

## SNOW CLIMBING ON THE DEESIDE HILLS.

BY JOHN R. LEVACK, M.B.

THE vast snow mantle which clothes the higher hills of Upper Deeside every winter from December to June transforms these mountains into a magnificent playground for the mountaineer who wishes to practise the snow-climbing branch of his sport, and more than compensates for the lack of good rock-climbing, for the deficiencies of which these hills are notorious. The Deeside hills in winter form a veritable Switzerland in miniature, with the advantage that here the weather does not seriously count, and the danger of avalanches is practically absent. Winter ascents have been hitherto far too few, and it is the object of the present paper to stimulate interest in this branch of mountaineering amongst members of the Cairngorm Club.

Lochnagar will always remain the most attractive of the higher hills on Deeside, not only on account of its being the nearest and most accessible of these mountains from Aberdeen, but also on account of its individuality and beauty of form. Its cliffs are for the most part excessively difficult, or altogether impossible, to the rock-climber, and the numerous gullies which seam the rock-face have also been proved to be anything but safe places, even in summer, the only exception being the Black Spout, which is really a steep scree slope set deep into the face of the mountain, and offers no difficulty to an active hill-walker properly shod. This gully brings the climber out on to the summit plateau, close to Cac Carn Beag, and I would strongly recommend the Black Spout route to any ordinarily active hill-walkers who wish to ascend Lochnagar, the only precaution necessary being that one member of the party should have been over the ground before. This is advisable for the reason that near the top of the Spout the bed of the gully, which

Black  
Spout.

Cac  
Carn Beag



*Photo by*

LOCHNAGAR CORRIE, MAY, 1906.

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otherwise consists of loose rock and debris, is here divided in two by a prominent nose of rock, compelling the climber to turn aside to get round it. The way lies to the right (north) side of the rock, up over one or two rock ledges; then an easy walk out at the top of the gully finishes the scramble, and the summit cairn is reached in two or three minutes. If the Black Spout route be chosen, one approaches the hill from Allt-naguibhsaich, along the Queen's path and across the "wilderness" to the foot of the "Ladder," that steep zig-zagging ankle-twisting abomination called, by courtesy, a path, which every climber who values his comfort and peace of mind should avoid. Having therefore crossed the "wilderness," and lunched at the Fox's Well, the climber follows the path up to the col or dip between the Cuidhe Crom and the Meikle Pap, whence a superb view of the whole corrie of Lochnagar is obtained. And as he crosses the saddle, and clambers down over the tumbled mass of boulders towards the head of the loch, this rare picture of rock scenery is constantly before him, whilst below lies the lonely loch, across which flit in endless succession eddying ripples as the breeze sweeps over its surface. Contrast this with the toilsome grind up the "Ladder," where the path is a more or less dry watercourse, rough, steep, and uneven, into which one has to stoop till one's nose nearly touches the rocks above and nothing is seen but the steps just ahead, and the way seems endless.

Down in the corrie everything is different, and time passes quickly as one picks one's way over the rocks, past the head of the loch, and across the steep screes to the foot of the Spout. A short rest and a lunch of jam sandwiches are advisable here, water being usually obtainable from a trickle coming down the gully. Then as one mounts up the steep slope of loose granite debris which forms the bed of the gully, and finds oneself flanked on either side by vertical walls of black rock, the feeling of being at last in the heart of the mountain comes home very forcibly to the climber. The return journey from the summit of the mountain is best made by skirting the top of the cliffs and

then descending by the "Ladder," or, preferably, by the rocks immediately to the north of it. Any party equipped with common sense and good boots can ascend Lochnagar by this route with perfect safety.

The above description of the Black Spout route should not, strictly speaking, come within the scope of a paper on snow climbing, but a knowledge of the way under summer conditions helps materially to understand the state of matters there in winter, when the "wilderness" is one of snow, the rocks leading from the saddle to the loch half or wholly buried in drift, and the scree up to the foot of the Spout a steep snow slope. Under such conditions our route can afford a first-class snow climb. All the gullies are now filled with snow or ice, but, as in summer, they are mostly inaccessible to the mountaineer, the principal exception being again the Spout, which is now simply a steep snow slope up which it is generally possible to kick or cut steps to the top, and, unless a really gigantic snow cornice is met with, no difficulty is experienced in completing the climb.

My first real snow climb was up the Black Spout some years ago, and naturally it is one I shall not forget in a hurry. We were a party of four, and we arrived at Ballater one evening in February. We set out again at 7 a.m., driving to Alltnaguibhsaich in pouring rain. As we neared the Hut, however, the rain ceased, and the higher tops became rosy as they caught the first rays of the morning sun. Snow showers swept across the glen at frequent intervals, and as we walked up the path and crossed the "wilderness" these showers became small blizzards and the wind a gale. Ultimately we reached the foot of the Spout, and had a rest and lunch in the beautiful little snow dell which always forms at the foot of the rocks between the Spout and Douglas' gully. The snow in the Spout was not very hard, and the leader could kick steps for some distance, but he soon had to scrape them with his axe when the surface became too hard to kick. Higher up the angle steepened and the surface became quite icy, so that step-cutting proper had to be done, and the

