

HEAT AND COLD ON THE CUILLIN RIDGE

BY
LILIAN BRAY.

HAVING always had our Whitsun Meet in the Lakes we decided in 1927 to make a change and to hold it in Skye. Considering its distance, its unapproachability, and the short holiday enjoyed by most of us, we were quite pleased at six members turning up at Mrs. Macrae's, Glen Brittle, on the Saturday before Whitsun.

From the moment we set foot on the Island we were imbued with but one idea—the Cuillin ridge; we must traverse it in its entirety, it had never yet been accomplished alone by women, so our first few days were spent in preparation. Trilby and Bidy had already been to Skye and knew parts of the ridge, and we made long excursions to those peaks with which none of us were acquainted. We traversed the Bideins and the Mhadaidhs, we climbed down and then up the Thearliach side of the Thearlaich Dubh gap, we ascended Mhic Coinnich by Collie's ledge. Further we made two dumps of food, one by the Inaccessible Pinnacle, which we deemed nearly half-way, and another with both food and woollies on the Col between Bidein and Caisteal, where we thought we might possibly spend a few hours of the night.

The preparations completed, it remained to settle the party and hour of departure. The party was settled for Dr. Corbett, Trilby, Bidy and myself; but the zero hour was discussed and rediscussed afresh every day. The problem was: if two first-class men (Messrs. Shadbolt and McLaren) took 17 hours, how long would four women take? After working it out by higher mathematics, and with the help of Einstein's relativity, the correct answer seemed to be twenty-four hours. That being so, it was argued that it did not matter at what hour the start was made, as we had to run round the clock. Unfortunately, though we were agreed as a body that it did not matter, to each one individually it seemed to matter very much. One wanted to rest all day and start at 8 p.m.,

so as to get the night over first; another at 2 a.m., because all good mountaineers started at that hour; a third at 5 a.m., because it would not be light at 2 o'clock; and the last voted for a good night's rest and a normal start at 9 a.m.

Finally 5 a.m. had it, and Mrs. Macrae offered to give us breakfast at that hour. Unfortunately at 5 o'clock on the appointed day it was raining hard, with snow on the ridge, and after waiting a short time we returned to our beds with the joy with which one usually returns to one's bed at such an hour. It cleared up later and looked like being fine next day. It was now argued by one of the party that as Mrs. Macrae had got up so early that day we could not ask her to get up early again, and that we must start at 9 a.m.; and start at 9 a.m. we did, after a proper breakfast. We carried but little food, one bottle of water between us and a thin mac-kintosh each.

The day was cold but fine, and we trudged across the wet moor and toiled up Garsbheinn. We made very fair progress till we reached the Thearliach Dubh Gap. Here, for the only time during the climb, I was somewhat disturbed from my usual equanimity and showed, I fear, some slight annoyance. I had thought we were to *abseil* down the perpendicular side, and had even cut off a piece of my rope for a sling; but when I had placed the rope and made all arrangements my three companions announced their intention of climbing down as they were not used to *abseiling*. Probably I should not have felt any annoyance at all if there had not been a terrific snow and hail storm at the moment; but I confess my patience was tried as I sat on the top exposed to the full blast of the storm, while I let one after the other slowly (very slowly) down the steep face of rock, and ended by *abseiling* down myself. The climb up the other side was led by Bidy, the hail storm still raging, and the rest of us with frozen fingers were glad of the rope above.

The weather continued uncertain for some time, fine, cold intervals, varied by colder showers. We wasted more time at the Inaccessible Pinnacle, for, as we were not going to *abseil* down the steep side, we had to walk up the long easy rib and descend the same way. A very heavy storm

overtook us here, and we huddled under shelter and ate some of our "cached" provisions. It was nearly 9 p.m. when the storm ceased and we quitted the Pinnacle, and though the weather from then onwards was fine, it was bitterly cold. We kept on steadily but slowly till 11 p.m., when one of our party showed signs of weariness, and as daylight was waning we called a halt. We were then on the slope of Ghreadaidh, and had a fairly flat piece of rock to lie on; but alas! we had nothing extra to put on but the thinnest of thin mackintoshes, our *cache* of clothes was still in the far distance. However, we were thankful for what we had, especially as the rocks were wet. We lay down—but not to sleep. For quite half an hour we tried to find a better spot; but alas! every spot was swept by the night breeze, no shelter anywhere, bare wet rock below us, a pitiless starlit sky above us, and all around the wind of heaven. We huddled together in pairs, there was nowhere room for all of us; we took it in turns to lie on one another's legs; at intervals we got up and flapped our arms. I complained bitterly of my bedfellow because she shivered so violently, "it was enough to prevent anyone sleeping." At last at 3 a.m. it was sufficiently light to think of making a start, we ate some food and called it breakfast, we thought to wash it down with a mouthful of water; but Nature decreed otherwise, for though the bottle had been in a rucksack, its contents were frozen, and we deduced from this that it really must have been rather a cold night.

