

BEN MORE ASSYNT.

BY DAVID P. LEVACK.

IN the country lying immediately inland between two lines drawn east and west, one through Loch Lurgain, the other through Loch Assynt, there is a mass of hill-land in the west, little known to most people on this side of Scotland. The exploration of any part of this extensive playground is attained only by somewhat lengthy sojourns in the neighbourhood, and any particular district can be reached only by long journeys from the railway, which at no point is nearer than 40 miles by road. The isolation of the district is enhanced by the scarcity of accommodation, the extreme infrequency of houses, and the wildness of the landscape, relieved only here and there by little woods at the edges of its innumerable lochs.

Last year (1922) four of us solved all the difficulties of travel and hotels, by using a motor-car and camping where we chose. I have enlarged elsewhere on the glorious freedom of camp-life, and it is unnecessary to go further into the delights of such a method of travel.* Suffice it to say that one afternoon in August saw us running along the road from Loch Inver, up the short wooded valley which separates the north end of Loch Assynt from the sea, through scenery such as is produced by the West of Scotland alone. The evening was just beginning when we bivouacked on the shore of Loch Assynt, on the promontory where stand the ruins of Ardvreck Castle, beside the Allt a Chalda Mor. A more perfect situation could hardly be imagined. The sunset crimsoned the water of the loch, the hills became purple with an indefinite haze, while the sky in the west was an emerald green shot with gold. A visit to Inchnadamph hotel procured butter, bread, and milk, and these,

* See p. 109 of present volume.

supplemented by sundry herrings bought from a fisherman in Loch Inver, made a supper which was as extensive as it was appreciated. About 10 p.m. we turned in.

Next morning, after a hurried breakfast and the preparation of some immense cheese sandwiches, we ran the car into Inchnadamph, and set off, up the Traligill Burn, to attack the solitudes of Ben More Assynt. The track is a well-defined one for nearly a mile, running up the north bank of the burn to the farm of Glenbain, where, for all practical purposes, it ceases. Its absence is not felt in the slightest. The route lies on and up, rising higher and higher above the burn, over short hummocks of pasture land, and, finally, the crisp short heather of the hillside. Here let me point out that Bartholomew's half-inch map is out-of-date. The track shown leading to Ben More Assynt is on the south side of the burn, but it no longer exists. I would advise any one who attempts the ascent to hold to the north side, and there keep rising, rising, till the burn is a silver streak far on the right, and below, and the mass of Conamheall appears in front of the climber.

About three miles up from Inchnadamph, the burn divides, the left fork tumbling down a steep narrow valley which marks the northern limit of Conamheall. We turn up here, and climbing, now with hands as well as feet, we rise rapidly 1,000 feet in less than half-a-mile. And here another word of warning. It seems the easiest way out of a tiresome ascent to cross the stream to the south side, and strike obliquely up the rounded shoulder of Conamheall. It can be done, but let the climber prepare for a grinding ascent over what is literally an immense heap of road metal. Vegetation disappears, and he will find himself standing on a vast slope of shattered rock, just at the angle of repose, where pieces the size of pianos tend to move and shudder as he puts his weight on them, while here and there he has to cross little gullies filled with smaller rock debris, the whole of which slides like an avalanche without the slightest warning. No; the burn's the thing. Tiresome as it

may seem, and apparently leaving the direct line of ascent, it is by far the easiest route in the end. It eventually ceases, about 100 feet below the skyline, at the saddle between Conamheall and Beinn an Fhurain.

On the top of the saddle, the remains of the old march fence are still to be seen, twisted pieces of rusty wire, running north and south along the ridge. We turn left and due south, and climbing up the ridge by the fence, we gradually raise the top of Conamheall, on the ever-narrowing ridge. But all this time, away on our left and due east, across an immense basin of rock and little lochans, lie the remains of the oldest mountain in Europe, Ben More Assynt.* From east to west, the north face of this immense pile of debris is an unbroken sweep of stones. Stones large, stones small, with little gullies streaking the surface, all set at the angle of repose, all ready to move.

At the summit of Conamheall, the ridge turns east, and after a lunch of our immense cheese sandwiches and chocolate, we carried on, over the never-ending stones, now dipping, now rising, towards the north top of Ben More Assynt. It took us the best part of an hour and a half to make the summit, a great mass of fissured rock rising out of the pile of debris that composes the body of the mountain. Only one top is marked on the map, but two exist, within a hundred yards of each other, and dispute arose as to which was really the summit. We have not yet discovered the answer, but we were on both; so surely the mountain is ours. By the time we had gained our objective, it was nearly five o'clock, and the late afternoon had begun to dim the landscape.

* Ben More Assynt is probably entitled to the distinction of being the oldest mountain in the kingdom above 3,000 feet, for geologically it belongs to the oldest known rock system, viz., Lewisian gneiss, or "Old Boy," as it is irreverently termed. The extreme top is capped with Cambrian quartzite, which latter formation also appears on the western side of Coinnemheal (or Conamheall, pron. Connival).—"S.M.C. Guide Book" (*Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, ix, 140).

Still, to the east, we had the most desolate stretch of country that surely exists in Scotland. Miles and miles of broken moorland 2,000 feet below us, stretching over to the long line of water which is called Loch Shin, which marked the limit of our vision in that direction. Countless lochans and lesser lochans reflected the fading light, but not a sign or sound of life could be seen or heard. Southward, our view was restricted by the ridge, which again turns south, terminating in Carn na Convaroan and sloping down on the west to the Dubh Loch Mor and the Dubh Loch Beag, and the head waters of the river Oykell. Westward, the setting sun outlined Conamheall, Glas Bheinn and Quinaig to the north, while in between them we could see Loch Assynt and the coast-line north of Loch Inver.

Turning back once more to the west, we retraced our steps to the ridge, and now dropped down on to the north face, and moved diagonally down and across this vast stone shoot, to the lochan which marks the beginning of the Garbh Allt, a tributary of the Gorm Loch Mor, and eventually of the river Cassley. We quickly climbed the shoulder of Conamheall, and stood on the saddle in the evening light. Due west, against the setting sun, which made a brilliant band of light over the sea, between horizon and clouds, the solitary masses of Suilven and Canisp stood out, the former hiding behind Canisp, which seemed but a stone's-throw away. Farther south, Cul Mor and Cul Beag were just as clear, while over the north shoulder of the former peeped the jagged end of Stac Polly.

It was now getting late, and we hurried down the burn from the saddle, dropping in great strides down and across the south slopes of Beinn an Fhurain. A thousand feet disappeared above us in no time, and we were on more level ground but ever dropping toward Glenbain Farm. Here we met the keeper, and told him of our great day. He seemed quite enthusiastic over our toils, and said he had "only once seen the likes of us, and they were an Italian and a friend." I really do

not think we looked like an Italian, or his friend, but we said "Good-night" and went our way.

Inchnadamph and beer!—surely the finest brew of man after a practically waterless day—and then back to our ruined castle, now a silhouette against the golden loch, with the sun just disappearing in the west.

Such was a day of days in the hills. Tired but triumphant, we cooked and ate what I believe to be the record supper of any camp, the composition of which was turgid and complex, but the eating thereof ambrosial.

Next morning it rained as the west alone can rain, and we left for the south with the mountains shrouded in mist, and all the angels weeping.