

A GLIMPSE OF SKYE.

By W. G. EVANS, M.B., B.S., M.R.C.S.

HEAVEN knows I had no wish to go with my friend B——. I've accompanied him on holidays before. He and trouble seem inseparable ; I am invariably dragged in. I pointed out to him, perhaps with too much emphasis, that Skye at Easter was a God-forsaken place ; full of puddles and mist ; a land fit for seagulls to live in. To make quite sure, I dwelt with care on the probability of muscular rheumatism and shipwreck.

Such pen-pictures served but to allure him ; I might have known better. A semi-coherent telegram requested me not to forget his climbing sprigs : address—Skye. Sundry similar demands apparently written on L.M.S. blotting paper, and *en route*, all equally illegible or ambiguous and devoid of proposed address, followed at intervals. Unable to bear it longer, burdened with his manifold needs, a bicycle, and a sense of impending trouble, I entrained for Skye.

The Kyle Hotel, Kyle of Lochalsh, is good after that endless exasperating crawl from Inverness. It came as a shock to be greeted at the door next morning by warm sunshine, a deep-blue sea and a really Mediterranean vista, with the Coolins in the distance. Blessed is he who expecteth nothing—but mist. That evening, too tired to stir, I rested within sight of the smoke of Sligachan, after 30 miles of headwinds, rain, hail, and unaccustomed exertion on surfaces well in keeping with tradition : and regarded the wet crags of Sgurr nan Gillean glistening in the evening sun, heavily and without enthusiasm.

The Sliguchan Inn, that Mecca of generations of climbers, was enduring the process, so dear to the heart of woman, of spring cleaning. Seating myself with tenderest care amidst workmen and tools, I waited, immobile, till speech and strength returned sufficient to explain to a half-

convinced maid that I was not in any way connected with any trade union.

Much too early next morning I was joyously greeted by my enthusiastic confrère B——. Let me add, that I, with unerring judgment, born of past suffering, had unearthed him overnight in Portree, by the simple expedient of telephoning the least expensive hotels, omitting all temperance ones: no lengthy description was required: each recognized him instantly.

The pinnacle of Sgurr nan Gillean was his first objective; nothing less would do. I groaned, but soon realized with relief that he, having scaled everything except the Storr rock in the few days preceding my arrival, was in anything but good condition. Knowing little of the mountain ahead except what I had read overnight in some dismal tome, the text of which seemed liberally bestrewn with statistics of the mortality-rate of those who climbed without a guide, we decided to try the "tourist route."

It is quite true to say that the Cuchullins are quite different from all other mountains in the British Isles. Difficulties lie on every hand; the right route may be obscure even in plain weather; distances are unusually deceptive. It may be that we found the aforementioned route; if so, my opinion of the average tourist needs revision. A rope would have been a great comfort on the last 200 feet, though the handholds are excellent and the gabbro unyielding; such rock as this irresistibly invites a climb even for those without a penchant for jeopardising their necks.

Little snow was encountered; none of it recent. The panorama from Sgurr nan Gillean well repays the climb. To the south-west, a jagged range topped by Alasdair; to the south, the massive citadels of Sgurr Beag, Sgurr na-'h'-Uamha, and Sgurr na Stri, hiding Harta Corrie; beyond a silvery Atlantic and the Outer Hebrides. To the east, and seeming far below Glamaig's green and brown slopes, bathed in sun, and beyond Raasay and Scalpay, and still beyond, the tall peaks of Ross-shire, momentarily blotted out in mist. To the north-east a specially arranged demonstration of typical Skye weather; hurrying rains sweeping in across

the Isle from the sea ; with bursts of short-lived sunshine playing on the glens of Trotternish, searchlight-fashion, through the clouds.

Friend B——, immersed in rations, agreed indistinctly that it was highly probable that we should soon be (a) very wet indeed, (b) wrapped in mist, (c) unable to get down again. My appetite departing, I hazarded a disregarded observation, that provided it be *terra firma*, sea-level has its points.

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The following day, with bicycle and baggage, we removed from Sligachan to Glen Brittle, following Allt Dearg Mor over the Bealach a' Mhaim ; this was quite enjoyable. At the highest point of the pass is an impressive view of the grim, steaming flanks of Bruach na Frithe, and Sgurr Thuilm, with dark, forbidding corries and truly fearsome ridges thinly veiled with puffs of mist. Dante must have seen them.

On a dull, foreboding day in the Coolins, with lowered clouds raking the ridges, the appalling desolation communicates a feeling of depression hard to withstand.

It is small wonder that almost every crag has its history ; superstitious if not real. For the monarchs of the Cairngorms, with long acquaintance, one might entertain a feeling of affection ; the unrelieved ferocity of the Coolins would temper their attraction for most of us, with awe.

We descended on Glen Brittle house, navigated the bicycle circumspectly through the ranks of two platoons of interested Highland cattle, caked in mud, and insinuated ourselves into the house and—temporarily—into the good books of our hostess by unflinchingly declaring our passion for houses undergoing spring-cleaning. Was *all* Skye undergoing this same relentless operation ? In addition to this Easter curse, a heavy sea-mist, permitting scarcely 30 yards visibility, also lay upon the land.

The main contingent of the Club disporting themselves at Kinlochewe also shared its moisture—the thought was comforting.

Sgurr Alasdair having been decided upon the previous night, we, driven forth by broom and duster, emerged, to be greeted by a sympathetic fanfare from the Bovril squad also stationed somewhere in the mist. Shortly after, a water-rotted plank, successfully traversed by my friend B—, not very unexpectedly provided me with all the thrills and joys of surf-riding, in an icy waterfall swollen to ample dimensions. Neptune-like I arose from the flood. Whilst emptying hat, boots, and vocabulary, I detected, dimly, a hyena-like performance from higher up the bank. Philosophically pointing out, with an expression of sheer happiness, that I, at least, was no longer faced with the certainty of further wetness, we proceeded.

The story that the compass is unreliable in the Coolins owing to the magnetic nature of the rock was soon verified, but with map and mountain-loch to guide us, we eventually reached, after miles of bog-trotting, the desolate boulder-strewn slopes and roaring torrents at the foot of Coire Lagan. The "Great Stone Chute" between Coire Lagan and Coir' a' Ghrundda proved an unforgettable experience.

A steep, unstable scree-slope, probably nearly 3,000 feet in height, flanked by dimly-visible precipitous rock-walls, pouring down miniature cascades, splashing on the scree, gave us plenty to think about. A gingerly-made ascent of several feet, on all fours, was frequently rewarded with a wild downward slither in the middle of a rattling avalanche: weighty boulders perched on such a base needed watching.

Decades later, in slashing rain and best nursery-style, we crawled triumphant on to solid rocks, and the climb along the ridge to the pinnacle of Alasdair was quickly done. The height of Alasdair (3,309 ft.) fluctuates in different books: on wet days it is distinctly higher. A beautiful view! Naught but the dismal sound of dripping waters, squelching boots, and purplish remarks from scarcely-recognizable B—. There was nothing to see, he explained, wiping the streaming rain from his spectacles. Yes; Corrie Lagan, once in a life-time, on such a day with my friend B—, is quite enough.