We had hardly been going half an hour when a thick mist came down; the rocks, moreover, were glazed with ice, and going was so slow that we could not keep warm. On the ascent of the South-West Mhadaidh we lost our way in the mist and finally, without one single dissentient voice, we decided to abandon the ridge and make tracks for Glen Brittle. We dropped off easily into Coire na Dorum, and by 6.30 were drinking tea and thinking of bed. Thus ended our first attempt, there was no hope of repeating it that year, as some of our party had to leave the next day.

From that time onwards the thought of the ridge was seldom absent from our minds, whenever Trilby, Bidy and I met we spent our time discussing "Der Tag," the food we

were going to take, the clothes we were going to wear, the hour we were going to start, the time we were going to take over the expedition, the party that was to form it. We never got in the least nearer settling anything, except that the attempt must be repeated the following year. So next Whitsun saw us once more at Mrs. Macrae's. There were four of us and two men, but only Trilby, Bidy and I were to try the ridge.

The day after our arrival (Sunday) there was a thick mist, and we spent it in making two *caches* as before. Monday it rained all day; Tuesday was gloriously fine and hot, and as the weather looked more settled we determined to start on the following day.

This time we prepared our breakfast the night before, making tea in a couple of thermos flasks so that we might get up at what time we liked without disturbing anyone, and we actually were off by 2.30 a.m. It was really hardly daylight, and in consequence we lost some time on the way to Garsbheinn, not taking the best line across the moor.

The day turned out hot, cloudless and absolutely airless, not a breath of wind. We made good progress at first, my companions had learnt to *abseil*, and we wasted no time over the Gap; but as the sun grew higher the heat became intense, and the long trudge up the scree past An Stac was terrible in the midday heat. The Pinnacle took us but little time; we had previously found the *abseil* block, we walked easily up the rib and swung ourselves quickly down the steep side. In spite of the heat we had gained an hour and a half on our previous time, having taken nine and a half hours.

We had intended to have a large meal at the Pinnacle where we had our chief *cache*; but the heat was such that we simply could not eat, we had a few oranges and apples, but no water, and though an orange was delicious while it lasted, five minutes afterwards our thirst was as bad as ever. We left the Pinnacle at 12.30, the heat was really terrific, and the rocks almost too hot to touch, our mouths so dry we could hardly speak. The sun that day seemed to have some exceptional power of stabbing us, there was no possibility of getting away from it; it just glared at us remorselessly from above and, like some malignant being, sucked up every

drop of moisture from our bodies. We had no shady hats, I had started in one but lost it at Garsbheinn, and only wore a handkerchief; our skins were burning. I regret to relate, from now onwards our progress was slow; at the top of every peak we flung ourselves down—only for a moment—but each moment was at least ten minutes; at every gap we paused, gazing at the wall above us, sometimes crouching with our heads in a tiny patch of shade; but still we continued, though the timekeeper refused any more to take the time of arrival at each peak. Of conversation there was practically none, I only remember exchanging a few words as we were toiling up some peak as to where we would take our next climbing holiday; we decided on Holland.

We passed over the Mhadaidhs and the Bideins, we jumped the amusing little gaps between Bidein and Castail, we scrambled off Castail to the Col, and we were slowly toiling up Bruach na Frithe when suddenly at 9 p.m. one of the party announced that she could not go another step. That being so we lay down on our tracks; it was not a very good place as the ridge itself was impossible just there, so we had to make ourselves as comfortable as we could on the slope. Unfortunately the slope was somewhat steep, and we felt that if we turned over in our sleep we should continue to turn over more and more rapidly till we reached the bottom of the ridge. However, on such occasions one does not sleep soundly, and no one turned over in her sleep. Our greatest tragedy occurred here. We had been hoarding one single lemon with which we hoped to moisten our lips before retiring for the night. Alas! that lemon slipped from our grasp, and we had to watch it falling faster and ever faster down the mountain side. It was perhaps fortunate that our tongues were too dry to speak.

It was, indeed, a night *à la belle étoile*. Slowly, very slowly, the sun sank below the horizon, the sky changed from gold to red and finally to purple, and then, almost midnight, one after the other the stars came out to look down upon us. The night breeze swept silently across the ridge; we could feel and see the quiet beauty enveloping us, without one sound to disturb the peacefulness of the night.

