

HARKING BACK : AN ASCENT

by a new route and without guides, to the summit of Ben Muich-dhuie in the summer of 18—, with excursive remarks on divers objects of scenic interest presented during a tour of the picturesque valley of the Dee.

THE ascent of the highest mountain in the kingdom becomes the chief ambition of the more adventurous visitor to the Castletown of Braemar, an undertaking not entirely devoid of danger by reason of the great height and remoteness of that mountain. The greatest peril of these solitudes—that of the fog which suddenly descends on the moor, obliterating the landscape and making it impossible to ascertain one's direction with any certitude—may be obviated by engaging a guide, or ghillie, for the expedition. These ghillies we found usually well-informed, domesticated, and very civil; having repaired to the most celebrated of these hillmen, after some converse with him regarding the practicability of the ascent and the usual route to the mountain, we resolved to dispense with the services of a guide, esteeming the adventure of inestimably greater merit if successfully accomplished by our unaided efforts. And, although our intentions occasioned some misgiving in the village of Castletown, we nevertheless made all the necessary preparations for the event. The weather seemed propitious and, although not without some doubts as to our ability to carry the venture to a successful conclusion, we contrived, the better to assure our friends, to affect an air of total unconcern.

At 6 A.M. our curricule was at the door and we all but ready, having previously arranged all the items necessary to the undertaking. Our cautious hostess, however, had delayed packing our provision-bags, under the impression that at the sober hour of six we would review and repent of our rashness in embarking on such a hazardous venture. Eventually, with parting injunctions from our host to follow the nearest burn in the event of our becoming trapped in a

fog, we set gaily forth. We realised, however, that this piece of advice, were we to follow the wrong watercourse, might involve us in some considerable inconvenience, not to say danger, since we understood that the whole region for many miles around was entirely barren and desolate.

Our thoughts might have been further given to foreboding had not our attention been diverted to a waterfall of considerable magnitude and some beauty (a large part of it, unfortunately, obscured by trees), which annually attracts a large concourse of visitors. This is hardly so impressive a spectacle as the neighbouring Linn of Quoich, itself a mere trickle compared with the Linn of Dee, a mile or two farther on, which is some 300 yards in length and through which the river whirls with great force and rapidity. It is said that a man may jump across but that it is quite impossible to jump back. The rewards we thought incommensurate with the risk, and we, accordingly, had no inclination to attempt this feat. In any case, we had no means of ascertaining from which side the spring should be performed.

The road now deteriorates considerably, being little more than a rough track passable for carts. But, eventually, we arrived at the base of our mountain and, at a wood of dark pines, dismounted and apportioned as neatly and as precisely as possible the amount each should have to carry. On seeing the extent of this, we regretted not having arranged to take ponies as far as Loch Etagan (or Attachin), which, we understand, is normally possible. (Unversed as I am in the finer points of the equestrian art, a glance at the rather languid and sedate animals of our equipage entirely reassured me.) However, proceeding methodically to fill the six pockets of our waistcoats first, then the inner pockets of the coats, and lastly, the outer pockets, we were successful in accommodating, more or less unobtrusively, the greater part of our impedimenta, except for our Scotch plaids, provision-bags, a japanned tin vasculum carried by my botanist companion, and a telescope. These latter depended from our persons and gave our little *entourage* quite a business-like air.

Stepping bravely forth, we soon lost sight of the curricule,



GLEN DERRY

G. R. Symmers

passing by the way a small hut, a unique habitation but apparently unoccupied at that time. Issuing from the wood we were confronted with a sublime panorama of mountains, a proper appreciation of which was seriously interfered with by reason of frequent contact with the angular boulders with which our path was so plentifully bestrewn. The path, a rude track, albeit not always discernible, wound round the base of a mountain of severely barren aspect. Presently, on turning a corner, the Monarch himself was presented to our gaze, still at a considerable distance away. A chill feeling came over us at the sight of the gigantic precipices, which, by some means yet to be ascertained, it was our purpose to circumvent. After toilsome walking along the banks of a burn, which, we understood, issued from Loch Attachin (or Etagan), we arrived at a hollow of spacious dimensions between two mountains, with a frightful precipice on our left, the merest glance at which was attended with some feeling of giddiness. Here we partook of a cold collation, whose savour was no whit diminished by the crispness of the air, and our comfort was considerably augmented by copious draughts from a bottle of usquebaugh which the guides assured us was quite indispensable.

We now addressed our steps towards a steep acclivity at the upper end of this hollow. The sun shone from an azure sky, and this, together with the steepness of the ascent, induced an uncomfortable sensation of warmth, obliging us to relinquish some of the extra garments which we had been assured would be necessary to combat the great cold of these regions. Selecting a conspicuous boulder; to identify which would be an easy matter on our return, we abandoned our plaids, woollen comforters, and other paraphernalia, which now seemed to us unnecessary encumbrance.

It was no easy matter to preserve our balance on the uncertain foothold afforded by the great conglomeration of loose stones. But, by patient persistence, we eventually surmounted this slope, although not entirely without incident. At an unusually steep part my stout staff slipped from my grasp, and, gathering momentum as it fell, rapidly disappeared from view. This episode brought home to us the

necessity for constant vigilance, although the disappearance of the staff was no material loss and permitted me freer use of my hands, a matter of considerable convenience. It was now obvious that, by turning abruptly to the left, the precipice could be passed at its northern extremity and the ascent to the summit continued by another steep acclivity. Below us we saw the dark, forbidding waters of a lake, girt by grim precipices of unknown depth (which we noted as a place to avoid), and which, from its appearance, we took to be Loch Etagan. It was now abundantly clear that we had not followed the Loch Etagan burn but had pursued an unorthodox route, which departure from the conventional mode of approach afforded us some little satisfaction.

Although now very fatigued with our efforts and not a little breathless, we felt disposed to hurry over the latter part of our task on account of the savage and inhospitable appearance which the wilderness around us now presented. But, fortified with another draught of usquebaugh, after many weary hours of exertion, we discerned the heap of stones marking the culminating point of our mountain. Here the wind blew with gale force, and we were soon so chilled as to regret having so unwisely abandoned our comforters. In what liquid stimulant remained, we celebrated our success and temporarily defeated the cold. The prospect was magnificent, the chief object of the view being Ben Nevis. Although we had no means of exactly ascertaining the position of that mountain, its great height and distance left no room for doubt in our minds. We spent but a few minutes on the summit, anxiety lest we should be overtaken by a fog hastening our departure.

The descent was by much the more difficult operation, on account of the great looseness of the stones, but, in the fullness of time, we arrived at Loch Attachin, experiencing some difficulty in recognising our approach to that place and also in identifying the conspicuous rock at which we had abandoned our superfluous garments, of which we now stood in some need. After visiting a dozen or more, we chanced upon the spot and made our way rapidly down the declivity to the burn by which we had ascended. Although waxen

very weary, we were stayed by a feeling of complacency, now that all danger was past, in having accomplished the unusual feat of an ascent of the mountain without guides and with no greater hurt than slight desquamation of the epidermis. In due course we arrived at the curricule, well-nigh exhausted with our self-imposed labours. The drive to Castletown refreshed us considerably and, after fourteen hours' absence, we were again thankfully reunited to our friends. We stepped down showing, I believe, but little sign of fatigue, and making so light of our adventure as to cause it to appear that we were willing to set out forthwith and repeat our accomplishment.