

CLIMBING IN SKYE IN WET WEATHER.

BY A. M. MACRAE WILLIAMSON.

IT was a glorious morning, which gave promise of a still more glorious day, when Mackintosh and I joined the early morning train to Inverness, *en route* for Skye. By the time Inverness was reached, the sun was blazing in a cloudless sky, and we took it as a good omen of the weather for our holiday. We had once more defied the pronouncement of people who profess to understand Skye weather, for it was the 27th of July, and August is generally regarded as the wettest month in that wettest of places. However, as we had had really fine weather in August last year (1920),* we had decided to give Skye another trial. At Inverness we took the train to Kyle of Lochalsh, and from there were ferried across to Kyleakin. In the motor-ferry we met two enthusiasts who were taking motor-cycles to Staffin; we had left ours at home—we had been there before! We walked to Broadford and put up there for the night, and next day we set out to walk the twenty-four miles to Glen Brittle, which was to be our headquarters during our stay in Skye. In due course, we arrived at the post office at Glen Brittle, and were heartily welcomed by our landlady, Mrs. Chisholm. We spent the evening seated in front of the cottage, watching the changing lights on the great Sron na Ciche precipice. Such a colour these rocks assume in the evening of a fine day!—from pale pink to dark purple; and all the gullies stand out clearly—a picture that is worth all the journey to Skye to see, all that and more.

The next day was magnificent, but we were tired and stiff after our walk, so we decided to take a day off and loafed about around the cottage, feasting our eyes on the wonderful scenery, scenery that is equalled in few places. Again there was a gorgeous sunset, again the

* See "A Rock-Climbing Novitiate in Skye," pp. 52-60.

great cliffs reflected it, again we rejoiced in the prospect of fine days to come. Alas! We awoke next morning to a regular downpour—what I believe is called “an average Skye day.” The rain poured from leaden skies all day long, the hills were invisible under their mantle of thick mist; and we were obliged to stay indoors and while away the time reading, for we had not yet learned to climb in the wet—so far, we had always had plenty of fine weather in which to do our climbing, with a few wet days on which to rest. We were soon to learn that if one goes to Skye to climb, climbing has to be done in all weathers, on the principle, “Take what you get and be thankful.”

The following day (Sunday) was no better. However, we got “fed up” of staying in the house all day, so at four o'clock we set out for a walk into Coire Lagan. We duly admired the gullies all streaming with water, but we would have been quite willing to dispense with the spectacle of these 1000-foot waterfalls. We walked as far as the foot of the Sgumain stone shoot, and then we conceived the idea of doing the Cioch. When we started out we had no intention of doing any climbing and so had not brought a rope, but we knew the way and thought we might try it. The Eastern Gully was easily crossed and we soon stood at the foot of the great slab. The slab was wet and cold, and no help could be got from friction, impossible in the circumstances. By following the ordinary route, however, and not attempting any of the stiffer variations, we soon reached the top of the slab, after which there is little or no difficulty, except perhaps the last bit on to the Cioch itself, which was rendered somewhat tricky owing to the wet state of the rocks. We were not induced to remain long on the top, but we were interested to note that the tin which we built into the cairn last year to serve as a receptacle for visitors' cards had disappeared. Nor did we waste much time on our return journey. We discovered that other two climbers had arrived at the cottage in our absence—Messrs. Porter and Hilton.

The day after was the 1st of August, and the pessimists would have been pleased, for the weather was no better than on the previous two days. We were all anxious to be doing something, however; so, making a late start, we headed for Coire Banachdich, intending to do the Window Buttress of Sron Dearg. This buttress is quite a large *massif* as seen from our cottage, and we had been there before, but the mist was so thick that we spent over three hours looking for it, and we only stumbled across the foot of it after having given it up for lost. We tied on in two parties—Hilton and I on one rope, Mackintosh and Porter on the other. We got on very well, and Hilton “sailed” through the “window” in truly wonderful style. He had the advantage of a tremendous reach, which is a *sine qua non* in this pitch, unless one is prepared to expend a terrific amount of energy and risk giving No. 2 concussion of the brain by using his head as a foothold. The window pitch is the only really difficult one, but the 60-foot vertical wall above it is very sensational. The holds are ample, however, and there is no difficulty or danger. We unroped above this and soon gained the top of Sron Dearg. By this time we were pretty well soaked, so we decided that we had better not try any other bits of work and accordingly we made tracks for home.

