

## LOCHNAGAR—A FIRST VISIT.

ROBERT BAIN.

SINCE the days of my youth, one hill above all others has tempted me. Then, as now, I was not interested in the attainment of mere height so long as I was on a hill, somewhere, anywhere. A hill was a place where one lay in the heather, looking at the plain below. In imagination the raiding clansmen could be seen feeling their stealthy way out of the corries, sometimes using a wood as shelter, sometimes creeping up under cover of the river banks, as they converged on the castle below. As the mood fitted I lay and planned ferocious attack or glorious defence.

I was tempted from my Perthshire hills, not by the great Ben Nevis, not by the extensive heights of the Cairngorms, but by their smaller neighbour Lochnagar. Dark Lochnagar! Here was a hill to fill the imagination—here was a name to dream of and to conjure up pictures of towering precipices, black crevice and dark, wet rock, dully, malevolently glistening. There was something fearful which repelled, and yet the whole picture had an air of mystery, a suggestion of new and great discoveries which was infinitely compelling.

For many years Lochnagar remained a dream, a dream to be dreamt at night in the depths of winter when the winds whistled and snow and sleet battered on the window. Once, indeed, I lay on the rising ground above the Devil's Elbow and, looking out at where Lochnagar should be, let my fancy roam. That was the nearest I got to the hill for several years, until finally an opportunity to join a climbing party presented itself. Doubts assailed me. Should I decline and be sure of my dream mountain? Or should I go and run the risk of disillusionment? I went.

It was very quiet and peaceful as we walked upwards through the forest, our feet making no sound as they sank



LOCHNAGAR SCENE

*Robert Bain*

into snow so freshly fallen that it did not squeak. A capercailzie rose with a crackling of undergrowth and winged its noisy way through the trees, while some deer eyed us questioningly before they retreated. Nothing else stirred.

Soon the stately pines began to thin out, and the foothills of surrounding mountains became visible through the mist and lightly falling snow. The ascent grew steeper, the going harder, the pines were left behind and below, and we were out on the open hill, able to look around us. The outlook was grey and gloomy, yet there was a certain ethereal beauty in the intermingling of rising snow-tipped forest and drooping mist. Nothing above a few hundred feet was visible.

Up we went, into the mist, figures some thirty yards ahead showing up only dimly in the gloom. The snow was soft and deep. The wind rose and the temperature dropped as we climbed, so that soon, coats which previously had been wet were now frozen stiff. Miniature snowdrifts built up in the corners of our windward eyes, and varied were the types of headgear which now made their appearance. Progress, by map and compass, was slow, but eventually the crest of a ridge was reached, along which we made our way, sometimes aided, sometimes checked, by a gale which came whistling and whirling out of unseen corries, but always almost blinded by the fine snow powder now being blown off the surface. Suddenly we found our way seemingly barred by a steep snow slope rising right up into the mist above. The angle of the slope, intensified by its misty indefiniteness, gave it the appearance of a great limitless wall.

Up and up we went. Would we ever get to the top of this never-ending staircase? Resting for a moment, I watched figures disappear wraith-like in the mists above, figures appear wraith-like from the mists below. Between the whistling gusts of wind, the rhythmic chip, chip of the ice axes, curiously softened and muffled by the blanket of mist, or occasionally the heavy breathing of a companion was heard. Every other sound was that of wind. A snowball

came rolling past me and vanished below, and as I watched it I pondered its beginning and end.

Then what had been a smooth surface became broken, the gradient eased off, and we burst out on to a summit. Here was a dead calm, though some twenty feet below the wind was whistling past. Around us loomed the outlines of huge boulders, encased in frozen snow. Here was a snow cave, carved out by some curious eddy in the wind; there was a solitary, unexplained pinnacle; while all that could be seen was iced with fog crystals which formed the most amazing floral designs. I sighed for the gleam of sunshine which would have made it a fairyland. But this was no place to linger at that time of day, so, after a roll-call, down, down, and down we went. Soon we were into the wind again, and this time it was against us. Still seeing no farther than before, we made our way, it seemed, for mile after mile, buffeted this way, flung that way, almost blinded by the frozen snow and icicles which hung from our eyebrows, our nostrils, and our moustaches. Now we plunged to the thighs in a softer snow patch, now felt for a precarious hold on wind-swept ice, but still we went down and down.

A pine showed up through the mist. Another and yet another appeared, and then, within five minutes, we stepped out of the blistering, searing wind into the quiet, peaceful haven of the forest. Every twig of every branch of every tree bore its clinging burden of snow and not one moved. The quiet and stillness seemed unnatural and almost oppressive. It was a never-to-be-forgotten transition and a fitting close to a memorable day. What is more, I still had my dream to play with.