

*Photo by*

*Dr. J. R. Levack.*

CLOCHNABEN—SOUTH-EASTERN GULLY.

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ROCK-CLIMBING ON CLOCHNABEN.

BY DR. JOHN R. LEVACK.

THE rock-climbing mountaineer has very little scope for pursuing his favourite sport amongst the hills of Deeside. Lochnagar and the giants that encircle the head-waters of the Dee possess rock faces and precipices which, for grandeur and beauty, compare favourably with any to be met with elsewhere in Scotland. Generally speaking, these crags are not suitable for the average climber, for they are almost always too difficult, and are frequently quite impossible, owing to the nature of the rock. Granite weathers into huge, vertical slabs with rounded edges, and a climb up a face composed of this rock is, in most cases, much too difficult a proposition for the ordinary climber. In recent years, however, a good deal of careful investigation has been made amongst these crags by some of our expert climbers, but a lot more remains to be done. The face of Lochnagar was climbed many years ago by Brown and Tough, but the ascent by this route has not been repeated. Raeburn and Ling climbed the buttress on the north wall of the Black Spout at Easter, 1908. In the Garbh-Choire of Braeriach some interesting work has been done by Mr. Parker, while the crags on the eastern face of Beinn a' Bhuird have also been explored, but appear to be, for the most part, impossible.

X. K

One great drawback about the crags on upper Deeside is their remoteness from any base, and the consequent difficulty, as regards time, in reaching them. A ten-mile tramp, over rough ground, to the foot of the actual climb is a serious handicap, when the climb to be attempted is of a difficult nature. The rock-climber is tempted, therefore, to look around for suitable courses nearer home. All the hills of lower Deeside, unfortunately, are of the rounded, undulating type, heather-clad and uninteresting. There are no steep rock faces like those of Lochnagar or Braeriach.

One of these smaller, rounded hills, however, is redeemed from the commonplace, and made very conspicuous, by having, as its highest point, a large pinnacle or tower of rock protruding above the heather-clad surface of the hill. This tower is not set on the very top of the hill, but on the eastern slope a short distance lower down. Its summit rises well above the surrounding ground, and is actually the highest point of the hill, 1900 feet.

Clochnaben, as this hill is called, lies two miles west of the Bridge of Dye, and four miles south-south-west of Feughside Inn. A good description of it is given by Mr. Robert Anderson in Vol. I. of the *C.C.J.* (p. 138), but I can find no further reference to it in the *Journal*. Many thousands of people must have climbed this hill for the sake of the view; the more active of them will have scrambled up the easy west side of the rock to the summit cairn. Here the sensation experienced is one not to be met with anywhere else on Deeside, except, possibly, when standing on the topmost rock of Lochnagar—a feeling of great height, airiness and isolation. Many of the visitors must have walked round the base of the rock, and all of them would have been impressed with the steepness and apparent inaccessibility of the crags of the eastern face. No one seems to have paid any attention to the possibility of climbing the eastern face of the rock till 1901, when Mr. William Garden made some investigations, and

quickly concluded that any climbing here would be very difficult, if not dangerous.

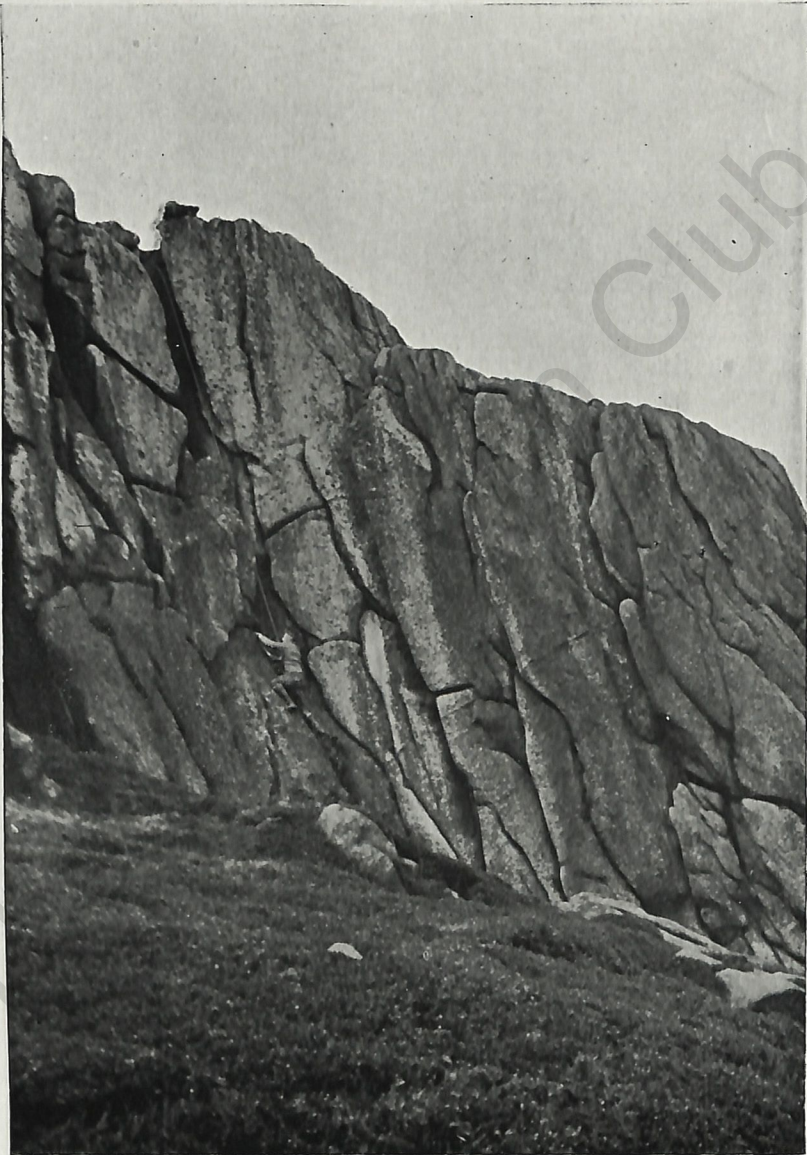
The bare rock face itself, consisting, as it does, of giant slabs with next to no hand-holds, and set at a high angle, is manifestly impossible. There are, however, several gullies or chimneys which invite inspection. The first obvious one of these, not far from the north end of the precipice, is a narrow vertical crack which runs out on the summit ridge well to the north of, and much lower than the summit cairn. A few yards along towards the south from No. 1 there is a second gully, wider, and, at first, not nearly so steep as No. 1. It also comes out on the summit ridge to the north of and below the level of the summit cairn. Farther along and now to the south of the summit, the eastern face shows a third, but very ill-defined gully. Finally, round the south corner of the precipice, one comes upon the part of the rock which is longest from base to summit (about 100 feet). It is still very steep, but does not look quite so hopeless as the eastern face. Here there is a well-defined, broad shallow gully which might be called the south-east gully. Passing round to the western aspect of the rock, we find that only about 20 to 30 feet of it projects above the slope of the hill. This face, still more or less vertical, is much broken up, so that it is easy to scramble up it almost anywhere to the summit ridge.

