

FOUR BENS AND A TENT.

BY JAMES STEWART.

ON a Saturday evening preceding a Glasgow autumn holiday—now a few years ago—five men landed from the Loch Lomond steamer at Ardlui pier, at the head of the loch. They were not over-burdened with travelling gear, their baggage consisting simply of camping paraphernalia and provisions. A camping holiday, in fact, was what was projected, and in a very short time after the party landed, a tent was duly pitched on a convenient site in the shelter of a wood by the verge of Loch Lomond. This was the first experience of camping for three members of the party; the other two had made previous ventures under canvas.

During the week before we had dreamt frequently of the little canvas shelter that has meant for us in the past many days of freedom, and we fondly anticipated another period of relaxation and physical refreshment. When erected, the tent justified our expectations, and the man who made it was justly proud of his handiwork. We had looked forward expectantly to sitting in the tent listening to the “sighing of the wind at even”; but it was not so. The wind did not sigh; it raged and bellowed, and in mad fits came charging up the Loch like squadrons of invisible but audible cavalry, each blast sounding a louder and ever louder note as it drew nearer and nearer, its advent heralded by a straining of ropes and a fluttering of canvas. Two of us viewed the turmoil apprehensively, and visions of a tent riding towards Ben More on the wings of the storm haunted us continually. But the faith of the tentmaker in his handiwork never wavered. Nor was his faith misplaced: our shelter weathered that storm—and, let it be added, it has weathered many other storms since.

BEN VORLICH.

Next morning a watery-looking sun leered down upon five straggling figures heading across the spongy bogland towards the bank of clouds which enwrapped Ben Vorlich—the Ben of that name in Dumbartonshire; not to be confounded with the better-known Ben Vorlich in Perthshire. We followed a streamlet as far as the corrie where its waters divide. Up to this level the hills were clear; higher, the mist held sway, and we entered its opaque realms suddenly; thereafter everything became huge and shadowy. Mighty boulders hurled from the heights lay all around; rock walls of startling steepness thrust up into the vapour; and enveloped in an intense gloom we pressed onward with quickening pulse. Within the arms of the corrie not a breath of wind was stirring, but across the exposed slope the wind drove with cyclonic fury, and our scramble over the scree on to the back of the ridge was not lacking in mild excitement. There we built a cairn as a guide against our return, for while our line of ascent was quite safe, it was flanked by precipices whose close acquaintance we did not desire to cultivate. The summit was reached after a breathless struggle in the teeth of wind and hail. Despite the velocity of the gale, never even for an instant did the density of the mist diminish, and from the mountain top no far-reaching panorama delighted our eyes; nothing was visible but a heap of stones and the whirling wrack. Nevertheless, we were of good cheer up there in the storm some 3090 feet above sea-level, for we had, at our first attempt, triumphed over Vorlich in one of his surliest moods, what is doubtless an easy ascent partaking somewhat of the nature of adventure.

A proposal to descend to Loch Sloy was hurriedly and emphatically vetoed. Was it because of the appalling picture of desperate places on the rugged shoulder of Vorlich conjured, out of his fertile imagination, by the member of the party who had viewed the mountain from Ben Vane and who did not relish the long tramp down the glen? Whatever the reason, we retraced our

steps along the ridge and were soon back at our emergency cairn, whence a quick descent was made into the corrie.

On the middle reaches of the mountain the mist thinned, and the wind limned for us a picture passing fair. This cloud-framed view comprised the southern end of Glen Falloch, the ebon waters of Loch Lomond, and the hills beyond, these last exquisitely etherealised where a ray of sunlight touched into green and bronze and orange the grass and brackens that clothed them.

BEN LUI AND BEN OSS.

From our tent on another occasion, said tent being then pitched in the Glen of the Rowans, we made a pilgrimage to Ben Oss and Ben Laoigh (or Ben Lui). To the farmer of Laggan and to a gallant officer in the Vale of Leven we were indebted for liberty to set up our tent in one of the most delightful sites it has been our good fortune to find in the whole course of our camping experiences. There were four of us this time, and two set forth in the early morning for the hills, the other two remaining in their sleeping-bags to guard the camp—so they said. For a mile or two we followed a fine path up Glen Caorrann; then holding sharply to the north over the high moors, we ultimately brought up on the belach between Ben Laoigh and Ben Oss. The ascent of Ben Laoigh from this side—the south—is easy to any one whose wind is normal, and we sauntered cannily up the shoulder, noting here a saxifrage, there an alpine lady's mantle, or sometimes a bit of moss campion, and thinking, maybe, that Laoigh was rather a featureless mountain after all, when suddenly the majestic snow-crowned peak, a wisp of cloud playing around it, soared into view. The elementary botanical research terminated suddenly; unconsciously our pace quickened; a brisk scramble amongst the boulders, and we were on the long-desired crest. There we looked over an entrancing scene—what appeared at first a mere tumult of cloud and sky, of mountain and

valley, of loch, river and sea, of sunlight and shadow. Gradually, however, the separate entities got sorted out, and we began to find our bearings and to identify some features of the encircling scene. Far south-west was Arran—misty, indefinite, cloudlike. Seemingly floating amidst the clouds on the north-east horizon, a mass of snow patches, loomed up the Cairngorms. At the base of Cruachan, Loch Awe stood out golden-splashed and emerald-studded.

