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SOME REMINISCENCES OF A HAS BEEN.

By T. S. F. C.

IF, in presenting these reminiscences to the readers of the *Climbers' Club Journal*, I begin with the words "once upon a time," I should perhaps ask pardon for using a phrase which says so little, but which is so pregnant with romance. For here I give you nothing of romance and little of adventure, but merely a few modest flowers gathered in the garden of my memory—my chief excuse in plucking which must be the pleasure I myself derive in recalling some of the days I have spent among the hills. One such memory which I now vividly recall, is my first visit to Ben Lui. The world is so old that a quarter of a century is to it not even as a watch in the night; but to some of the dwellers therein, even twenty years seems long enough. It was then "once upon a time"—the exact year matters not—that six young men fore-gathered at Princes Street Station, Edinburgh, on a somewhat unpromising evening in the spring of the year. I cannot remember that any one of us was injuring his health by over-work, but in the offices where we severally employed our time, the remuneration accorded us in return for the little we did was not sufficient to warrant our making long and expensive excursions in search of fresh air and adventure. An early start, a long railway journey to some mountain centre, a walk of 20 or 30 miles, with a hill thrown in—this was a common programme for an odd holiday: while a flask and a packet of sandwiches, or sometimes a knapsack replete with more varied and luxurious fare, rendered us independent of hotels. We always got home pretty tired and often very wet, but these trifles only added

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- I. Loch Laggan.
2. The Cliffs of Choire Ardhoire, from below the Lochan.
From photographs by Harold Raeburn,

zest to the pleasures of the day. On the particular occasion to which I now refer we had planned a big day, so 9 o'clock on the previous night saw us prepared to start—our immediate destination being Tyndrum, which we were timed to reach between 2 and 3 a.m. ; but the night was dark and threatening, and we were fully an hour late when we stepped out upon the little platform, and watched the train puff slowly westward into the mist. Tyndrum is now possessed of two stations, owned respectively by the "Callander and Oban" and "West Highland" lines, but in those days the latter did not exist, and the place was even more primitive than at the present time. The dawn of a spring morning was beginning to break, but this only accentuated the dreariness of the surrounding scene. A heavy, sodden mist lay low over the whole landscape, blotting out entirely both mountain and moorland: but after a good meal, eaten beside the station fire, we girded our loins, and stepped out upon our quest.

As we made our way up the glen, following the course of the Ettrich Burn, which, springing from the great central Corrie of Ben Lui, forms the first source of the River Tay, the mist quickly developed into rain, and by the time we had passed the farm of Coninish and the old lead mines, we were very thoroughly soaked. The wind, too, had risen, and as we mounted into the region of snow, great wreaths of white mist were tossed about us till they were swallowed up again in the prevailing gloom. No object could be discerned more than a few feet away, and no outline of the mountain was visible by which we could estimate our position. At last, however, we reached a point from which the ground sloped downwards in every direction, and as we seemed to have been climbing for an indefinite time, and could see no indication of higher ground about us, we rashly concluded that we had reached the summit. We quickly unpacked our knapsack, and though we could hardly stand up against the wind, and were so numb with cold that the process of uncorking our bottle was accomplished only with great difficulty, we managed to make a meal, and we drank a "Health unto Her Majesty"—it was

the Queen's Birthday—and it is more than conceivable that on that day, and within the limits of the British Isles, the toast of our late gracious Sovereign was pledged under no more romantic conditions. Our position was not such as to tempt us to any lengthy stay, so, repacking our knapsack, we proceeded to descend in a direction as nearly as we could judge the opposite of that of our ascent—our object being to reach Loch Lomond, ascend Ben Lomond, and return to Edinburgh by Balloch. This, however, was not to be. We had only gone a few paces, when a violent gust of wind tore the veil for a few seconds from the scene, disclosing a great wall of rock rising up precipitously to our left, while to our right the descent to the valley seemed equally precipitous. Subsequent visits to Ben Lui have enabled me to locate to some extent the position of our false top, and viewed under more favourable conditions, the surroundings do not appear particularly formidable ; but situated as we then were, and without any previous knowledge of the mountain, any further attempt to gain the summit would certainly have been attended by some danger ; and, prudent counsels prevailing, we turned our steps back in the direction of Tyn-drum, which we reached without further adventure worthy of record. At the hotel we received every attention, and were soon provided with dry clothes, which were distributed among us with strict impartiality and without regard to the exigencies of height or figure. To myself, to whom nature has not been lavish in the matter of stature, was allotted a knickerbocker suit of grey home-spuns, which must have been built for a giant ; while to another member of the party, framed on somewhat heroic lines, fell a suit of Sunday-go-to-meetings, which was a world too tight, and left quite six inches of wrist and ankle protruding severally from the upper and nether garments. We were much too wet and hungry, however, to attach the slightest importance to outward appearance ; and it need hardly be said that we did ample justice to a meal which, taken either as late breakfast or early lunch, was entirely grateful to the inner man. It was now barely noon,

