

A WINTRY ASCENT OF LOCHNAGAR.

BY DAVID P. LEVACK.

SOME members of the Club having expressed a desire for a mountain excursion, an unofficial Meet at Ballater during the first week-end of May was arranged for, with the object of ascending Lochnagar. This is the mountain best known, perhaps, to the generality of the members of the Club. It has a very varied temperament, however. Now fair and smiling, now dark and frowning, it is a mountain which should not be attempted without certain precautions, unless in exceptionally fine weather when the barometer has been high and steady for some time. It is, indeed, remarkable how few people realise what might possibly happen on Lochnagar, even in the warm days of summer; and there are on record several narrow escapes of visitors to the Ballater-Braemar district, who, going unprepared and with little knowledge of the hill and its capricious moods, were enveloped in mist and were with difficulty rescued from dangerous places on the mountain.

On this occasion we were destined to encounter Lochnagar in one of its unpropitious moods. The weather on the Saturday was dull and cold, with sharp showers of hail, and altogether holding little promise of being succeeded by a good day; and, in view of the threatening outlook, our Chairman maintained that an ascent of Lochnagar by the orthodox route was the only justifiable expedition. This course was agreed upon; and early on the Sunday morning a party of nine set out in a trap for Alltnaguibhsaich. The morning was dull and rather cold but fair, and we started in hopes of a good day. Having arrived at Alltnaguibhsaich, we at once set off up the Lochnagar path. The party divided, as parties usually do, into groups of two and three—the long legs

in front, the short behind. The "Stick" at the foot of the "Wilderness" was reached in 55 minutes—good average time; and the long uphill walk over the Wilderness to the Fox's Well was accomplished in about 20 minutes. Half-way between the Stick and the Well, footprints were seen here and there on the snow, evidently only an hour or two old. Shortly afterwards, two figures were observed coming slowly down the path, and they proved to be two senior members of the Club who had walked up from Inver, where they were staying. They had preceded us across the Wilderness, as far as the foot of the Ladder, but as they were not equipped for the arctic conditions which they knew existed higher up, they decided to return, and we met them a short distance below the Well. We tried to persuade them to come on with us, but deeming discretion the better part of valour, they proceeded down the hill, while we went forward.

The weather now became distinctly worse. A biting wind, more or less from the south, drove the mist across the face of the Cuidhe Crom, blotting out the upper half of the Ladder, and making us none too comfortable as we halted at the Well for lunch. So cold was it that we were glad to move on and up, the gale increasing as we ascended. Half-way up the Ladder, we had our last glimpse, for some hours, of the district below us; then the mist swallowed us up. Keeping pretty well together, we slowly ascended the path, and, in the teeth of the wind, with the help of a compass, found the cairn at the top of the Ladder. The weather was now very bad. The wind roared across the plateau, and it was interesting to watch the various members staggering along, leaning against it, and gradually becoming coated with frozen moisture from the mist. From the cairn, the leader moved across to the cliffs, following the line of which was the only safe route that day. Advancing now across the level, always keeping in touch with the cliffs, the going was easier, the ground being fairly well swept of snow. The foot of the rise to the main plateau

was soon reached and we slowly climbed up, the rocks becoming more and more coated with ice as we ascended. Upon reaching the plateau, the full force of the wind was felt, while the ground was covered with snow, hard in places, remarkably soft in others. It became increasingly difficult to see more than a few yards, and the cliffs were followed more closely than ever.

We now advanced in single file. The cliffs were so heavily corniced and the gullies so thickly banked up with snow that it was difficult to make out which were the main gullies and which were the subsidiary ones. Raeburn's gully was the first to be recognised, but beyond this difficulty was experienced, and we steered due north for a gully which we were more or less certain was the Black Spout. This, however, proved to be one of its branches, but eventually we found the Black Spout itself, easily recognised by its size although otherwise unrecognisable with its huge drift of snow.

The main top lies a little way back from the cliffs and due north from the Spout. The wind was fiercer, and the mist and driving snow were so dense that it was almost impossible to keep a straight line for any distance, even with a compass, and a short search was necessary before the ice-coated rocks of Cac Carn Beag loomed through the mist. A huge drift was piled up on the south side, and we sheltered for three minutes in the hollow behind the topmost rock. The cold was intense and prohibited any further delay. Small icicles formed on our moustaches and eyebrows, while our clothes were thickly coated with ice.

We turned to descend and had to face the full force of the gale. Driving particles of ice and snow made it difficult to see, and we were buffeted about a good deal. Steering due east, we quickly came to the cliffs, the edge of which we followed all the way down, our footprints on the way up being of very little use to us, as only here and there could we detect any trace of them, so quickly had they been filled with snow. On reaching the top of

the Cuidhe Crom above the Ladder, we still continued to our left, and descended by the loose rocks to the col between the Cuidhe Crom and the Meikle Pap. At this level we came out of the mist, after having been in it for over four hours.

The snow had now turned to rain, and the clouds followed us down the valley, so that by the time we reached the path beyond the Stick, the mist was down upon us once more, and the Wilderness was completely blotted out. We quickly trotted down the path, and Alltnaguibhsaich was reached about 5.30 p.m. The trap was waiting, and having donned overcoats we scrambled aboard. Soaked more or less as we were, the drive to Ballater was rather uncomfortable, and climbing out of the trap at the Hotel door was a stiff performance ; but tea, hot baths, and dry garments soon changed that, and it was a merry party which sat down to dinner that evening mightily pleased with the day's outing.