Glen Orchy's proud mountains, Kilchurn and her towers ;
Glen Strae and Glen Lyon

were ours—for the moment, at least ; and what more does a man want? After all, it is the seeing eye and the sympathetic understanding—whether in a belted earl, lording it over a county, or in a denizen of a vast city who carries in his rucksack the only house he owns—that truly possess the landscape in the great out-of-doors.

A snowstorm burst suddenly over the mountain while we were resting by the leaside of a boulder near the cairn, and from this comparative shelter we watched the lightning play around the hoary pate of Ben Oss, and rip at times the purple pall behind which Ben More was sulking. The storm passed as suddenly as it started, and long ere we reached the summit of Ben Oss the sky was swept clean and the sun was shining brightly. Prior to this excursion it had been our impression that the Tay rose on Ben Laoigh, but now we are inclined to think that the source of Scotia's noblest river is to be found a few feet beneath the summit of Ben Oss, where, a very tiny rill, it trickles into the little tarn on the north-west shoulder of the hill, emerging therefrom a lusty burn, which tumbles in a series of cascades into Corrie Laoigh.

A descent was made to Loch Oss, a lonely tarn in the hollow between Ben Oss and Ben Dubh Chraige ; and a tramp over the elevated platform which forms the base of the Ben Laoigh range terminated our outing.

BEN MORE (Perthshire).

A fine September afternoon; an enjoyable tramp up Glen Falloch, rich in the tints of autumn; and, later, a camp fire, where Billy mystified the company alternately with conjuring tricks and metaphysical dissertations, Jack read Omar and suggested improvements for the next tent, George smoked in silent contemplation as became a philosopher, and Bob played his mandoline and sang of Maidens of Morven, and while that rare voice of his rang out in our woodland retreat, the daily cares and troubles vanished for the time amongst the encircling shadows that crouched beyond the flicker of the firelight. And as the night had been pleasant, so too, in another sense, was the morning. The tang of autumn gripped the air; and as George and I strode up Glen Falloch the blood did not flow quite so sluggishly through our veins as is its wont, and we decided that, after all, life is really worth living, that Scotland is the grandest country in the world, and Glen Falloch one of the finest valleys in the land—and this despite the fact that we have seen Glen Affric, Glen Lyon, and Glen Garry. We halted for a moment at the bend in the road near the summit to look back; Brownlie Docharty paints scenery exquisitely, but I think that revelation of autumnal-tinted woods, mountains, rivers, and September mists would have taxed even his powers of artistry to portray. In the church at Crianlarich the congregation were singing the 121st psalm. To us it seemed to have a personal application; were not we seeking strength and inspiration amongst the hills? The clouds had settled resolutely on the great Ben by the time we reached it, and soon we were up amongst them, the outer world shut out by a mysterious opaque wall. In the valley a brisk breeze was blowing; on the mountain it was a hurricane, and every inch of the last 500 feet was disputed. Most of this part of the ascent we accomplished by the elementary method of crawling, and we often had to anchor to a boulder while a blast of exceptional violence

swept the hill, but at times we snatched several yards by an upright rush in the shelter of a friendly crag. In the end, however, we stood, buffeted and breathless but triumphant, on the top of the cairn. Hereabouts, the very "free breath of the broad-winged breeze" was just rather much in evidence, but the view from the craggy rim of Ben More did not amount to much.

In descending, we set ourselves resolutely to keep our line of ascent, but so great was the wind pressure that we emerged from the clouds a good half-mile east of where we entered them. We were like "drookit craws" when we reached the highway, but our rags of convention were dry enough by the time the tent was reached. So were we; and due honour was done to the feast which the housekeepers had prepared. Afterwards we smoked and discussed many topics of which I have but the the haziest recollection. The forenoon of the next day we spent on the gullies that seam the sides of Troisgeach; and with the evening came steamers and trains, and, later, tram cars and crowded streets. There remain, however, visions and recollections of the sublime solitudes of the mountains and the quiet beauty of the woods and glens.