

FUAR THOLL—HILL OF THE COLD HOLES.

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A FEW miles inland from the Little Minch lies a group of small mountain ranges of exceeding variety and beauty—Achnashellach Forest.

On the morning of north-west breezes, when puffs of sunlit cumulus drifted above the glens, we left the high road and took to the track by the Allt Coire Lair among the old Scots pines. Trout darted in pools the colour of bubbling goblets of champagne and waterfalls glistened between the gnarled pine trunks. To the north lay the long undulating spine of Liath Mhòr, its steep scree slopes lit by the sunshine to a bleached and dazzling glare. Far away behind us, violet and hazy with distance, rolled the great tangle of the south-west Ross-shire mountains, billow on billow.

The burn's song grew thinner, the air became crisper, and presently we stood in an amphitheatre of great magnificence; as the solemn beauty of a cathedral steals upon one, as organ music swells and ebbs upon still air, so was the silence in these mountains, so was the cadence of innumerable waters whose age-old song was wafted to us, now louder, now fainter, upon the wind.

We circled dark little Loch Coire Lair; swallows skimmed its inky surface, which is 1,200 feet above sea-level. We were now facing the massif of Fuar Tholl—Hill of the Cold Holes. The tremendous northern buttress rose above us, a wall of Lewisian gneiss nearly a quarter of a mile in length and rising from a floor of Torridon red sandstone as abruptly as a mason's wall rises from a street. Heading for the high col between Fuar Tholl and its northern neighbour, we soon came upon the "loch a' bealach"—the little crystal lochan

so often cradled in the high passes among our Scottish hills—fairy water, ice-cold through the long northern summer days. Here, at this signpost, we turned again toward the great rock face and slowly upward into a hanging corrie, whence, by a scramble on steep scree and rock terraces, we gained the ridge.

A moment ago our faces had been close to the mossy rock; now we gazed out upon the western sea, the "far Cuillin," Kyle Rhea sparkling like a thread of diamonds. The island of Eigg floated in a blue mist-wreath which partially veiled the nearer mountains of Kintail. Far away in the east, beyond the table-lands of Wyvis, and just discernible, a tongue of water crept inland, flanked by two dark sentinels—the Sutors of Cromarty guarding their firth.

The ridge of Fuar Tholl is roughly S-shaped, and the two great corries and various lesser gullies are more suggestive of erosion by sea than those on any other hill in Scotland that I know. The buttresses have almost a basaltic appearance. The main ridge runs out into thin headlands and the gullies are wide and unbroken. It was as we stood upon the crest of one of these headlands that we heard an eerie wail. The sound, borne on a breeze that flickered and eddied in the chimneys below us, was savage, unearthly, elusive as the echo. Hunting buzzards have a similar wild scream, but no buzzard sailed in sight under the wide blue sky. A moment later the cry came again, now, without doubt, from the cliff face beneath us, and in it a terribly human quality which made the heart stand still.

Rotten rock, treacherously cemented with parsley fern, formed a most evil-looking parapet, and obscured our view of a possible route on the face below—but discover the origin of these wierd wailings we must. Making for the head of a chimney on our left we quickly decided upon a descent which looked easy for about 50 feet; thence a traverse could be made back to the promontory. This point we reached without much difficulty, but still the perpendicular wall below our original standpoint was out of view. A crevasse and a jammed block were just below us, and beyond

that a grassy platform about the size of a billiard-table. This vantage-point we gained after a scramble over the block and an unpleasant glimpse into a very black crevasse.

Slowly, cautiously, we put our heads over the edge of the billiard-table and looked into space. On a narrow shelf 10 feet below there lay a huddled bundle of fur, smoke-coloured and pulsating; the little creature was a wild-cat kitten which, somehow, must have rolled or scrambled to that ledge to be marooned there. Who knows whether the mother had attempted a rescue, or whether she had abandoned her lost kit to lead the rest of the litter to safety upon our invasion of her territory?

The kitten had heard our clumsy scrambling, the soft fur bristled, and in the amber eyes that looked up at me burned the spirit of primitive savagery these hills have known since time began. Poor little outlaw, though gamekeepers and shepherds put a price upon your head, yet we would have rescued you—but you would not! Unbuckling our rucksack straps we made a life-line, with a rucksack at the end as bos'n's chair. This we dangled beside the furry atom and drew it slowly, invitingly up the wall of rock. But it was all of no avail, and after twenty minutes of fruitless persuasion, very reluctantly, we abandoned the little castaway to its fate.

Regaining the ridge, we walked the springy turf to the lip of the great north-western corrie. Into this airy cirque we dropped by a stone shoot, and the chill, dank air of the "cold hole" enveloped us. Down on the boggy floor where little golden frogs hopped, slow drips from the cold rock faces made dismal whisperings. In this chill cauldron the sun as it crosses the meridian on Midsummer's Day can scarcely cast a beam.

Out again into the glorious sunshine and homeward across the moor; downward through wide, free spaces like gods from high Olympus. Did Grass of Parnassus smell sweeter on its Hellenic uplands than it smells upon the Highland hills? Spread the golden asphodel a richer carpet in Elysian Fields?

Where the Allt Coire Lair froths into its first gorge we stood for a long look back at the buttressed walls and the "cold holes" of Fuar Tholl. The evening sun was now aslant upon them—and the glory of it was very great.