but after a morning of mist and rain the day already gave promise of being gloriously fine ; and as we lay out upon the drying heather, tricked out in our incongruous raiment, and waiting for our own things to dry, we watched, with envious eyes, a wiser party who had evidently spent the night in bed, and had probably breakfasted comfortably, making their way in bright sunlight along the same path which we ourselves had traversed only a few hours before under such different conditions. Their goal was evidently the same hill, which—invisible to us while on it—now stood revealed in all its beauty : the black rocks, which fringe its summit, picked out sharply against the blue of the sky, while the snow, which filled the corries and gullies of the north-east face, glistened in the light of the mid-day sun. I may say that years later I was one of a party of three who made, in winter, the first recorded descent of the north-east face of Ben Lui—frequent ascents having, however, been made subsequently. Some years later the same party arranged for another night excursion, but on this occasion the objective was Schiehallion, and the results were more satisfactory. The season of the year was, I think, March or April, and I remember it was very dark, with a fine rain falling. When we reached Pitlochry, about 3 a.m., we enjoyed there, round the station fire, our usual breakfast of biscuits, hard-boiled eggs, and a bottle of claret, and before 4 a.m. we were on the road. By 5 o'clock we had reached the point from which is obtained the famous "Queen's View"—and very beautiful it was in the grey of the morning—the birches just breaking into leaf, and the long stretch of Loch Tummel lying below us with a steely glint reflected from its unruffled surface. At the far end of the loch is the little Inn of Tummel Brig—14 miles from Pitlochry : here we called our first halt, and sat down to our second breakfast, at which we were joined by two friends who, scorning the delights of five hours of night travelling, had come up the night before. They joined us, however, on level terms in the discussion of the relative merits of brandered steaks and ham and eggs. The ascent of Schiehallion offers no

feature of special interest to the climber—but it is a fine hill, and the view from the top is magnificent. After the descent we walked to Aberfeldy, taking train thence to Edinburgh, which we reached about 11 p.m., after being “on the go” for fully 26 hours.

The mention of Aberfeldy recalls to my mind a little incident which occurred on the occasion of one of our visits to that district. We had arrived one evening at a place called Innerwick, where there was alleged to be an Inn, so marked on our maps. The accommodation was primitive, consisting of two rooms, one of which served the double purpose of coffee-room and best bed-room—containing as it did two box-beds; the other room had two beds in it, one capable of holding two, and the other a sofa-bed for one. There were seven of us, so it was possible for only one of the party to have a bed for himself. I was to be one of the three in the smaller room, and in the course of the evening another of this trio, who had been absent for half-an-hour, returned to the coffee-room, clothed in his pyjamas, and intimated that he was ready to retire, but suggested that as I was the oldest of the three I should have my choice of beds, and that he, for his part, would willingly waive any claim to the single couch. I was somewhat surprised, though secretly rather pleased, at this unwonted evidence of a quite proper respect for my superior age, so I thanked him gratefully, and retired to rest. In the morning my friend asked me how I had slept—but there was a look in his eye which I did not like. As a matter of fact I had slept like a top—though I trust, with less noise—and I said so: he then very calmly informed me that he had retired early the previous night in order to secure the single bed for himself, but had found the sheets in it so damp, that he had given it up to me, preferring to take a share of the other one, in which he had ascertained that the sheets were comparatively dry. I may say that he is now in the colonies, but it is only fair to say he went quite openly, and at his own expense.

I may be allowed, perhaps, to conclude these random notes with a little adventure in which our esteemed Hon. Treasurer bore a conspicuous part. I presume all visitors to Edinburgh know Arthur's Seat—that beautiful hill, which, like a couchant lion, guards the eastern approach to the Scottish Capital. From its summit may be seen a wonderful panorama of mountain and sea—the country round it dotted here and there with palace and castle, village church and ruined keep, but at no time is the view more beautiful than at night, with the grim old city spread out at its foot, its rugged outlines scintillating with a thousand lights. Some few years after the incidents related in the preceding pages, Mr. Moss and I were dining at one of the clubs in Prince's Street with a then well known member of the Alpine Club, now, I am sorry to say, passed from us. The conversation had turned upon climbing, a sport at which Moss was then a novice, and it was suggested and agreed that we should there and then make an ascent of Arthur's Seat. It was a clear but moonless night, and we reached the top by the ordinary path about 1 a.m. To take a stranger down by the same route seemed a tame conclusion to our night's adventure, so we decided to make the descent by the "Gutted Haddie"—a rough crack running obliquely down towards the "Hunter's Bog"—easy enough to traverse by day, but a little uncertain in the dark. Moss decided to take it sitting, with the result that the echoes were shortly awakened by a bombardment of stones, which must have caused some uneasiness in the minds of any wakeful residents in the near vicinity. However, we reached the foot in safety, but there is a legend that Mr. Moss was found next morning to have presented to the poor of the town a pair of patent leather boots, for which their owner had no further use; and a new proverb was given to the world, which, while not traversing the adage that "a rolling stone gathers no moss," affirms most emphatically that "a rolling Moss gathers many stones." It is with some shame that I confess that it is nearly eight years since I have climbed a mountain. In a copy of verses sent me some years ago by a friend, who deploras in them the

defection of some of his old companions, he says that some

“Forsook the hills, with their profound abysses,
To seek the solace of connubial kisses,”

but these things must be. But the spell of the mountains once fallen upon a man cannot easily be lifted, and even if I never climb again, the memory of many glorious days spent among the hills will abide with me till the shadows fall and it is dark.

T. S. F. C.