3.30 a.m. saw us once more on our way ; we had all slept more or less ; our thirst was not so acute in the cool morning, and we set off up Bruach na Frithe. At the summit we found kind friends had placed three apples for us, but strange as it sounds, my companions could not touch them, which was fortunate for me. At Bealach nan Lice we considered Naysmith's route up the Tooth. None of us had done it, no one seemed inclined to lead it, so there was nothing for it but to descend into Lota Corrie and scramble up the long and easy way. So far as I remember, we climbed the Tooth in complete silence, and if one of us stopped to rest no one disagreed. For the awkward pitch from the Tooth to Am Bhasteir we used a shoulder for the first one and the other two helped themselves by a stirrup of rope let down. The climb up the Western ridge of Sgurr nan Gillean was a delight after the toilsome scrambling, and we took it easy down the scree of the Tourist route.

It was 9 a.m. when we finished the ridge, we had spent $30\frac{1}{2}$ hours without water through the hottest day it has ever been my fate to climb on in the British Isles. Water seemed now of no use to us, and though we drank unlimited quantities, we never really slaked our thirst till we reached Sligachan at 11 o'clock and drank innumerable cups of tea.

We had hoped to secure a car to drive over to Glen Brittle ; but there was none available, so we had once more to take to our feet for the ten miles over the moor. Luckily we had unlimited time, unlimited water and unlimited opportunities of bathing, and with the thought of tea and bed awaiting us the walk proved quite pleasant.

Precisely at 4.30 we thrust our sunburnt faces through the window at Mrs. Macrae's, where our party were sitting round the tea-table. " We've done it ! " Two days after I heard Trilby and Bidy murmuring : " Next time we really must do it in the twenty-four hours."

NOTES FOR FUTURE RIDGE WALKERS.

THE Scottish Mountaineering Club Guide is essentially a climbing guide and not of much help to ridge walkers, there is occasionally a very brief description; but generally the Guide seems to think that "the route is always fairly obvious." On our first traverse of the Bideins and Sgurr a'Mhadaidh we found the way anything but obvious, we may have been stupid and inefficient; but we heard of a party of men a few days afterwards who spent over an hour on one of the Mhadaidh peaks. It is certainly advisable for any party attempting the ridge to know most of the peaks or time will be lost finding the best ways down. It is hoped these notes may prove useful, we do not pretend that the routes described are the only ways up or down the various peaks but they are the easiest ways and for that reason probably the quickest.

On our second attempt one or other of us had done every peak.

Footgear.—We all walked across the boggy moor with bare legs and wearing an old pair of rubbers, this was my idea, and I thought it a particularly brilliant one, for it did not matter where one walked, in or out of the water. At the foot of Garsbheinn we discarded our old rubbers and put on dry stockings. Trilby and I wore *kletterschuhe* and we found them quite perfect, being equally good on rock or scree. Bidy wore boots, not because she preferred them, but because the *kletterschuhe* she had did not fit.

Rope.—We carried a half weight, and used it on the steep rock face shortly before the Gap, to *abseil* down the perpendicular side of the Thearlaich Dubh Gap, and also to climb up the other side; to *abseil* down the lower half of the Pinnacle. On the second Bidein the first to descend used it for a moment to lower herself over the awkward corner and finally on the pitch between the Tooth and Am Basteir, the two last used it.

To Garsbheinn.—Nothing special to remark except that the highest point is to the right, we kept rather too much to the left and found ourselves on a point which was not the highest and had to traverse across.

To Bhig.—Easy going along the ridge without much of a dip.

To Eag.—From the gap it appears best to keep just on the left of the ridge, though quite close to it, till a little short of the summit where the ridge turns to the left, here it can be followed to the top of Eag. It has a nearly level summit ridge which gives pleasant walking.

To Dubh na Da Bheinn.—On the descent from Eag the ridge should be kept to more or less, till just short of the gap where a cairn on the left leads to a little awkward pitch. At the end of the gap a large pinnacle is passed by a grassy track on its right (Coruisk) side. From the gap it is a scramble (not a walk) to Dubh na Da Bheinn beginning with a steep ascent on the left of the gap (well scratched).

The next gap is the famous Thearliach Dubh Gap. Just before reaching it there is a steep ascent of about 40 feet. It is very exposed, and though not difficult the rock is not quite sound and we roped for it. The short wall on the Dubh side of the Gap is very perpendicular and the holds small, there is a convenient stone for an *abseil*. No doubt the rope might be arranged around it so that it could be pulled off after the party had descended; but having had experience of ropes that stick and refuse to come off, we had a spare piece with us to make a sling. The climb up the other side is delightful, it begins with a

somewhat strenuous chimney with a good belay round a chockstone; this is followed by an exposed pitch up good rock.

To Alastair.—From the Gap a few minutes walk up a scree shoot.

To Thearliach.—Alastair is descended to the head of the scree shoot, and a few yards down it a little chimney leads on to the ridge by which one arrives at the summit in a few minutes.

