

## A CLASSICAL CLIMB ON BEN NEVIS.

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RECENT discoveries at Mycenae have thrown fresh light upon the times and events of which Homer tells in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Investigations are proceeding and we may yet be furnished with evidence which will prove, or disprove, some of the theories which have been put forward regarding the wanderings of Ulysses after the fall of Troy. One interesting theory is that he actually spent some time in this country, and passages in the *Odyssey* would almost suggest that he made the first ascent of the Tower Ridge of Ben Nevis.

It may well have been that Neptune, who was feeling particularly ill-disposed to Ulysses following on the Polyphemus incident—an incident which some later writers have attempted to associate with the north-east corrie of Loch-nagar—raised such a storm that the Greek ships were driven far out into the Atlantic, whence they were borne by the Gulf Stream to our western shores. It was then surely not beyond the power of the sea god in a final burst of passion to conjure up a mighty tidal wave. Somewhere in the Firth of Lorne his ship may have foundered and Ulysses, the sole survivor, been borne up the length of Loch Linnhe with some terrible sea monster at his heels. There Pallas Athene, the grey-eyed goddess, ever watchful for the safety of Ulysses, may have intervened and caused him to be washed high up the Allt a' Mhuilinn, while the monster was carried on up the Great Glen to find a final resting-place in Loch Ness.

So far much has been conjecture, but now it requires little imagination to see in the words of Homer the great cliffs of Carn Dearg and Ben Nevis towering into the clouds, with the topmost pinnacle of the Douglas Boulder showing now and again through the drifting mists. As Ulysses struggled out of the bed of the stream and gazed about him in awe he must



have recalled the words of the goddess Circe when she forewarned him of the dangers ahead :—

“ High in the air the rock its summit shrouds  
In brooding tempests, and in rolling clouds;  
Loud storms around and mists eternal rise,  
Beat its bleak brow, and intercept the skies.

Impervious to the step of man it stands,  
Though borne by twenty feet, though arm'd with twenty hands;  
Smooth as the polish of the mirror, rise  
The slippery sides, and shoot into the skies.”

Well, indeed, was it for Ulysses that he had a grey-eyed goddess to guide and inspire him in such a situation, and so was it too for the Club's Librarian and Secretary when they found themselves in the very same situation one evening in the early summer of 1952; for surely it was Athene herself who was with them in the guise and form of Betty Lawrence.

It may be that the Tower Ridge has lost some of its terrors since the days of Ulysses, but it is still, at first sight, apt to cause a little apprehension to the hill-walker, particularly if he is politely but firmly told that an ascent of the Tower Ridge should include the Douglas Boulder. The Secretary at any rate, before he fell asleep in the C.I.C. hut that night, may have had uneasy recollections of the further words of Circe when she warned Ulysses of the fate of the unfortunate man who listened to the voices of the Sirens :—

“ No more that wretch shall view the joys of life,  
His blooming offspring or his beauteous wife.”

It is not known how Ulysses passed the night, but no doubt some goddess heralded a rosy dawn, as is usual in Homer. We, too, were awakened at 6 A.M. with the glad news from Athene that there was sunshine on Càrn Dearg; and she, being a very practical goddess, proceeded to light the only primus stove which worked and put on the kettle. But, alas, it was only a blink of sunshine, or maybe it was nothing but a trick of the goddess devised to awaken the sleepy mortals. At all events when they looked out of the door of the hut some little time afterwards Càrn Dearg and



Ben Nevis were enveloped in cloud and there was not even a trace of the Douglas Boulder.

Visibility was no better at 9.30 A.M. when we left the hut with the intention of climbing the south-west ridge of the Boulder. In these conditions it was difficult to decide where exactly to leave the scree slope and take to the rocks, but ultimately the rope was put on and Athene disappeared into the mist.

“ . . . the sandals of celestial mould  
Fledged with ambrosial plumes, and rich with gold,  
Surround her feet; with these sublime she sails  
The aërial space, and mounts the winged gales.”

It may be of interest to note that on this occasion the sandals were replaced by well-nailed boots and instead of the plumes, reserved for Olympic feasts or the Annual Dinner of the Cairngorm Club, she was garbed in more suitable attire—like the aged Laertes, when Ulysses found him working in his garden:—

“ His buskins old, in former service torn,  
But well repaired.”

