

A FIRST VISIT TO SKYE.

H. D. WHITEHOUSE.

A HOLIDAY in Skye ! Oh yes, we shall certainly go to Skye—after the war. Why not now ? Impossible ! Why impossible ? Well, then, is your journey really necessary ? No, but we live only once, so let's go, anyhow ! In the end, all was fixed up and we left in the early autumn. Boarding the night train at Crewe, we travelled in luxury to Inverness and thence to Kyle of Lochalsh.

A flock of sheep was chased off the ferry-boat and we went to take their place for the short journey across the Sound of Sleat, passing the ruins of Castle Maol which brought memories of the vikings and of their princess who once lived there ; 5 P.M. saw us at Sligachan after a rather bumpy bus ride and all the Cuillin Hills were clear to their tops and looked fine against the blue sky. We were told that Skye was having the best spell of weather for several years. Things were looking good.

Next day dawned inconceivably clear ; the sun shone and the sky was blue, so we set out in a party of three for Sgùrr nan Gillean—with the rope. Shall we ever forget that rope ? Climbing rope being unobtainable anywhere, something to take its place had been obtained, and when this something was unpacked at Sligachan it turned out to be a cart rope of no mean strength, weighing at least 15 lb. ! The young naval member of the party was consulted and recommended the removal of one strand, which would leave strength enough to hold the entire party at once. We took the rope up Sgùrr nan Gillean and that was its last outing. The leader found such a weight round his waist that he was unable to move upwards, and, as the heavy rope dragged across loose scree, pounds and pounds of debris fell on those following.

Knight's Peak was ascended first, then Sgùrr nan Gillean,

and what a view! We looked over the channel between Benbecula and N. Uist and there, over ninety miles away, suspended between sea and sky, was St Kilda with its huge cliffs falling to the Atlantic. We wondered if we would ever set foot there. Mountains in every direction—An Teallach looking wonderfully enticing. Well, perhaps some day! But the near-by Black Cuillin, too, looked superb. Truly are they called black. I doubt if any of us had seen so many mountains ever before at one time. The young member of the party found a fine eagle's flight feather near to the summit ridge and this caused us to keep an eye on the sky, although until then we had hardly seen any birds at all.

A leisured scramble down the eastern ridge brought us nearer to the glen. This ridge is part of the so-called Tourist Route. The rope preceded us down each cliff and it whistled wonderfully as it sailed through the air. We wondered if we would whistle like that if we dropped over! At dinner we were delighted and most surprised to find the President, H. D. Welsh, in the dining-room, and to hear that he had just had a most enjoyable day on Bruach na Frithe and the Bhasteir Corrie. Next day was not so good, mist on the tops, rain in the offing, barometer falling. Somebody said, "You've had one good day, any way."

On a day of uncertain weather we made for Bruach na Frithe by way of the Fionn Corrie in a certain amount of mist which cleared wonderfully five minutes after our arrival on the summit ridge. We saw pinnacles and rock faces outlined against the mist which moved from ridge to ridge revealing something new and wonderful every minute. As the sun filtered through the mist we looked, in vain, for a Brocken spectre. Instead, the views opened out—Loch Hourn and Loch Carron were bathed in sunshine, Rum was having a little rain, and the Outer Isles were clear from Barra to the Butt of Lewis. In the middle distance MacLeod's Tables looked fine and the smooth surface of Loch Bracadale reflected the rocks on its shore like a mirror.

Scrambles on Sgùrr a' Fhionn Choire and on the neighbouring pinnacles amused us for a while, but we were not amused when the young member of the party attempted to



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climb down the impossible. Sgùrr a' Bhasteir was visited and this point affords a fine view of Sgùrr nan Gillean and the Pinnacle Ridge as well as of the Bhasteir Corrie. The cave climb on the Bhasteir Tooth looked too wet and forbidding, festooned as it was with bits of rope left there by previous parties. We climbed to the top of Am Bhasteir instead, whence we looked down to the summit of the Tooth, 70 feet below us.

Another day in this war-time holiday flashes vividly across my memory. It was a day of sunshine and bright cloud, and as we ascended the Bealach a' Mhaim path towards Glen Brittle the midges feasted on our shirtless backs. We passed the Fair Corrie and entered the huge hollow in the side of the Cuillin, Coire na Creiche or Corrie of the Spoil. We looked in awe at Sgùrr an Fheadain with its prominent Waterpipe Gully, one of Britain's most famous rock climbs. We ascended towards the right into Tairneilear and then to the ridge joining Sgùrr Thuilm to Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh, which was our first objective.

From the ridge the ascent to the summit of Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh looked fearsome with its shattered crest and we followed the nail scratches to the right into Coire na Dorus and climbed up an easy scree gully. We wondered if this gully is An Dorus, where the MacLeods escaped from their enemies after the battle in the glen below. As we lunched on the summit of Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh we were fortunate to spy the young member of our party just as he arrived beside the cairn on Bruach na Frithe with a lady friend whom he was escorting on her first Cuillin climb. We found the ridge route to our next objective, Sgùrr a' Ghreadaidh, quite easy, although somewhat sensational in places. When we surveyed the Black Cuillin from this vantage point, 3,190 feet above the sea, we felt that we were truly in the heart of these magnificent hills.

Coruisk, the birthplace of the waters, was just below us and, on the other side, Coire na Dorus. One wonders how these knife-edged ridges are able to stand against the Atlantic gales which rush against them in days of winter storm. We looked across to Sgùrr Dearg with what appeared to be a huge slug perched beside its summit, and this we found to be the

highest part of the Inaccessible Pinnacle, for the Pinnacle is hidden behind the summit of the hill from this point, only the topmost stone being visible. Sgùrr na Banachdich did not look far but the ridge between, along which we had to pass, is like the edge of a knife and in parts notched and very broken, and it took us well over an hour to pass between the two peaks. Surely this must be one of the finest parts of the Cuillin Ridge, for there is no way down to right or left; there is hardly a flat spot to stand on anywhere and the hands are continuously employed. In parts we were reminded of the Crib Goch, famous as part of the Snowdon Horseshoe walk in distant Wales. The views were superb—when we had time to look at them—for one step in the wrong direction to the left would have put us into Coruisk and one to the right into Coire na Dorus. To let go, in many places, would, I am sure, have made a quick and quite painless entry into the next world. As we approached the rounded summit of Sgùrr na Banachdich it was quite a relief to be able to walk again using only our two feet. We felt a wave of respect and awe towards those who have completed the main Cuillin ridge in a day.

Memories of other days pass through one's mind—a day of flying showers and stinging hail on the grassy top of Glamaig. Yet all the time the mainland was to be seen bathed in sunshine and dappled with cloud shadow. From here Raasay and Scalpay are seen entirely surrounded by water, for the fact that they are islands is not apparent from the lower ground. One day, when crossing from Sligachan towards Glen Brittle, by the Bealach a' Mhaim path, an eagle appeared flying in a leisured manner towards the east. As this great bird made his way towards the Sound of Raasay he passed close to us and his flight feathers could be seen to bend upwards with each beat of his powerful wings. We marvelled at a brilliant sunrise, at the deep blue of the sea-lochs, at the colours of land, sea, and sky, and we said, "May it not be long before we are here again."