To Mhic Coinnich.—It is not quite easy to find the route to the gap, a large pinnacle just before the gap must be turned on the right (Coruisk) side. From the top of Thearliach two small gaps are passed, at a third gap a grassy terrace on the right side of the ridge should be followed till rather more than half-way round the pinnacle, a cairn marks a descent by a crack to a ledge, about 25 yards along this ledge a cairn marks a further descent, and then the gap can be reached. The easiest though not the most direct way up Mhic Coinnich is by Collie's ledge. This begins with a 10 foot ascent well to the right of the gap, then a traverse to the left is made on scree till Collie's ledge is plainly seen. The ledge can be followed the whole way round on the left side till the ridge on the far side of Mhic Coinnich is reached, whence a few minutes walk back to the summit is made.

To the Pinnacle.—As far as the gap the ridge can generally be kept to, going slightly on its left side just before the gap. From the gap a sharp descent and ascent must be made on the left side of An Stac, it is the most toilsome ascent on the whole of the ridge as it is entirely on scree, it is best to keep as close as possible to An Stac. The ascent of the Pinnacle is quite simple and the first part of the descent on the other side is also easy, the last part is steep, but there is a good abseil place just where the lower figure is seen on page 84 of the Guide book.

Deagh to Bannachdich and on to Thormaid is a ridge walk.

Greadaidh.—The ascent should be made directly by steep rocks (no difficulties). There are two tops and after the second (North) top a large stony terrace on the left side leads to a small gap, An Dorus, then an ascent and a drop into the true gap, Eag Dubh, which is passed by a traverse to the right.

South West Mhadaidh.—From the gap there is a short steep pitch, then the easy scree on the left can be followed for some distance till it leads on to the ridge which is then followed to the summit. The descent is made mostly on the ridge, later slabs on the right are descended and the gap is attained by rocks on its right side.

The next peak (third in the Guide).—The steep rocks immediately above the gap should be ascended, then slightly to the right, and finally, a swing round a corner on the right is made on to easy terraces, thence easy to summit. (The first part is well scratched and the way cannot be missed). The descent is a walk off by the ridge.

Next peak (second in the Guide) begins with a short pleasant climb up a pillar of gabbro, good holds. The descent is by stony terraces on the right side.

North East peak, is an easy scramble straight up the ridge, the descent is a long easy scree walk on the left side.

Bidein.

West peak.—The ascent is directly by the ridge to the boulder on the top, the descent is by slabs and terraces on the right side.

Central peak.—Ascent is again made by the ridge, from the summit the very sharp ridge should be followed till near the gap, a cairn is seen on the right side, the slabs on the right should then be descended and a drop is made over the edge into the gap. The landing over the

edge is not quite easy and it is best for the first one to have a rope unless she understands the trick of balance, the following ones can easily be steadied.

North Peak.—Ascent on left side of gap by an easy terrace, then directly upwards to the summit, a short distance. The descent by the ridge is easy.

To Caisteal.—The ridge can be kept to more or less the whole way. A large lump can be turned by a terrace on the right, two amusing gaps are passed which must be jumped (the first one is now bridged by a boulder). Shortly before arriving at the gap the ridge ends abruptly and a brown stone terrace must be followed on the left for a few yards, a shallow chimney or crack on the right leads to slabs which are traversed to the left, finally the descent to the gap begins with a little chimney on the left side of the ridge.

To Bruach na Frithe. From the gap directly upwards, then along an easy grassy track to the left of the ridge and then up to the ridge again by scree. A hump can be turned on the left, a gap is encountered and a terrace on the right followed. The Limpet should be passed on the left and thence almost without a break the ridge can be followed to the summit. The shoulder just before the top can be turned on the left side if preferred.

To the Tooth.—The descent from Bruach na Frithe to the Gap (Bealach nan Lice) needs no description. The shortest way up the Tooth is by Naysmith's route. The easy way is long and tedious. A long descent must first be made into Lota Corrie, keeping close beside the ridge. The starting point of ascent is quite obvious provided one goes far enough down, it is practically at the end of the ridge and begins with a scree walk, there is a little scrambling in parts but absolutely no difficulties of any sort in the ascent.

To Am Bhasteir.—There is a short overhung chimney from the Tooth to Bhasteir, this can be surmounted with the help of a shoulder for the first one.

Sgurr nan Gillean.—A pleasant walk to the gap and a delightful climb up the Western ridge of Surr nan Gillean, it is well scratched and consequently the route is not difficult to find. The *Gendarme* is described in the Guide and is sensational rather than difficult. For the Tourist route down, the start is not quite easy to find, the South East ridge is followed for a time and then a descent made on the left side.