



BEINN-NA-CAILLACH

# The Mists o' Skye

BY ARTHUR COLTON

I

BEINN-NA-CAILLACH

IT is possible to stay at home and yet make long journeys, as Xavier de Maistre did around his chamber, or Thoreau within the township of Concord. And Thoreau praises his own choice with that felicity of quotation which makes a quotation seem like a casual remark of his own:

*Erret, et extremos alter scrutetur Iberos.  
Plus habet hic vitæ, plus habet ille viæ.*

Some people, it seems to say, travel about and examine the ends of the earth, but the stay-at-home learns more about life, and the other only learns about roads (railroads, for instance), hotels and ferries, highways and other ways of going from one place to another. "It is not

worth the while," he continues, "to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar."

But then if the world is round, it has no ends, or else the ends and the middle are one and everywhere. I do not think I should count cats in Zanzibar. I have never done so in Connecticut. Let us not be dogmatic. There are as various ways of travelling as of staying at home, and of living an existence in transit as in rest. At any rate, one has to keep moving in the liquid progression of time. Roads, such as railroads, ferries, and highways, are less ways of going from one place to another than ways of being from hour to hour. After all, it is well to experiment. You cannot know the best without tasting varieties. And if the uses of this world shall have come on a time to seem a bit flat and unprofitable, it is

perhaps a little stagnancy that motion will freshen and sweeten. One may become tired of those uses before he has really had any use of them. He might go travel in order to understand what a remarkable neighborhood he has always lived in. If his brain has grown foggy in the clearness of New England, it may be the mists of Skye are his antidote.

The mists on the Cuchullins are not fat, dull, and still, like lowland and inland mists, but haggard, and streaming from the black peaks, and full of gusty lines. We saw them first from the top of Beinn-na-Caillach, a red, round-headed mountain hard by Broadford, in the Isle of Skye. To Broadford we came by steamer, and lodged with one Mrs. McCrae, a grave woman whose porridge and cakes were passable, whose windows looked across the highway to the pier and the herring-boats, the cold blue Sound, with its innumerable sea-gulls and massive islands.

One advantage of foot travelling is the better force it gives to the sense of being as compared with the sense of going. To climb Beinn-na-Caillach is to have the sense of going reduced to a minimum. It is farther and higher than it looks. It is not half a mile, but two, over the flat moor, which is crossed with black ditches of the peat-cutters, up the shaggy green terraces of Caillach's pedestal, to where the crumbling rocks begin. For these "Red Hills" all about are breaking down and wearing away; the jagged boulders lie thickly in the heather at their feet; loose rusty rubble is all over the slopes; the gullies in the cliffs are choked with their ruined masonry. And so each step is an aspiration, a forecast, and an experiment; and in accumulation and retrospect they seem to represent not so much progress as experience. One seems to arrive at the summit through time and a troubled life, rather than by the conquest of space. There he comes upon a great cairn, or pile of stones, to the memory of a mythical Norse woman, said to have been buried there some thousands of years ago. Time lies behind and space around submissively.

She was keen in the choice of her burial-place. But I dare say life was as much a matter of small items to her as to me, as vivid and genuine, and only

now and then visionary. I have forgotten the myth, or why she was buried there, except that she wanted to be. It seems almost enough, but sounds nothing mythical. I remember heaving a stone on the cairn, pleased at the possession of a nameless sentiment.

Any one can leave a persistent memory who can compass to be buried on a mountain-top. Let there be a modest cairn to begin with, and the nameless sentiment of the mountain-climber shall add stone to stone, appropriate the landscape for the pedestal, the sky-line for a frieze or metope. He shall stand lifted, enlarged, contemplative.

The idea of her life shall sweetly creep  
Into his study of imagination. . . .  
Into the eye and prospect of his soul.

And it shall seem to him epic, moving in hexameters and stately periods, which seemed to her a matter of small items.

The sounds and straits and the sea, with its plump sleepy islands, lay north, east, and south. Sea and land have uncommon intimacies here. They are tangled and braided together. There is no such caste or color line as goes with an unbroken coast. One understands why the Norseman dropped his sail in the Inner Sound of Skye. "This is another Norway for a seafaring folk. It must belong to me." So he reasoned, and conquered for a time. But the story of his conquest and defeat has gone pale in myths or dry and structural in history. It is either a ghost or a skeleton. You cannot find him there. You would come nearer him by going out in a burly tansailed herring-boat, and thinking of him that "He felt the swell heave under him like this. He watched a wave suck in its chest like that, and hiss and sputter foam. The wind blew the spume into lace-work about his prow precisely so, and it pleased him, and he didn't know why. He was matted and unclean, and had a digestion that he didn't notice, whereas I differ from him in many respects, but he was more like me than like his ghost or his skeleton."