The next day was, if possible, worse than the preceding ones, and so dense was the mist that Hilton, who had not yet seen the Sron na Ciche face, was inclined to cast doubts on our veracity when we assured him that it was the cliffs just opposite. We went out, contenting ourselves with a walk along the road (to give it a purely courtesy title), and of course we got soaked. We were not in a very cheerful frame of mind that evening, especially when we remembered that the pessimists had said that once it really starts to rain in Skye, climbers may as well go home. We went to bed praying for a drought, just as, in all probability, people in the south were praying for rain. Some people are never satisfied!

The morning was misty, but dry, and we cheered up

somewhat. The promise of good weather, however, speedily vanished, and the rain came on again before eleven o'clock. It "faired" a bit in the afternoon, and we chartered the village boat and went for a row in the bay, having some fine views up Coire Lagan. We got back without incident, and became greatly elated by a beautiful evening. Hilton apologised for his scepticism, as the Sron na Ciche showed up very fine.

As the next morning proved fine—or comparatively so—we set off in high spirits for the Inaccessible Pinnacle. We had not gone far, however, when the wind began to blow a veritable hurricane, and we felt we would not be warranted in ascending the eastern arête. We separated. Porter and Hilton made for the Window Buttress, which they climbed, and then went on to the top of Sgurr Dearg. Mackintosh and I crossed Coire Lagan and made for the Western Gully of Sron na Ciche—a climb which we had not done before. The gully is a long one, and on that day it was entirely filled by a very energetic waterfall. The first pitch is a magnificent one—about 100 feet high, with a chock-stone. It is simple work to reach the foot of the chock-stone, but the balance out is rather tricky, and was not rendered any easier by a stream of water falling on the back of one's neck the while. Several good pitches succeed this one, all of which would no doubt be fairly easy in fine weather, but with the stream masking all the holds they became quite difficult. We were thoroughly drenched long before we reached the top, though it was not raining—in fact, it was really quite a nice day. We had fine views out to sea and also of the crags at the head of Coire Lagan. The gully gives out on the screes at the top of Sron na Ciche, and we got some sensational peeps down into the Central Gully. We returned by the west ridge of Sgumain, and by the time we got home we were almost dry. We were of opinion that this was the best climb we had yet done, considering the condition of the rocks. We did not use the rope though we had one with us.

The weather fluctuated back to "dismal" the next

day; but we recognised by this time that if we did not do climbs in the rain, we would never get any done probably. Hilton and Porter set out for the West Gully but acting on a wrong direction—due to the hills being covered with mist—they went about a quarter of a mile too far west and missed the gully. Mackintosh and I did the Cioch Gully. This is a very wet gully, especially the waterfall pitch where there is an archway of rock from which a curtain of water generally falls upon “the lunatic who works for pleasure.” This pitch is remarkably holdless and altogether uncomfortable, and therefore, *ipso facto*, most enjoyable. The pitch above this baulked us at first, so we traversed round by the Cioch, climbed up by the slab, and descended the pitch by the rope. Having seen it, we were able to climb it—combined tactics are a great help at this point. We descended by the slab and made a rapid journey home for we were drenched to the skin.

It rained again the following day; and, as we had scarcely any dry clothes left, we did not go out. The afternoon proved quite fine, however, and Porter and Hilton went into Coire Lagan while Mackintosh and I loafed about. In the evening there were two more arrivals—Mr and Mrs. Bell from Sligachan. Mr. Bell is a member of the S. M. C. of old standing, and we looked forward to some climbs with him. The next day was quite as bad as any we had had, and at first no one could be induced to go out. In the afternoon, however, Hilton and I summoned up enough energy to attempt the Cioch by the Eastern Gully. We accomplished it without difficulty, but it was wet and miserable work, and we pictured the others sitting down to tea and hot scones in the cottage as we were feeling for holds with fingers that had lost all sense of touch. When we got back, we of course said we would not have missed the climb for worlds, but failed to elicit any symptoms of envy among the rest of the company.