rope was put on. The serious nature of the work now on hand became apparent to the writer, who was the passenger, and therefore the particular care of each of the other members of the party. The leader's axe never ceased as he cut step after step in the frozen surface. One man only moved at a time, and so it happened that when ice-glazed rock showed through the snow, and the leader necessarily took some time to pick a way over those difficult stretches, the other three men stood in their steps like statues, with the picks of their axes dug deep in the frozen surface in case of a slip, patiently waiting till the order should be given to "come on." Near the top, where the big rock projects through the snow, we stood in our steps for what seemed an age; no word was spoken, and no sound broke the stillness save the chip, chip, of the leader's axe and the continuous hiss of the dislodged ice particles as they streamed down the slope past our feet. Ultimately we stood on the summit plateau, unroped, and walked on to the highest point. Storm-clouds swept the higher hills, and everything was clothed in white. Between the snow showers the sun shone brilliantly, and the sky was intensely blue. We looked across a snow-world, essentially Alpine in its grandeur and beauty. A descent by the ordinary route completed the day's outing.

Another time six of us went up the Black Spout in deep, soft, powdery snow. The ascent was simply a toilsome grind for two-thirds of the way, to a point where a lateral gully branches off to the left. Four of the party took the rope and climbed this gully, whilst the fifth member of the party and the writer continued up the main gully, as they did not consider the lateral gully a safe place for married men! We continued gaily to kick steps, thinking to have an easy walk out at the summit, but suddenly we came to the end of the snow, and were confronted with ice and frozen gravel, in which we tried to cut steps. Inexperience and the want of a rope defeated us, and we failed to get up. Many times we tried, and as many times did we slide back into the snow, helplessly and ignominiously. At last we gave in, leaving

behind us sundry shreds of skin and more than one blood stain in the snow from abraded knuckles and fingers. A reckless scurry down the soft snow in the gully landed us in the corrie, out of which we had to steer by compass, for, owing to a heavy and prolonged snow shower, we could not see five yards ahead. Our friends climbed their gully and descended the main Spout, taking one and a half hours to the icy stretch on which we had failed.

On March 21st of this year three of us had a magnificent day on Lochnagar. Driving from Ballater, we reached Allt-naguibhsaich at 8.30 a.m., and walked up the path, over the col, and down to the loch. We had intended to climb the Black Spout, but it was overhung by a gigantic cornice, the largest I ever saw, the cutting through which would probably occupy more time than we could afford, so we chose the steep face of the south-east corner of the corrie, where it drops in one unbroken sweep to the head of the loch. The angle rapidly increased as we mounted, till near the top it became perpendicular, and finally, a small cornice had to be cut away before we could get up. The surface consisted of recent soft snow plastered over old hard snow, and this meant laborious work for the leader, scraping away all the new snow and cutting deeply into the old before any foothold that could be trusted was obtained. Large quantities of snow, soft and hard, were dislodged by the leader's axe, and the middle man on the rope had difficulty in keeping himself from being smothered, whilst the third man, standing twenty feet lower down, plaintively reminded the leader that falling bodies gathered momentum, even on a mountain face. But the climb was a lovely one, and we were sorry when it was done. We wandered round to the main top, and once again enjoyed the view in brilliant sunshine. Everything that could hold snow was dazzlingly white, and all the peaks and ridges stood up for us to name them. A glissade down the east side of the Cuidhe Crom on the way home completed our enjoyment.

This eastern slope of the Cuidhe Crom affords good sport for the snow climber. If the snow be soft, ascent is easy by

kicking steps, but, if the slope be in shadow, as in the afternoon, the surface becomes icy, and ascent or descent may be quite exciting. The writer and a friend once attempted glissading down this slope under afternoon conditions, with disastrous results. We both shot downwards, utterly incapable of checking ourselves till we came to grief on some rocks lower down. Sitting, except on the softest of cushions, was a painful process for some days afterwards.

At the head of Glen Callater, a few miles west of Lochnagar, is a beautiful little corrie encircling a lonely lochan, Loch Cander. The cliffs of this corrie are for the most part unclimbable, but the numerous gullies which seam its face afford, in winter, excellent scope for the sport of snow climbing. Two years ago, a party of three Cairngormers climbed out of the corrie by one of these gullies, an 800 feet climb, up perfect snow, out on to a plateau from which much of Scotland was visible, a veritable fairyland in its winter garb.

Even the smaller hills round Braemar can be made to yield first rate sport to the snow climber under suitable conditions. Last February three of us spent a week-end in Braemar, when the temperature was in the neighbourhood of zero, and all the roads were more or less blocked with snow. We had to content ourselves with Craig Choinnich, and had seven hours' rope- and axe-work, first, in ascending the ice-covered perpendicular wall leading into the old quarry on the south of the hill, and, afterwards, in climbing the gully immediately to the west of the Lion's Face.

The great corries on the eastern face of Beinn a' Bhuid, the vast snow slopes and gullies which line and seam the shoulders of Ben Muich Dhui, Cairngorm, and Cairn Toul, and, best of all, the truly titanic Garbh Coire of Braeriach, all await the snow climber, and offer him infinite possibilities in the exercise of his sport.