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THE SOUTHERN CULLIN FROM SGÙRR DEARG.

- 1. Sgùrr Dubh Mòr.
- 2. Sgùrr Mhic Coinnich.
- 3. Sgùrr Dubh na da Bheinn.

- 4. Sgùrr Thearlaich
Alasdair Stone Shoot.
- 5. Sgùrr Alasdair.

- 6. Sgùrr nan Eag.
- 7. Sgùrr Sgumain.
- 8. Sron na Ciche.

- 9. The Cioch.

G. R. Symmers

THE ROAD TO GLEN BRITTLE.

BY W. A. EWEN.

It happened only a year or two ago in Portree Post Office. We were wiring for accommodation at Glen Brittle in mid-afternoon and had prepaid the reply. "It will take some *hours* to come back; perhaps to-morrow morning," we were told. We must have looked surprised, for the girl added, "You see, it has to go on a horse." And that was how I came first to hear of the road to Glen Brittle and of its water splashes; and I shall always retain that picture of a telegraph messenger, mounted on a horse, ambling slowly down the long road to Rhudunan.

But far be it from me to criticise the postal arrangements at Rhudunan. The telephone has now arrived—"Rhudunan 1," says Mrs Chisholm—and the postman calls, weather permitting, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I collided with him in the door of the post office on the morning of one of his visits. Rubicund, round-faced, and smiling, he rummaged in the bottom of his bag and remarked, "I think this is your toothbrush." And so it was. And who would wish for efficiency greater than that? One could imagine him, seated in the postal gig, watching various parcels disintegrate (oh! the road to Glen Brittle) and playing a variation of Kim's Game with a number of articles and memorising the parcels to which they belonged. To this careful gentleman, therefore, we entrusted our heavy luggage so that we might travel the lighter on the high road to Glen Brittle. There cannot be much wrong with the postal facilities when even Symmers's rucksack is passed as a parcel not exceeding 11 lbs. weight.

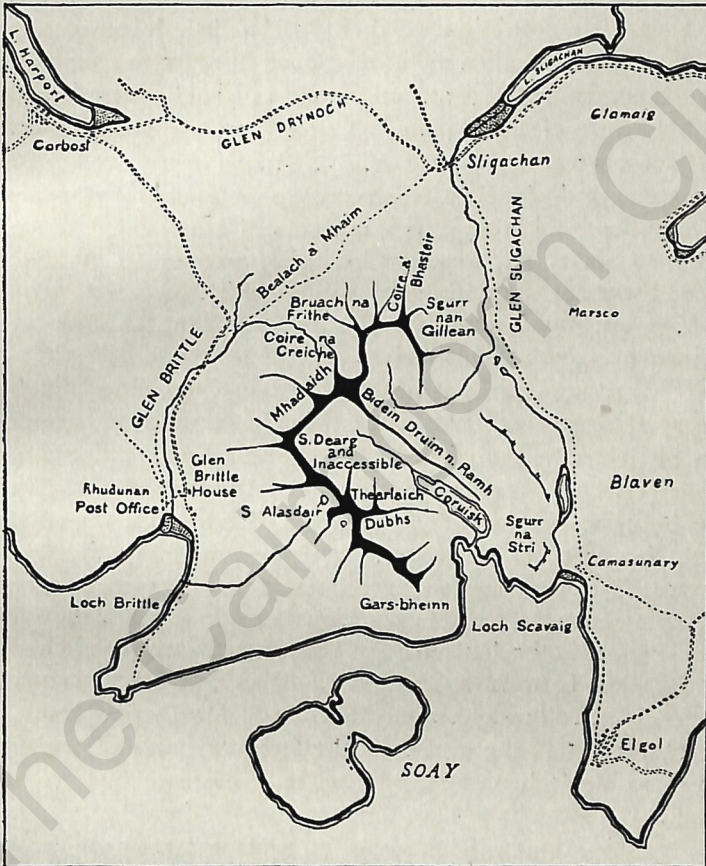
Our immediate objective was to reach Glen Brittle by the Cuillin ridge. But we had also laid plans for an attempt on the ridge walk from Garsbheinn to Sgùrr nan Gillean, an ambitious programme since only one of the party had

previous acquaintance with the ridge, and only the southern half of it at that. By taking the high road we achieved two further objects, in exploring an unknown area, particularly the Bhasteir Tooth, and in laying a cache of food at the Bealach nan Lice. It was August and late in the year for such an attempt, so we provisioned a tent in Glen Sligachan lest we should descend late to a silent and already overcrowded hotel. As the tent was to be left for a week we took every precaution against wind and water, pitching it on a knoll in an exposed position but safe from the rising tide of the Sligachan.