There is no recorded climb on any of these gullies, but Mr. Garden tells me that, in 1901, he ascended the narrow chimney above-mentioned (No. 1), but he had a rope held from above to assist him over the unclimbable rocks below the chimney. Since that time nothing further has been done in the matter, apparently, till two years ago, when a party of five, including Messrs. Garden and Parker, made a reconnaissance of the rock. The weather was bad, and very little climbing could be done, but the same party returned a week later and got to work. The long south-east gully was first investigated. For about 30 feet up, the climbing is on steep easy rock ;

then one comes to a big slab, set at a high angle and devoid of holds, which it is necessary to traverse to the left, so as to get into the continuation of the gully. Our party, on its first visit, got up over the easy rocks to the foot of the slab, but, the rocks being wet, it was found impossible to cross that slab, especially as we had no rope. So we gave up the attempt, but returned a week later, armed with an 80-foot rope.

Two of us got on to the summit ridge from the easy west side, and, anchoring in a convenient recess a little way below the top of the gully, threw down the rope to the three others, who had already climbed up to the foot of the slab. The leader, the tallest of the three, tied on and proceeded to negotiate the difficult bit, we up above meantime holding him in case of a slip. Owing to his long reach he could just stretch across the slab to its upper western corner and get a good hand-hold. He quickly swung himself across to a firm foot-hold and the difficulty was over. He required no assistance from the rope during the operation. His companions, having tied on, followed, but, both being shorter than the leader, just failed to stretch far enough to get the necessary hand-hold, and required a little help from the rope. Above the slab the gully becomes less steep and is grass-covered, so the party walked and scrambled up for about 20 feet, and came again to another steep rocky part, which afforded a nice little scramble up to the summit ridge. This climb was repeated last summer (1921).

The narrow vertical chimney (No. 1), first ascended, as already mentioned, by Mr. Garden in 1901, was climbed two years ago by J. W. Levack. He, like Mr. Garden, required the assistance of the rope to get up over the lower rocks and into the chimney proper. These lower rocks are vertical, smooth and holdless, and are unclimbable without help. Once in the chimney, the climber was able to work his way upward by the "back and knee" method without any assistance from the rope, which was held from the top of the chimney in



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CLOCHNABEN—EASTERN CHIMNEY (No. 1).

case of a slip. After a sharp struggle of half an hour's duration he emerged, breathless, on the grassy platform at the top of the gully; the height from base to summit is here about 50 feet. It is perhaps unnecessary to add that this chimney can not be climbed by stout people.

No. 2 gully, as has been indicated above, is wider than No. 1. It is also much easier of access from below; in fact, the lower part is a simple scramble. Higher up, the gully steepens and narrows, so that the mode of progression is, as in No. 1. by the "back and knee" method, and, where it is too wide for this, by the "back and feet" method. Here the walls of the gully are nearly vertical and are quite holdless. Still higher up and about 10 feet from the top, the gully again widens, so that the "back and feet" method is no longer possible, and, as the walls are still vertical and holds are entirely absent, climbing here becomes impossible. One of our party, D. P. Levack, entered this gully from the foot of the rocks, having tied on to a rope from above. He quickly ascended the lower easy stretch, and "backed" up the steep narrow part. When he came to the wider upper section he called to us who were holding the rope that he could go no farther, so we had simply to pull him up. This gully, it seems, therefore, will not "go."

The next gully (No. 3) on the eastern face is much less defined than the others. It comes out on the summit ridge a little to the left (south) of the cairn, and is longer than the others. Want of time prevented us from exploring it, but it looks much worse than No. 2, and I doubt if it be possible.

Passing round to the west side of the rock, there is plenty of easy scrambling to be had. It is excellent practice for the beginner. He learns to stand up on a sloping rock, and he learns balance and confidence in an airy situation. The climbing on the east face is too serious and difficult for most people, but the climb on the south-east gully is distinctly good, and the scrambles on the west side are very delightful.