One does not envy the woman her cairn or burial-place. She would rather be down on the beach herself, in a hut with a pot on the fire, and blood enough in her to know when it is cold.



THE SKY-LINE OF THE CUCHULLINS

The sky-line of the Cuchullins is a nightmare.

The wind blew down from Greenland over the shoulder of the world, over Iceland and Harris, and drove us from the top of Beinn-na-Caillach down through the rusty rubble, cumbered gorges, treacherous heather that hid the footing, and over the swampy moor; and so we came again to the cottage of Mrs. McCrae, to her porridge and kippered herring and windows that looked across the highway to the pier and the cold blue Sound, with its bewildering gulls. But there was no doubt that we must go nearer the Cuchullins and see what fashion of things they were.

## II

### ELGOL

The nearest way on the map seemed to be by Torran, Slapin, and Strathaird, and the nearest shelter to the Cuchullins an empty cottage called "Camasunary," by report a sort of private dak bungalow, where we might put up unless it were already spoken for. It was. "But ye might

try the school-house at Elgol." The map testified to the existence of Elgol, and this, with a faith in our standing luck, was enough.

The road to Torran was level, and there was little by the way, except a solitary stone church, whose only sign of parishioners was a cemetery full of bygone McKinnons. Torran was a few huts of stone and thatch, some heavy battered boats on the weedy beach, and men enough ambitious of a shilling to ferry us over to Strathaird. Loch Slapin was no cozy harbor. The hulls of two wrecked vessels lay against the Strathaird shore. There was a vicious swing and snap in the waves even on that quiet day.

Beyond we found the highway again, and went by the highway, and foot-path on the cliffs over the sea, looking for something called "The Spar Cave," described as "a thing not to be missed," and therefore I had doubts about it. But it grew in interest on inquiry. It was two miles away at the first report, and presently became three, then suddenly a mile,



THE ROAD TO TORRAN

and later a mile and a half. So it grew in interest.

But it is not an impressive cave by the light of two tallow candles. We take a deal of trouble to be acquainted with freaks, a hole in the rocks with a stalactite, or a man who can play four instruments at once. He could play any one of them better if he let the others alone. A stalactite is not so significant as a sea-shell. The tide and wind were rising; gray curtains of rain drifting over the loch. After all, the cliffs, the rain, and the sea-weed were better than the cave; better still to climb over the moors and find Elgol.

Elgol, on Loch Scavaig, a little shore and hill village between the moor and the sea, a long road winding up from the school-house—where the master offered us tea—and around the crest of a hill; gray cottages and huts as natural as birds' nests. Why should they not be as natural as birds' nests?

Some one took a responsibility who first set cities on the one side and nature on some other side, and called the efficiencies

of men "artificial" by a sour distinction. It is as if we were somehow less natives, with a birthright in the earth, than its other inhabitants. I do not see that the nature-worshipper who needs the country for his practice of devotion should argue to himself a fine sensitiveness. Why not argue a callousness and dull unseeing eyes that cannot find her admirable in a shop window? "God made the country and man made the town" is the true "pathetic fallacy" of the "naturalists." There is no such distinction. Man made the town, and the foxes dug holes, and the river cut its own channel. The bed of a river is as natural as a street, and no more so; an oak leaf as natural as this written page, and no more so, and the page will be as natural when it is printed. That would be a narrow cult among the crows which called their political system artificial, and admired the habits of hawks as more natural; or among orioles which argued against sophisticated nest structure, and was bent on going back to "simplicity and nature." What has simplicity to do with

nature more than complexity, unless there is nothing natural but an atom? I should think the man who turned my penholder worked to the laws of his being as well as the tree that grew the wood.

The school-house stood close under a rugged cliff above the beach, a trim brick and government-built, with a careful lawn, half a school-house and half a dwelling for the master, who was a Glasgow medical student, and offered us tea. Yet the black moor hung over it, and the sea mouthed below. I was about to say that the thing did not seem natural.

