

ENCOUNTER ON BEN A'AN.

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THE sun was shining brightly as we set off for Ben A'an—too brightly, said our pessimist, who gloomily forecast weather changes. There is nothing quite so fresh as the countryside early on a May morning and Donside was at its freshest that day. The river sparkled in the sun, whins and brooms splashed the prevailing greens with a blaze of gold and yellow, while the geans in full flower lent an air of delicacy to the picture. It is early in the morning, too, that the cock pheasant, in full plumage, looks his finest and seems most careless of the human presence.

We were wise to gather enjoyment while we could, for, as often before, our pessimist was right. Clouds gathered, there was a threat even of rain and, by the time we were within striking distance of our mountain, the mist was down to 2,500 feet and the outlook pretty grey. The climber, however, accepts that there is adventure wherever one cares to seek it, no matter how dismal the prospects may be, and he is truly unfortunate who finds nothing of interest during a day on the hills. It was therefore with hopeful optimism that we set off along the river-side for our objective, the central ridge on the eastern flank of Ben A'an.

An eagle soared above a rocky ridge on our left, dropped and landed on a summit rock, no doubt to take stock of the situation. Some twenty minutes later it glided low, just over our heads, following the contour of the valley below, where it appeared to land. It was trying to bluff us, however, for it had merely entered a rather deeply cut little ravine, gouged out by a burn flowing from one of the main corries. Moments later it was seen, a mile and a half to the west, rising out of the corrie into the clouds above. Soon we had left the peaty hollow at the base of the corrie and were moving up our ridge, heathery at first, but later mostly rock. It was about here that we first came on patches of the moss campion growing among the coarse, gravelly

remnants of decayed granite. Although it was the end of May the pink flower buds were not yet opened, but even then patches were little jewels in a grey world.

We were now up into the mist and soon came on snow, freshly-fallen, soft, wet snow about 6 in. deep, with the usual deeper pockets. Lead seemed added to our boots as we plodded on to the top of the ridge. The summit of Ben A'an is extensive, with several large granite tors scattered round the rim. Our intention was to make for the highest of these and then return by another ridge. Visibility was about 30 to 40 yards, snow melted indefinitely into mist and we were left to map and compass for guidance. It was the sort of situation that brings to mind the story of the ship's waiter who, having dropped a silver teapot overboard in mid-Atlantic, inquired of the chief steward whether a thing could be lost if you knew where it was. It was heavy work groping our way in the wet snow down to a more sheltered hollow.

We had found a useful spot and were seated when, suddenly, out of the mist 25 to 30 yards away, appeared two deer, a hind and a yearling. There was perhaps nothing very extraordinary in that, but what was extraordinary was that they were being driven by a pair of golden eagles. The eagles were flying, one on either side of the deer, a foot or two to the side, a foot or so higher and a little behind their heads. Our presence upset things a bit, for the eagles rose a few feet, the deer seized the chance and broke for the safety of the mist. It seemed as if the birds were not quite sure what we were, sitting there in the heather, for they circled us two or three times at a height of 10 to 12 feet, moved off into the mist and then came back to have another look.

So much is fact. What they were trying to do is only conjecture. Five minutes later there came a momentary thinning of the mist and it became possible to see that we were on the rim of a grassy corrie but that some little distance away there was clearly a steeper and rockier face. There is no doubt that, if the deer had kept on their original course, they would have arrived in a few moments at the steep part.

Were they being driven deliberately to this one area or was the intention merely to harry them into a state of exhaustion and collapse, with the chance of driving them over any cliff? If the first suggestion is considered a possibility, then the assumption is that the eagles, despite the mist, knew where they were going. It is true that they were following the edge of the valley and may have been getting assistance from air currents, but it would still have been a pretty good piece of direction finding, for the deer, in all probability, had been picked up in the main valley 1,500 feet below, and the last 1,000 feet of climb had been in mist.

It is perhaps not surprising that, after the thrill of such an encounter, we forgot our discomfort and returned to lower levels, feeling rather superior to those of our friends who earlier in the day had confidently asserted "there is no future in visiting the tops to-day."