

## FORT WILLIAM TO SKYE.

### I.—BEN NEVIS AND GLEN NEVIS.

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READERS of the *Journal* may perhaps remember that, on setting out to walk through Glen Feshie in the autumn of 1915—a walk I described in No. 46 (pp. 137-144)—the only definite object I had in view after crossing to Speyside was, if possible, to walk down Glen Spean to Fort William. On approaching my destination (Fort William) on the Friday afternoon—my fifth day of walking—I was so impressed with the majestic mass of Ben Nevis towering up from sea level that I decided to attempt its ascent next day if the weather conditions were propitious; and, after a short rest and a substantial meal, I set out the same evening to explore the approach to the mountain. Retracing my steps for a mile to the Bridge of Nevis, I took the road on the north side of the river Nevis, and in a short time reached the farm house of Achintee, where the driving road ends and the path to the hill strikes upwards. Here, by good fortune, I met the farmer himself and obtained from him much information regarding the hill and the glen which proved of great assistance later.

Next day—Saturday—found me early at the hill-foot. The ascent presents little or no difficulty. A well-made path leads right to the top; and although in parts the gradients are steep, necessitating frequent pauses, there is no climbing in the real sense of the word, and nothing which an ordinary pedestrian possessing sufficient endurance and “wind” cannot easily accomplish. A couple of zig-zags on the face of Meall-an-t’Suidhe (the western shoulder of the Ben Nevis

massif) leads one into a deep gully, at the top of which stands the half-way shelter hut. From this point upwards the road is carried on the face of Carn Dearg by a series of traverses, each one steeper and more stony than its predecessor, until the crest is reached. Then a comparatively level stretch of road, marked by cairns, lands one at the Observatory and the summit. At the lower levels and up to the 3,000 feet level the day was an ideal one for walking—cool and grey. Westward, Loch Eil was seen surrounded by gloomy mountains; south-westward stretched Loch Linnhe, narrowing down at Ardgour and then expanding again to the open sea, where in the far distance the island of Mull was indicated by the majestic cone of Ben More; to the south, the view was limited by the nearer hills in Mamore Forest, and to the north by dark hills surrounding Loch Lochy and the Caledonian Canal.

Dense mist enveloped the hill above the 3,000 feet level and prevented any view from the summit. Momentary glimpses down the gullies on the north face revealed some tremendous precipices, but, with this exception, little could be made out, and I had to be content with an examination of objects nearer at hand, and, in particular, of the buildings on the summit. The principal of these is the Observatory—a most substantial structure of square-jointed granite stone, built apparently without mortar and designed to withstand the fierce gales likely to be experienced in such an exposed situation. Although now closed and deserted, it bids fair to stand for many a day if treated with due respect, but, unfortunately, I noted that several of the outer windows had already been broken, and if such a practice be continued it will soon result in serious damage. The long, rambling structure of wood and corrugated iron, politely known as the "Hotel," is already hastening to dissolution; with its open door, broken windows, and rain-soaked interior littered with papers, it was a pitiful object. Narrow paths, neatly

paved with flat-bedded stones, connect the main Observatory with the little stone buildings which housed the instruments. Otherwise, the top of the hill consists of a mass of rather sharp-pointed boulders, over which walking is anything but pleasant and requires considerable care to prevent accident.

After spending about three quarters of an hour on the summit, I made a rapid descent to the half-way hut, and thereafter to a heather-clad hollow near the dark Lochan Meall-an-t'Suidhe, lying between Meall-an-t'Suidhe and Carn Dearg. In this sheltered spot I spent some time, watching the mist rolling ceaselessly round the shoulders of the hill and gradually creeping downward, until the lengthening shadows proclaimed the approach of evening. Another rapid descent brought me once again to the farm of Achintee and to level ground and within easy walking distance of Fort William.