The schoolmaster led us to one of the nested cottages on the hill, three-roomed with low eaves, and there, it appeared, dwelt one Miss Robertson, with her sister, who spoke only Gaelic, but whose smile was warm and universal—two old women. I think they were of the salt of the earth. A clergyman comes once in two weeks to lonely Elgol to hold a prayer-meeting. It fell on that night, and Miss Robertson sacrificed that seldom pleasure and profit to get us dinner. She confessed it, on accusation—"I couldn't sit in meeting and think you were hun-

gry"—with some embarrassment, as if she thought devoutness should be more impregnable, with a shadowy sadness for the meetingless barren fortnight before her. It involved us in remorse and secret melancholy. To consider that the sacrifice should have more worth to her than the prayer-meeting seemed sophistical. It depends on how one feels toward either, on frequency and custom, on which of the two has settled more stolidly into the plodding habits of life, and become more of a dusty usage. In "The Legend Beautiful" it is said of a certain monk that a celestial vision of his Lord came to him in his cell, and was splendid in countenance and vesture, and consoling to his depression. But it happened to be the hour in his routine of offices when he should feed the hungry who came to the monastery gate daily at that hour. There arose a doubtful question, to go or stay, a subject for casuistry and different points of view. But after all habit is the very stuff of the conscience, the voice of its summons is much like that of an imperative duty, and he turned his back and plodded away to his beggars. One



LOCH SLAPIN

is said to give alms properly for his own benefit, seeing that he cannot follow its effect for good or evil on those who receive; and surely the question was not quiet in his heart. Yet on coming again to his cell in an hour or more he found the vision still there, and, "Hadst thou stayed," it said, "I must have fled."

That is all very well, but Miss Robertson missed the meeting, and the clergyman would not come again to Elgol for a fortnight.

Still it is something to be now and then no better than one of the hungry and subject to ministrations. For if the giver of alms has economic and social doubts about it, the recipient is quite at rest. He is *overflowed* by an ancient benediction, as Elgol was *overflowed* by the moonlight that night. It spread over the ridges and rimmed the black hollows of the moor. But the Cuchullins were black in the face of the moon, and gave not a glimmer to answer her touch and pleading.

### III

#### CORUISK AND SLIGACHAN

The head of Loch Scavaig lies at the feet of the Cuchullins. We came up from Elgol in a sturdy sail-boat, and were landed on the slippery ledge hard by where a stream drops from Loch Coruisk into Scavaig. Scott landed his Bruce here, and introduced a clever description of Coruisk,—a

dread lake,  
With its dark ledge of barren stone.  
Seems that primeval earthquake's sway  
Hath but a strange and shattered way  
Through the dark bosom of the hill,  
And that each naked precipice,  
Sable ravine, and dark abyss  
Tells of the outrage still.

And he is accurate about a number of details. "Shattered way" is better than accurate. But I think one grows to care less for Scott's scenery. It is seldom lit from within. It appears to be mainly decorative. As a rule its significance diminishes according to its radius from Edinburgh and the Cheviots, and the scenes of his birth and nurture. These had grown into the color and texture of his mind, and so he was better able to get inside of them. Is not that the secret? One is a poet toward nature only so far

as he is able to project himself into it, and make it from within to darken or glow. Turner drew Coruisk better and less accurately than Scott described it. He was the bolder poet. He saw more "brave translunar things," and painted poetry of a different law and order. The Cuchullins do not crowd and race over Coruisk like that in the wake of their storm clouds. I think Wordsworth knew that battlements do not have "restless fronts," and Kingsley that "cruel crawling foam" took those qualities from his own bestowing. Ruskin chose the latter phrase to illustrate the "pathetic fallacy" he complained of, and idolized Turner, who painted to the same more distant truth of his own instinct. But the instinct had laws of its own. The reasons for a lake are springs in the mountains, the cup and enclosure of land, and it is to our knowledge that much water falls directly from heaven; yet we have not heard that it is any more lawless when it falls than when it flows. The Cuchullins are igneous rock, and once heaved and ran with red lava. If you stand on the shore of Coruisk while the sheets of gray rain go by, you may see them, in motion once more, drive their jagged spears into the mist and the veils of a hidden sky, bristle with hate and war, and crowd straining after the storm clouds over Coruisk. So Turner drew them. So Wordsworth, in "the cataclysms blow their trumpets from the steep," stated no more than was evident. And so I imagine that in this place he might have been led to say that

each naked precipice,  
Sable ravine, and dark abyss,  
does

Tell of the outrage still,

instead of, more timidly, that it "seems" to do so, knowing that it is not worth while for one kind of truth to apologize to another.