Our departure next morning was speeded by the advent of a plague of midges—Glen Sligachan midges, vicious, voracious, giants of their kind. Avoiding the dark depths of the Bhasteir Gorge, we ascended Coire a' Bhasteir to the Bealach nan Lice, and came face to face with Naismith's route to the Tooth, a route classed with the hard side of the Inaccessible, and the Thearlaich-Dubh gap, the three most interesting problems on the ridge. But neither of the others is comparable with Naismith's from the point of view of exposure and possibly also of difficulty. We found it difficult from a Sligachan start, and as we left it, wondered how much harder we might find it at the end of the ridge day. I had overlooked the fact that Symmers was being introduced to the ridge at its hardest point until he asked whether there were much of this sort of thing on the ridge "walk." But south to Bidein the ridge offers no difficulties, and we elected to leave it before that point in order to visit Coire na Creiche, the pleasantest road to Glen Brittle. And eventually we arrived at Glen Brittle House to await the day and the weather.

Having put in several weeks of almost continuous climbing, it was assumed that no special training would be necessary for the attempt on the ridge, and for a day or two we were very lazy, presenting something of a problem to the other guests, who observed that we climbed not neither did we fish. But we made one necessary excursion to the Bealach Coire na Banachdich, where we proposed to cache a supply of food and water. Having selected a promising

route, I assumed that Symmers would follow after filling the water-bottle. Half an hour later there was no sign of him, and the route was becoming difficult. A long traverse across the cliff failed to locate the supporting column (which, at the point I had reached, was what I required most), and



the face route was abandoned in favour of easy chimneys. It transpired that Symmers had stolen up an easy little scree gully and was sitting on the col eating chocolate; and the reason for this evasion was simply that he was following a trickle of water and would not fill the bottle until the last possible moment. It rained next day, and a visit to Sron

na Ciche was called off; but the day was nevertheless interesting for its encounter with a French couple who had no English. Interesting because we had so little French! That evening they departed for Coruisk in conditions so promising that we decided to make the attempt next day.

We had planned to start for Garsbheinn at 4 A.M., but at 4 A.M. it was raining. I thought it a little inconsiderate of Symmers to awaken me at that hour in order to announce such a commonplace; and to parade in his climbing boots, looking for a clearance, was definitely provocative of wrath. (I have a great regard for A. W. Moore, whose action in "reluctantly" leaving one morning without Whympers—because he wouldn't get up—might well have added something to Mr Young's code of climbing manners!) At five, then, Symmers not seeing eye to eye with Moore, we were picking our way across the bog in the half light, *en route* for the weary screes of Garsbheinn.

It was very calm. Night lingered in Coire Lagan, but the sombre grey of the sea was faintly suffused with rose. We carried only a minimum of food and a light Alpine line for roping into the gap and off the Inaccessible, and in two hours we were on the summit of Garsbheinn, the start of the long road to Sligachan. I felt more amiably disposed towards Symmers and even reconciled to the project now that the screes of Garsbheinn were below us. And below the screes was the little tent of the French couple, pitched on the shore between us and Soay. The Outer Isles steamer passed, siren blowing, and after that, for eleven hours, we observed nothing, not even the famous view of Coruisk from the Bealach na Glaic Mhor, only the rock under our noses. Thirst assailed us almost at once, but Sgùrr nan Eag provided occasional pools of rain water, warm and vapid, and inadequate even in quantity. Rain and mist hindered us on Sgùrr Dubh na Da Bheinn, where minutes were lost and the rope jammed on the south wall of the Thearlaich gap. We were behind schedule at Sgùrr Alasdair, but the round of Coire Lagan was familiar ground and we were only minutes behind at the Inaccessible.

