

## BEN CRUACHAN.

BY JAMES STEWART.

LOCH Awe Station at last, at the unholy hour of half-past three in the morning, but we were comparatively fresh despite the fact that the train was crowded with young folks from the Isles, mostly of the fair sex, all apparently acquainted and forgathering, it seemed, for the first time for at least a twelvemonth. At first all talked volubly and at the same time. Afterwards, when they had talked themselves into exhaustion, or sleep had overcome them, behold we were overwhelmed by a worse evil. A piper, probably he who blew the chanter in Alloway's auld haunted kirk, commenced somewhere after midnight to raise an unearthly din on his wind instrument. I am not a captious individual: to me, the music of the pipes when played on some lone hillside of a summer evening while the listener is drifting idly in a boat on the bosom of some West Highland loch sounds heavenly; in a railway carriage when one is vainly trying to secure a few minutes' sleep in anticipation of a day on the mountains, it is—well, not heavenly!

The air smelled fresh and clean after the stifling atmosphere of the carriage. Is an inborn dread of fresh air characteristic of all Islesmen and women? The clouds hung low, but we assured ourselves that it was only a heat haze. Our spirits were high, and we sang of Kilchurn and its towers as we tramped along the shores of glorious Loch Awe on a highway fringed with oak, hazel and sycamore trees. The young foliage was soothing and restful to the eye, and we were charmed with the variety of tints in the oak leaves; they seemed to run the whole gamut of shade from delicate green to a rich bronze. A holly bush in full blossom also gave us something to look at: it was almost as pretty as it would be at Christmas when its scarlet berries would

impart a dash of colour to a pallid landscape. In this hollow of the hills the atmosphere had become dead ; lack of air circulation made it most oppressive and only by conjuring up visions of Christmas on the mountains could one maintain a normal temperature.

Where the Cruachan burn glides quietly through the roadway, after its flying leap of several hundred feet down the dark narrow cleft in the hill, we left the highway and followed the path that winds up the steep forest-clad mountain side. It is a nerve-testing walk by the verge of the gorge ; the path is slippery with innumerable pine needles, and ever from the depths of the chasm, so narrow, so deep, and so dark, comes the turmoil of waters. Above the falls the trees become few in number and stunted in size, until on the verge of the moorland, they cease to take active interest in the struggle for existence. Hot and fatigued we reached the top of the terrace—the first great step to the mountain ; here the moorlands stretch away to the foot of the real ascent. And here we found a glorious rock pool in the burn, a natural bath, and speedily we were splashing in its cool depths ; it was more than a bath, 'twas a baptism to fit us to approach the shrine of the mountains. The clouds had settled down ; no trace of the mountain was visible, but we took our bearings by map and compass ; and, as we knew that the stream had its source high up on the Ben we followed it. After a walk of about half-an-hour's duration, over ground which grew rougher and rougher, suddenly there loomed through the mist "a mighty mountain dim and grey," seemingly of immense size and apparently inaccessible. But mist is ever deceitful, and we went on and heeded not.

The angle of ascent became acute ; the burn dwindled to a rill, and then disappeared. The mist was now very dense : we could see only a few yards in any direction, and it was impossible to pick out any line of ascent, much less the easiest : we could only go onward and upward. This we did ; sometimes working our way

upward between apparently unscaleable buttresses of rock, perhaps 1000 feet high, perhaps only 20; sometimes toiling up in a furrow worn out of the mountain by waters from the melting snows, or fearfully crawling round projecting rocks hanging above the void of mist. Many times we thought our upward progress was ended, but always as we got a nearer view another bit of possible ascent opened out; and always to spur us over a difficult part was the cheerful knowledge that we had lost all knowledge of the way by which we had come up, and that if we did try to descend, a few steps off the route and we might be marooned on the top of some precipice until the clouds lifted. However, without mishap we emerged on the top of the ridge: but what a change of outlook! In front lay a landscape gemmed with sparkling lochs, and alive with moving sunshine and shadow, backed by the blue Atlantic. We gazed over Morven and the Western Isles, and then for contrast we looked down into the depths from which we had emerged: a chaos of boiling mist. Near at hand and to the north there rose—huge, sombre, and enveloped in cloud—the object of our pilgrimage, the highest of the six tops of Cruachan. Soon we were on the cairn marking the highest point, then we clambered on to one of the splintered pinnacles which overhang the abyss, and from this coign of vantage watched the contents of the great cloud cauldron dissolve—

And, like an unsubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a wrack behind.

Rounding the lip of the corrie we reached the second summit, from which was visible Loch Etive, the “Braes abune Bonawe,” and the glorious coastline of Lorne, Benderloch and Morven.

It had been our intention on leaving the city to encircle the six crests of Cruachan. It is quite possible to do this in a day, but as our ambition does not lie towards record-breaking, and the delays caused by the mist weighed heavily against the longer journey, we

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faced about, and, intending to save time, held right across the shoulder of the main peak. If we missed a climb, we had a slippery scramble over some damp, steeply-inclined slabs of exposed rock. Thereafter we crossed Meal Cuanail—whose 3000 feet did not appear very formidable after the majestic heights of Cruachan, and descended into the encircling arms of the corrie. The opaque mist was now replaced by a scintillating heat haze, and in the drowsy afternoon we sat down on a bank of thyme by the burnside, there to watch dreamily the golden flakes of light dancing amongst the pebbles on the bed of the stream—sunbeams prisoned by the playful waters. The sweet clean air fanned our forehead with a touch light as a maiden's kiss; in our ears the wimpling of the burn gradually assumed the tone as of the tinkling of a myriad fairy bells; and the music lulled us into that blissful state of semi-consciousness in which one takes heed of neither time nor space. For the better part of an hour we surrendered ourselves to the spells of this Elysium. But anon the demands of the more materialistic world in which we dwell forced us to cast off the glamour of enchantment and seek regions more prosaic.

To me these days amongst the hills are days of endless delight: here one can enter Paradise by way of thyme-clad banks and the land of dreams. A sufficient leisure to enjoy the beauty so lavishly prepared for us by Nature should be the birthright of every man and woman in the land; and the inhabitants should go forth amongst the mountains to renew their bodies and to strengthen their æsthetic senses. On the mountains more than on the plains one can realise oneself.

Here, amidst the majesty and grandeur of the eternal hills, one can exclaim with Byron—

How beautiful is all this visible world.  
How glorious in its action and itself.