Whether you call it the mystery of the Cuchullins, or only infer that the black rocks absorb the light, there is always a brooding gloom in the gorges. The moonlight falters into dusk and dies away.

Shortly after noon the rain came up from the sea and drew long delicate gray lines against the cliffs. It came licking and lipping over the surface of Coruisk,





THE MELANCHOLY OF GLEN SLIGACHAN

and drove us to the lee of rocks and the shelter of our ponchos, to watch the mists drifting, to listen to the swell and lull of the wind and the patter of the cold rain. There were glimpses now and then of the inner Cuchullins, a fragment of ragged sky-line, the sudden jab of a black pinnacle through the mist, the open mouth of a gorge steaming with mist.

We climbed the great ridge, at length, of rock and wet heath that separates Coruisk from Glen Sligachan, slowly through the fitful rain and driving cloud, and saw Sgurr-nan-Gillian, sharp, black, and pitiless, the northernmost peak and sentinel of the Cuchullins. The yellow trail could be seen twisting along the flat, empty glen. Seven miles away was a white spot, the Sligachan Hotel.

I think it must be the dreariest glen in Scotland. The trail twists in a futile manner, and, after all, is mainly bog-holes and rolling rocks. The Red Hills are on the right, rusty, reddish, of the color of dried blood, and gashed with sliding boulders. Their heads seem beat-

en down, a Hebridean population, and the Cuchullins stand back like an army of iron conquerors. The Red Hills will be a vanished race one day, and the Cuchullins remain.

The melancholy of Glen Sligachan did not seem to come of "old, unhappy, far-off things." Norse and Gaelic wars, or anything so pale as a legend. It was the old bitterness that is yet new and forever, the sense of the unyielding metal of the enginery that tears down and builds, that allows us to study it and infer what we choose, but answers no questions. In the course of incident it comes tacitly and gathers us too into the crucible of its processes. If reading qualities of ourselves into something not ourselves is a "fallacy," it is "pathetic" enough. It is a fallacy that seems likely to persist, the seeking and seeing there some admission of our point of view, some tendency to notice, if not to wish us well, some yielding, perhaps, to humor us. It does not seem to "die among its worshippers," which is a concise argument that somehow it is no fallacy.

We came to the Sligachan Hotel. It seemed a comfortable oasis. There was a bustle about its doors, warmth and conversation in the smoking-room, an inclination to cheerfulness. Trout-fishers were there, and tourists. Coaches stopped outside. The day grew late.

A white-faced man burst into the smoking-room. He had come on a run the seven miles from Sgurr-nan-Gillian. His comrade in the climb had fallen on Gillian. He had heard the cry, he said,

the rush of the body past him, the thud far below.

They made up a party. The night came on. Lights were lit. It was all quiet about the hotel except for softly stepping feet and low voices. Those who went up Sgurr-nan-Gillian on the search passed the night there, and found business in driving the eagles away. We climbed into the mail-cart and rolled off into the darkness over the upland moors to Portree.

## The Aisles of the Wood

*BY WILLIAM HAMILTON HAYNE*

HE is not wise who would shun the joy  
 Of the life that is called alone,—  
 To roam the wood, with the heart of Spring  
 Soft beating against his own.

To watch the clouds as they form or fade,  
 By the breath of the wind-tide kissed,  
 On the ocean blue of boundless sky,  
 With its filmy veil of mist.

To hear the minstrels of high degree  
 Outpour from their eager throats  
 In lyric rapture, divine and deep,  
 Their current of golden notes.

To touch the blades of the keen, soft grass,  
 And flowers that star the sod,—  
 Children of bloom who can only speak  
 In the vernal tongues of God.

To share the odors of loam and leaf,  
 The balsam of vine and tree,—  
 To leave the care of the world behind,  
 And revel with bird and bee.

He is not wise who would shirk his part  
 In the Master Gardener's plan,  
 And shun the aisles of the ardent wood  
 To follow the ways of man.