which forms the peak of Sgurr nan Gillean. We crowded together—there is not much standing room—and gazed over the wonderful sea of peaks and ridges, then back across the moor far below to Sligachan and to the sea and its islands beyond. Everything was visible, and even the outer Hebrides were clear and distinct, set in a shimmering sea gilded by the rays of the setting sun. But we could not linger as it was nearly five o'clock, and it was essential to be clear of the mountain before it was dark.

The descent by the western ridge is easy for some distance, but ultimately a point is reached where the ridge suddenly narrows to the dimensions of a stone dyke, a most unstable-looking structure with a sheer drop on either side of about a hundred feet. To add to the difficulties of the place, a pillar of gabbro is perched end up on the middle of the narrowest part. This rock is known as the

“policeman,” and he bulges on both sides, effectually barring the way. He stands splendidly firm, however, and, by grasping his neck, it is possible to swing one’s feet round his right side till foot-hold is gained beyond him.

Those of us who were short of stature found it easier to climb right up and over him, and I found that it was perfectly comfortable and safe to lie prone on his flat top, whilst the next man negotiated the narrow dyke-top to his base. Here again, anyone with a tendency to “light head” should not try this experiment, but, if he can manage it, it will cure him for evermore! Beyond the “policeman” the route lies down a more or less vertical but easy chimney, which lands one on the screes at the foot of the cliffs. Here we unroped $5\frac{1}{2}$ hours after we had “tied on” at the foot of the first pinnacle, and we raced along the screes back past the foot of all the pinnacles to the point where we had started our climb. After a short rest and some sandwiches, we hurried down the rocks in the gathering twilight and on to the moor. The journey across the moor towards Sligachan was a go-as-you-please affair, as it was now too dark to see each other. Anyhow, I sat down more than once in soft boggy places, and arrived at the hotel very wet, very cool, and very well pleased with the day’s outing.

Next day (Tuesday) the non-climbing members of the party claimed us, and we had a long drive westward to Struan. The views we had of the whole Cuillin range were particularly fine. The quaint jagged outline of the peaks from Sgurr nan Gillean southwards to Sgurr nan Gobhar, peeping up across the moorland, was most impressive.

On Wednesday we set out to climb Bidein, three rock towers which form the culmination of the long ridge of Druim nan Ramh, and which stands most prominently at the head of Coire na Creiche. The actual summit of Bidein, the central and highest peak (2860 feet) is, with the exception of the Inaccessible Pinnacle of Sgurr Dearg, the most difficult to scale of all the Cuillins.

Reaching Coire na Creiche by Bealach a Mhaim, we kept along the base of Bruach na Frithe and entered Coire

Mhadaidh. Ascending by a stone shoot there, we reached the foot of the north Bidein, where we roped. A short climb took us to the summit of this peak, and, craning our necks over the perpendicular drop to the col between us and the central peak, we realised the nature of the main climb. Now, too, the mist came down, the only time it did come down during the whole week, and the rocks got wet and dripping. The face of the central peak looked more or less impossible, but the pressing problem for us was how to get down to the col. This took more than a little care, and the outstanding features of the descent were loose stones and narrow ledges on a more or less vertical face. At the col, things looked worse, the rocks of the central peak rising into the mist, wet, slabby, and forbidding, so we decided to give up the climb. A sporting descent by the gully leading from the col towards Coire na Creiche took us to the base of the rocks and out of the mist.

Skirting the central and south Bideins, we reached Bealach na Glai Moire and descended a stone shoot into Coire an Uaigneis and so towards Coruisk. All this took time, and we knew we were too late to go on to Loch Coruisk, so we climbed over the ridge of Druim nan Ramh into Harta Corrie.

Tea at the Bloody Stone and a long trudge home by the Sligachan path (beset that night by boulders similar in designation to their giant prototype in Harta Corrie), ended a long and interesting day.

Thursday was decreed an off day by the climbers, so the writer took a non-climbing member of the party up to Coire a' Bhasteir as far as the foot of the first pinnacle of Sgurr nan Gillean, and spent the afternoon taking photographs.

Friday was a calm and cloudless day, and four of us set off to traverse Sgurr a' Mhadaidh (3014 feet). Entering Coire na Creiche we passed the foot of Sgurr na Fheadain, climbed into Coire Tarneilear, and up to the ridge between Sgurr Thuilm and Mhadaidh. Here the rope was put on and the four peaks of Mhadaidh were traversed. At no

First Pinnacle

Second Pinnacle

Third Pinnacle

Fourth Pinnacle or
(Knight's Peak)

Sgurr nan Gillean

Western Ridge

The Gendarme



Photo by

PINNACLE RIDGE OF SGURR NAN GILLEAN, FROM BHASTEIR GORGE.

J. R. Levack.

point is the climbing difficult, but the hands are constantly employed. "Many fine situations are encountered, and when about midway between the peaks the sense of aloofness, and of being cut off on all sides, is most striking."

A descent into Tarneilear and a look at the famous "waterpipe" gully of Sgurr na Fheadain completed the enjoyment of a very fine day.

We had thus been remarkably fortunate in having been able, with the help of fine weather, to do three good climbs in five days, so we thought we deserved a lazy day on Saturday. Consequently we came down for late breakfast that morning, but the weather was finer than ever. The hills looked entrancing, and we felt that such a day was too good to waste in the vicinity of the hotel. Breakfast was scarcely begun when Garden looked at me and I at him. Simultaneously we said, "This won't do; let us go and climb Greadaidh."

A rapid scramble for sandwiches, the rope, and a rucksack, and we set off, three hours later than we should have been. But our week's training stood us in good stead, and we footed the long grind to Bealach a Mhaim, then down across Coire na Creiche, up and round the western shoulder of Sgurr Thuilm, and into Coire a' Greadaidh. A traverse of the whole ridge of Sgurr a' Greadaidh was seen to be impossible in the remaining hours of the short September day, so we decided to go straight up the west face of the mountain from the upper N.W. division of Coire Greadaidh. After surmounting the tiresome scree we reached the foot of the rocks, and roped. The ascent consisted of a climb up a 300 foot gully "which offers no difficulty to rock climbers." At the summit cairn (3197 ft.) we allowed ourselves seven minutes' rest, but these minutes were worth coming for. Not a breath of wind stirred to break the solitude, not a sound could be heard except the far-off trickle of diminutive burns deep down in the corries. The sun was so hot that we had to use our handkerchiefs under our caps to shade our faces, and I remember watching an ordinary-looking spider clambering over the stones of the

cairn. Coruisk shone like silver far below, and the outer Hebrides stood like jewels in a molten sea of gold.

But we had to hurry down, and once free of our gully and the rope, we fairly raeed down the screes till we reached a burn in the Corrie and cooled our parched tongues and burning heads.

In Coire na Creiche we had a long rest on a slab in the middle of the Allt Coir' a' Mhadaidh, but the countless hordes of midges slightly marred the otherwise perfect enjoyment of the place.

A hurried trot past Bealach a Mhaim and down the path by the Red Burn brought us to Sligachan in the dark some time after eight o'clock.

Later in the evening it was reported that an unusual display of Aurora Borealis was in evidence, and the majority of the hotel guests turned out to see it, but I was tired and desperately sleepy, so I went to bed. Not so Garden, who brought out his bag-pipes and played as he marched to and fro between the hotel door and the bridge over Sligachan burn.

My last recollections that night were of feelings of intense satisfaction and lazy comfort as I listened drowsily to the seductive wail of "Over the Sea to Skye," and unconsciously dropped into the dreamless sleep of the tired climber.