A glorious morning greeted us next day, and we resolved to make the most of it. Mr. and Mrs. Bell set

out for Coire a' Ghrunnda, Hilton and Porter for the West Buttress of Sgumain, while Mackintosh and I marked down the North-West Buttress of Alasdair as our effort. No sooner had we got into Coire Lagan than a terrific downpour of rain came on, which put all face-climbing quite out of the question. We foregathered with Hilton and Porter behind a large boulder and abused the weather in unmeasured terms, but that was not of much use. There was nothing left for us but to abandon our programme and return home. Mr. and Mrs. Bell also returned, like us, decidedly damp. In the evening two young ladies arrived, to camp in the school-house after a week's camping at Elgol. They too, were very wet, and were heavily laden besides, each of them carrying about 56 lbs. weight (and this for pleasure!)

The day after was the very worst we had; but we were all desperate by this time. Mr. Bell, Mackintosh, and Porter set out for Gars-bheinn—a little peeved because Hilton cast doubts as to its being a mountain. Hilton and I decided to do the West Gully of Sron na Ciche. It was considerably wetter than on the occasion Mackintosh and I did it, but we managed it. At one point, where it is necessary to "back and knee" up a vertical pitch, the force of water nearly washed us out. Farther up, we had the singular experience of climbing up between the rock and the waterfall and emerging through the bed of the stream—very pleasant!

As it was drawing near the time for Porter and Hilton to leave, we decided that the next day should be reserved for the Inaccessible Pinnacle. The day was unpromising, but the four of us set off along with one of the campers, Miss Pilley. We intended to reach the Pinnacle by way of the Window Buttress, and ultimately we did this. It was cold, wet, and misty—the first really cold day we had had. After doing the Buttress, Porter decided to go home, but the rest of us went on to the Pinnacle. We went up by the eastern arête—Hilton and I on one rope, Mackintosh and the lady on the other. I then went down the west side and climbed up again with the

rucsacs and spare sweaters—we needed these. After a hurried meal, we all got down the west side—not without considerable difficulty, however, owing to the wet and slippery nature of the rocks and to the effect of cold on the fingers. We got a few blinks of sunshine on our way down, and were genuinely satisfied with our day's work.

We were all feeling a bit limp next morning, but Hilton, Miss Pilley, and I set out for the west face of Sgurr Mhic Choinnich. This buttress is fairly easy, with the exception of the last few hundred feet, but it provides a very enjoyable climb. The day turned out fine, though the tops were never quite clear of mist. We climbed to within 300 feet of the top unroped, and then I led the party away to the right to try a new variation. After some awkward balancing up a slanting crack, a broad ledge was reached, and farther progress seemed barred by the overhanging summit. We were by this time immediately above the Tearlach-Mhic Choinnich col, quite off the west face, but not so far round as King's chimney. I could just see a hold or two up to the overhang, but could see nothing beyond. I proceeded carefully, and when on the last hold reached out to the full stretch of my arms and just touched a small hold that was sufficient to steady me over the overhang. A few feet farther on a resting-place was available and my two companions joined me, Miss Pilley having some difficulty with the long pull. There was nothing very serious in the way of rock gymnastics after this, and we soon reached the cairn—but from the south, instead of the west as we had originally intended. While we were climbing we heard shouts from Alasdair and Sgurr Dearg, and made out that Porter was up Alasdair *via* the stone shoot and that Mackintosh was disporting himself on the Pinnacle. We returned home along the ridge to Sgurr Dearg, Hilton and I traversing the Pinnacle *en route* and finding it much easier than on the previous day. Mackintosh had climbed it by every route, and we were just in time to see him do the south-

west crack. This made my twentieth climb on the Pinnacle. We got home really cheered with our day.

Two days after, we bade farewell to Mr. and Mrs. Bell and the two campers, who all went off to Sligachan. It was Porter and Hilton's last day, and Hilton was anxious to do something good. Mackintosh took him in charge, while I took Porter over the Inaccessible Pinnacle, which he had not yet done. It was a fine day, and the climb was easy. Mackintosh and Hilton had a magnificent day. They began with the Cioch gully; then did the Eastern gully and on to Sgumain; and then went along the ridge to Alasdair and across to Tealach. Crossing the Alasdair Dubh gap, they climbed Sgurr Dubh na Dabheinn on to Sgurr Dubh Mhor, and proceeded home by Coire a' Ghrunnda.