The following day (Sunday) was spent in Glen Nevis—the deep, narrow glen which encircles Ben Nevis to the south. Passing through Fort William once more to the Bridge of Nevis, I followed the road on the south side of the river, which here runs for about four miles in a south-easterly direction, to a farm called Achriavach. At this point the road crosses the river to the right bank, and bending round Carn Dearg—the southern spur of Ben Nevis—follows the course of the river, but on higher ground, for nearly two miles in a direction approximating north-east, until the first or lower Falls of Steall are reached. Here the road ends, and to one unfamiliar with the district the glen itself has the appearance of terminating, being shut in to the east by the hill marked Meall Cumhann on the map. Observing indications of a path on the face of this hill, however, I scrambled upwards and soon gained the top of a projecting shoulder, from which I was able to see that the river had made a sudden change in direction to south-east again and now wound through a flat meadow-like valley closely hemmed in by high hills

on both sides. On descending to the bottom of this valley—which appeared to have been formerly the bed of a loch—I followed the river upwards for nearly a mile to the upper Falls of Steall. Beyond this point the glen opened up somewhat and partook more of an upland character, but as rain threatened and little shelter was available, I decided to return.

On retracing my steps through the meadow-like valley, which was very wet and boggy, I discovered that the river plunges down a deep, rocky gorge—a feature I had missed on my upward journey through following the high-level path on the face of Meall Cumhann. This part of the glen turned out to be the most interesting part of the day's outing. The valley is here suddenly reduced to a narrow passage between two high hills, which, apparently, at one time were continuous, and had thus formed a barrier to hold up the waters of a deep loch. Either through a weakness in the structure of the rock or through the action of ice, this barrier has been cut down to the level of the flat above, and the whole of the loch emptied. As the gorge deepened, large boulders and masses of rock fell in from the adjacent hills, choking the course of the river, so that little water could be seen, although a considerable volume of water must pass underneath the boulders. In winter the conditions must be different, as I noted that both the side walls and the boulders were highly polished and eroded with numerous pot-holes.

A narrow foot-path labelled "Dangerous" on a notice-board leads along one side of the gorge. At first the warning seemed superfluous, but after a time, on turning a sharp bend, I found the path non-existent, having slipped into and been washed down by the river. After negotiating this obstruction, I found that the path became narrower and the hillside more precipitous, until the path acquired the character of a mere ledge about two feet wide on the face of the precipice, with a steep slope to the river and a vertical wall of rock above.

The passage of this part, however, was rendered comparatively safe by a stout wire rope fixed to staples leaded into the face of the precipice, which, although it affords no fence at the outer side of the road, gives a secure hand-grip and a feeling of safety.

Although the scenery in Glen Nevis is wild, it has not the desolate character of that of Glen Spean. The valley being so narrow, the hills on each side feel more companionable, and although during my tramp of about 21 miles few people were met with, there was no feeling of loneliness. The glen appears to be greatly over-deepened: the side slopes are very steep and consequently the tributary streams drop into the main valley as waterfalls. The two principal falls are known as the lower and upper falls of Steall. The lower ones, which descend from Cairn Dearg on the Ben Nevis side, slip down several hundreds of feet on bare rock, over which the water is broken up into long streaks of white foam; the upper falls, which come down from the Mamore Forest or south side of the glen, are more uncommon and striking in appearance, from the fact that about half-way down they split into two streams and form a figure resembling the letter Y, but inverted. Evidences of glacial action are abundant throughout the glen: many of the exposed rocks bear signs of polishing and grinding, and numerous moraine hillocks and travelled boulders are to be seen from the gorge downwards. A dyke of red-coloured rock, resembling porphyry, crosses the valley above Achriavach and gives rise to a group of beautiful waterfalls on the river, while the red colour of the exposed rocks forms a pleasing contrast to the green trees and vegetation. Although rain fell heavily for about half-an-hour at midday and several passing showers were encountered later on, the clouds broke up towards evening, and the sun, piercing the mist, lighted up the hills with vivid patches of colour. Ben Nevis itself, however, maintained a dignified reserve and refused to lift its capping of mist.