To proceed with our narrative the route which Athene took presented no serious difficulties. In fact all went so well that, literally, before we knew where we were we stepped on to the crest of the Tower Ridge. Little could be seen of the rest of the Ridge, but on taking a few steps to the left we found ourselves looking down through the mist on to the summit of the Douglas Boulder, and it became obvious that we had outflanked not only the south-west ridge of the Boulder but the Douglas Gap as well. A suggestion was made that we should descend to the Gap and do the job properly, but wiser counsels prevailed and we turned up the ridge.

It is not the intention, if indeed it were in the power of the historian to describe the next stage of the route in detail. Occasionally the clouds would part sufficiently to give a brief glimpse into the depths of Coire na Ciste on our right and for a little we could see on the other side a part of the North-east Buttress across Observatory Gully. No doubt



Ulysses was just as impressed as we were with all this, and more besides, if Apollo had been on his side that day. Perhaps Ulysses too persuaded Athene to halt for rest and refreshment near the top of the Great Chimney, even as he had counselled before the walls of Troy, when Achilles was bent on slaughter. Mountaineers would do well to remember his words :—

“ Strength is derived from spirits and from blood,  
And those augment by generous wine and food.

• • • • •  
Courage may prompt ; but, ebbing out his strength,  
Mere unsupported man must yield at length ;  
Shrunk with dry famine, and with toils declined,  
The drooping body will desert the mind.”

Unfortunately we lacked the generous wine, but a jammy bun and some ambrosial chocolate from the goddess provided a sufficiently “ strength-conferring fare ” to take each of us up the Little Tower “ with limbs and soul untamed.”

Soon we were at the foot of the Great Tower itself. Now indeed the way is—

“ . . . to mortals hard to find,  
But all is easy to the ethereal kind.”

Quickly and confidently Athene led round by the Eastern Traverse and up the steep flank of the Tower, while the mortals followed as best they could. After a short descent we found ourselves on an airy ridge faced with what appeared to be a very awkward gap between us and the rest of Ben Nevis. Here were Scylla and Charybdis with a vengeance ! It was not hard to imagine Charybdis lying in wait in the depths of Tower Gully on the left, or Scylla “ furious and fell, tremendous to behold ” lurking far below on the right, ready to spring from her lair under the Garadh na Ciste and snatch a whole party off the ridge. Even the Editor of the “ S.M.C. Guide,” writing throughout with studied moderation, is impelled to observe that “ the sensational drop on the right should be appreciated.”

Athene, accustomed to the severe upper pitches of



Olympus, no doubt rated the Tower Gap as an "easy in sandals." As befitted the Goddess of Wisdom, however, she took due precautions before she stepped down, crossed the Gap and climbed up the steep rocks on the other side. Meantime the second on the rope had been sitting astride the narrowest part of the ridge, looking for all the world like a jockey about to take his horse up to the starting-post in the Grand National. He now proceeded to negotiate the ditch and fence in fine style. Number three hesitated at the ditch and all but failed at the fence. Poor prose can ill express his feelings, which were akin to those of Ulysses:—

" Never, I never, scene so dire survey'd!  
My shivering blood, congeal'd, forgot to flow;  
Aghast I stood, a monument of woe!

Scylla, however, was apparently having a meatless day and eventually the last of the party edged gingerly round to the right and thankfully made his way up to join the goddess. A short scramble followed and soon after 2 P.M. we stepped on to the summit plateau.

What happened to Ulysses after that neither history nor Homer relates. It would seem, however, that Athene did not take him on to Càrn Mòr Dearg, as she now expressed a wish to add that Munro to her collection. Even a goddess is not above some mortal failings! Accordingly after a rest in the shelter of the observatory ruins and after some more "strength-conferring fare" we set off in the direction—approximately—of the Càrn Mòr Dearg arête. For a short time on the arête we were able to see the bottom of Coire Leas through a gap in the clouds, but as we ascended to Càrn Mòr Dearg we were again in mist. The cairn was reached at 4.30 P.M. and a quick descent was made direct to the C.I.C. hut. No Homeric banquet awaited us there, but seldom can chicken noodle soup have tasted better.

We left the cliffs and the gullies of Ben Nevis still enveloped in mist, but as we descended the path by the Allt a' Mhuilinn we came down into a peaceful summer evening and when we looked back the sun really was shining on the Castle Ridge of Càrn Dearg.