Porter and Hilton left the following day, and Mackintosh and I were once more alone. We rested that day, and on the next I did nothing, but Mackintosh explored the front of the Cioch. The day after was rainy and we thought we were in for another spell of wet weather, which was most disheartening, especially as the next day was to be our last. Miss Pilley returned for a few days, and seemed to bring good weather for our last day dawned cloudless.

We had decided that we would finish up with the West Buttress of Sgumain, then do Alasdair, and conclude by doing either the round of Coire Lagan or the Alasdair Dubh gap. It was so hot that we did not make a very good pace to the bottom of the cliffs, and by the time we started climbing we gave up the idea of doing the round of Coire Lagan. At the very start of the climb—which is of the indefinite order—I stumbled across a crack that seemed to have a pitch or two in it; in the end, it provided us with some of the hardest climbing we had done. The second pitch consists of a 40-foot crack with a chock-stone half-way up. Getting on to this chock-stone calls for some rather tricky work, and immediately above it there is some stiff climbing. This pitch took us a long time: Miss Pilley,

with her short reach, found some difficulty. After the second pitch the crack becomes indefinite and has to be looked for. There were no nail marks of any kind in the crack, so we built a cairn at the top of it. We followed the crack right up to the "shattered arête" that leads up to the big rock tower near the summit. It (the crack) can be seen from the slopes of Sgurr Dearg, from whence it looks continuous; it starts at the lowest point of the Buttress. It may be well, perhaps, to add, that all the pitches can be avoided.

From the top of Sgumain we went to Alasdair. There is one very awkward step on this ridge, but after a little combined tactics Miss Pillely managed to get up. The rest of the way is easy. The view from the summit of Alasdair is magnificent, and the day was so fine that it was seen at its very best—a view such as one beholds but once or twice in a lifetime, and to obtain which was well worth the compulsory wait enforced by the fortnight of rain.

It was getting late but we felt that we must do the "gap," and we did—crossed it and re-crossed it, albeit the undertaking is, to use the climbing phrase, "quite a stiff proposition." The views looking down either side are inspiring. We descended into Coire Lagan by the great stone shoot—a most exasperating place, but exceedingly imposing in the dusk that was now creeping in. We sat for a short time at the foot of the shoot beside a spring, and feasted on the scene. The cliffs looked magnificent. I have seen them in all kinds of weather—dripping wet, with the wind howling in from the Atlantic; and anon gleaming in the brilliant light of the sun in a cloudless sky. Till then, they had always looked hard, cold, repellent, and cruel. That evening they were all pale pink from the setting sun, and no hard lines appeared in them, nothing but soft and pleasing curves. Buttress shaded into buttress, gullies lost their stern outlines, and the sea, calm and peaceful, seemed to lap the slabs at the foot of the Coire. I have never spent a finer evening in the hills anywhere.

As we walked down the slopes and along the beach, we looked back at the peaks, beautifully silhouetted against the sky. We were exultant and sad by turns—exultant because of the delightful day we had had, sad because it was the last of our present sojourn in Skye.

The next day we took a sorrowful leave, and, heavy-hearted, tramped up the glen to Sligachan. As we reached the crest of the road and looked back at Glen Brittle, we saw the clouds rolling in from the sea and blotting out the landmarks of the dear old place. What a spot for a holiday! The place, though far from habitation, will now never be lonely to me, for it is peopled with recollections of happy days spent in the company of keen mountaineers, who understand each other with an understanding that comes only to those who work together among the rocks and in the fellowship of the hills. I think no one could ever tire of Skye and the Coolin. The awful majesty of Coire Lagan in a storm is a sight that is never forgotten. Climbing on great faces one somehow gets to the heart of things, and sees them in their true perspective; one realises how futile most ordinary concerns are, how small and impotent even human beings seem. Once visited, these rock-faces ever call on one to come back and give battle once more. They remain the same, yet are ever changing.