

SUMMER DAYS AMONGST THE COOLIN.

BY ELSPET W. MILNE.

THE Isle of Skye seems to possess more than its full share of the romantic glory of the West. It is as famous for beauty as for rain, and the Coolin are its greatest charm. Seen from Loch Carron side with a blood-red sunset as a background to their jagged ridge, with softly rosy clouds filling the corries, and Broadford Bay a golden path stretching towards them, they might be the hills of fairyland. Nor does the glamour fade on closer acquaintance. The great, black, verdureless cliffs and shattered, rocky ridge have an austere beauty which, to those who love the Coolin, is strangely satisfying and peaceful, though to others it seems cruel and depressing.

I was a complete and instant captive to the charm of the Coolin, and my adoration was only tempered by a longing to make their closer acquaintance. My envy and admiration of the bold beings who set off with rope and rucksack, was unbounded, and, when a lady and gentleman of the elect asked me out with them, I was overjoyed. My delight was still greater when our "quiet day on the moors" led to the top of Bruach na Frithe. This was not only my first peak of the Coolin, but my first "Munro," so I was shaken hands with by all, and wished a successful career as a climber. I was almost speechless with delight and excitement, but my friends seemed to understand my feelings. It was now wet, cold and misty, so, after pipes and cigarettes were set agoing (during which operations I was in great request as a wind-screen) we made for the Bhasteir Corrie. The magnificence of this corrie and my first attempt at coming down scree fairly loosened my

tongue, and in my exuberance I tried to run down the scree after the casual fashion of my friends. I picked myself up, sadder and wiser.

I thought nothing could surpass the thrill of my first hill, but I was to alter my opinion. I was consumed by a desire to climb Sgurr nan Gillean, which is the monarch of the north end of the ridge. Three climbers, with that kindness to young enthusiasts which, from my experience, must be characteristic of the species, offered to take me. We took a rope with us, to my secret thrill. My excitement mounted with us and, when we all roped and I discovered our route was the Pinnacle Ridge, it was almost painfully intense. I had seen some most sensational photographs of it! The pleasant scrambling of the first two pinnacles steadied my excitement, and interest was added by a contention as to pace between the first and third man in which I filled the place of the bone. At the descent of the Third Pinnacle a most regrettable incident occurred. I did not find the handhold on the steep part, and, owing to an inability to tell left from right, unless I can go through the motions of shaking hands, could not profit by my companions directions, hung on till I could not climb back and slid off on to the rope. I was bitterly ashamed of myself and I was not satisfied until I returned next year and descended comfortably in the orthodox fashion. The passage of the Gendarme is my other clear impression of that day. It was thrilling especially when I sat astride the top and saw the awesome drop below; but for my entire faith in my friends I should, I am sure, have been terrified. The sight of the Gendarme never fails to thrill me, though I now know him to be a fraud with handholds of a most comforting size.

After these first two the order of the days no longer stands out clear in my memory. My first year I found coming down scree a sore trial. While endeavouring, unsuccessfully, to keep up with the experts, I came by many a tumble and would come off the scree feeling I could not keep up the last five miles. Luckily I soon

recovered on the smoother ground and would arrive home feeling absolutely fit with the long, swaggering, end-of-a-day stride which I had been at pains to copy from my men friends and which must have been a ludicrous stretch for my short legs. During the winter I descended interminable scree slopes in my dreams and the next summer showed much improvement from this nocturnal practice.

Skye weather is notorious and we had a full share of bad weather. One dreadful day on Mhadaidh it poured unceasingly for eight hours on four half-drowned optimists. The swirling mists made our glimpses of the corries most impressive, but the rocks were one continuous waterslide. On the homeward path we tasted the full delights of splashing recklessly, confident we could get no wetter, and I had the joy of being roped across a burn. I was wearing light shoes, having come to Skye sublimely ignorant of the conditions, which arrived home in pieces, to the huge amusement of my friends at the inn, who had been following their career with interest. I believe one old lady was furious with the men for "keeping that poor child out on such a dreadful day," and was fully prepared to see me brought home half-dead.

Like many others I was fired by the fame of the Inaccessible Pinnacle so we motored to Brittle to climb it. We went up the east side and down the west. As scenery I thought the Pinnacle very disappointing, also the climbing on the east side. However, I believe the feature is the sheer drop to Coruisk and, as it was very misty, we missed this. The west side made up for all things; it was wet, and felt very perpendicular in places. Our last man, who had an intimate knowledge of the Pinnacle and is also a lengthy individual, put me thoroughly at my ease by exclaiming cheerfully as I started to descend, "I don't think you'll have the reach to manage one place, but just yell out before you come on the rope, I can hold a house here." To my relief no yell was necessary, for I knew rude comparisons would have been

made between my weight and that of a house. From the Inaccessible we made for the Cioch, still in dense mist. Suddenly it parted like a curtain and the top of Sgurr Alastair loomed through it, huge and black. The mists hid the base of the mountain and it appeared to be hanging in mid-air directly above us, while the loch in Corrie Lagan seemed a thousand feet below. The mist closed down like a flash, the mountains were again invisible presences, but that moment's vision gave an eerie, haunted feeling to the place. We found the loch about a hundred feet below, so greatly had the mist magnified everything. The Cioch, with its great slab ending abruptly over the deep gash of Eastern Gully, looked magnificent in the mist and I thought it the wildest and finest rock scenery I had seen. The slab was streaming with water and, as we had not started till 1 p.m., it was getting late, so, when I reached the top, I was told to touch the cairn and scout in such fierce tones that I fled at once. We got back to Sligachan about eleven, and were regaled with a complete dinner which we did thorough justice to.

I was so keen on rock-climbing that I would have climbed for its joys alone, but the Coolin have more lasting gifts in their keeping. The summit views in Skye on the rare clear days are the most exquisite combination of hills and sea imaginable. Look west from Bruach na Frithe over a golden sea with the Outer Isles black clouds upon it and the mountains of Rum rising from it in shapely splendour, and one knows whence comes the poignant, haunting beauty of the Hebridean songs. Such loveliness brings that strange mixture of joy and sadness of which Shelley writes, and fills one with a great sense of exaltation because of the beauty of the world. On such a day truly, "the distant view has heaven about its edges." It may be said with truth that such days are rare, but in mist and storm the peaks and gullies of the Coolin are endowed with a new grandeur, and the mists blowing first off one peak then another make a scene both varied and impressive.

The joys of the Coolin are not for those who climb only. There are the most delectable burn pools to bathe in, deep and clear and wonderful in colour, fitted by nature with ledges to dive from. There one may lie and "taste the luxury of sunny beams tempered with coolness," and watch the shadows on the Coolin the while. One can lie on the slopes of Corrie Lagan and look across the sea to Rum and the Outer Isles, or back at the Sron na Ciche, broken up by the sun into pinnacles and gullies which rouse all the latent explorer in one, but mildly, as becomes a hot day. Then, as evening comes on, the great wall of rock turns to glowing rose, which gradually fades through rich, deep purple to black again, the last light lingering long on the top of Sgurr Alastair, till night conquers there also. Such days may be few enough but, when they come, they make up for all the dreary waiting, and, by the mercy of providence, it is such scenes that remain with one and bring reunions of friends in the misty Isle of Skye.