On Sgùrr Dearg I advanced the opinion that the worst



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LOCH CORUISK

was behind us. Far from it; the Cuillin ridge only begins with Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh and Bidein, which go on and on and up and down *ad infinitum*. The steep southern faces presented little difficulty, but the long, slabby descents, on which route finding was often a process of trial and error, cost us time, precious minutes stolen from our infrequent halts. Resolutely we passed Coire na Creiche, the last road back, and looked forward to a change to purely pedestrian effort over Bruach na Frithe. Thirst was still a major problem and, in the absence of rain pools, Symmers moistened his tongue on a wet slab. But cautiously, I imagine, as our finger-tips were now tender from contact with the gabbro! The minor tops on the way to Bruach na Frithe provided easy going, and one or two remarkable gaps, narrow enough to permit of jumping across. From the summit of Bruach na Frithe we saw the familiar sight of cloud boiling up from the Atlantic, and resolution faltered. The weather seemed about to displace our absorbing interest in time. It is seldom that I take much arithmetical interest in these things, but the importance of the time factor on this journey may be gauged from a note I made here—Sgùrr a' Fionn Choire, 6.7½ P.M.! We rested at our second food cache on the Bealach nan Lice for half an hour, less interested in the immediate problem of the Tooth than in the refreshment provided. But the latter failed to restore our flagging spirits, and when the clouds swept over Bruach na Frithe and the first drops of rain fell, resolution broke.

The lateness of the hour and the rapidly approaching bad weather relieved either of the necessity of confessing that he would not care to lead Naismith's! It was already evident on Bruach na Frithe, and before it, that time and light would defeat the full realisation of our hopes. And, perhaps, in giving little previous thought to the exploration of Sgùrr nan Gillean (which neither had climbed), we treated that mountain a little lightly. We had begun to realise that its problems, although possibly comparatively easy, might prove difficult to unravel in mist and darkness. And so it came to pass that we descended again to Glen Sligachan by the Bhasteir Corrie. The light failed and

the rain came, and the wisdom of our choice was emphasised by every crack of the wildly flapping canvas and the more distant roar of the wind among the crags.

The camp, in ordinary circumstances, we would not have regarded as a comfortable one. As a result of standing unattended for a week, everything was wet, wholly or in part. But, after supping from a most unusual combination of tinned foods, we caterpillared into wet sleeping-bags and were asleep. And not the wildest winds of the Cuillin, not even the uneasy conjunction of tinned raspberries with sardines and chocolate (in that order!) could disturb our rest. In his notes, which I saw later, Symmers wrote, "Sodden oblivion"! Late next morning we awoke to a half-gale, wrestled with sodden canvas, and descended upon Sligachan in search of breakfast. At Sligachan, breakfast was off—a somewhat scandalised maid allowing that we might, with an (apparently great) effort on her part, have high tea. For high tea she achieved bacon and egg and toast with marmalade, so we were left wondering at what dark hour this amazing daily metamorphosis occurred! It is not our custom to suffer under the blight of gentility for a longer period than is necessary; accordingly, breakfast over, we set out again for Glen Brittle on foot. There was put, indeed, a tentative suggestion regarding a return to Glen Brittle over the Cuillin ridge. I imagine, however, that this was merely another example of the "heavy-footed facetiousness" so typical of climbers, to which one of our reviewers refers elsewhere! The pedestrian route by the Bealach a' Mhaim was nevertheless enjoyable, with its views into Coire na Creiche on the one hand, and out over Loch Harport on the other. The waterfalls and the colourful Fairy Pools in Coire na Creiche held our interest for a time, and Symmers was almost tempted to bathe. It will always be a matter for regret with me that I did not obtain for the *Journal* a picture of Symmers bathing in the Fairy Pool! And, in due course, we came to the highway, after the Stone Shoot, the most remarkable scree in Skye. It appears to have no permanent surface to speak of—apart from a few aged boulders by which old acquaintances mark their pro-



W. A. Ewen

COIRE LAGAN

gress along the glen. It is never very decisively, and without doubt, a road, and at last inconsiderately loses itself in a field. It has no historical associations that I know of, but it has echoed to the feet of many now famous men. It is impassable to charabancs and to low-slung cars; it has no virtues but one—it is the road to Glen Brittle.

