

WITH A ROPE ON THE CRAGS OF LOCHNAGAR

BY N. BRUCE AND G. ROY SYMMERS.

I.—RAEBURN'S GULLY.

EVERYTHING was in favour of a successful ascent of Raeburn's Gully on August 5, 1928. The weather had been settled for a considerable period. The day was fine and not too hot, and there was no wind to speak of. Climbing conditions were ideal except for water, which in several places was unavoidable. Symmers had already made two attempts, but it was my first essay at anything bigger than the tors on Clachnaben and Ben Rinnes. We reached Allt-na-giubhsaich by 9 a.m. on a motor bicycle. By 10.30 we were at the foot of the screes and by eleven we had started up our climb.

The gully was entered above its actual commencement by a traverse out to the right, on the white quartz intrusion mentioned by Symmers in an earlier article, and then back over some rather unreliable rock into the gully. The object of this was to avoid certain slabs at the foot of the gully, which had given a former party no little trouble in surmounting. Progress was rapid up to the foot of the pitches, which commence some 300 feet from the start of the course. The route follows the bed of the gully, which is carved in solid rock. The climbing was fairly easy, but disagreeable because of the amount of water present. Looking up-

wards from the bend in the gully, it seemed to be completely blocked by a series of chokestones, piled high one above the other—a rather disconcerting obstacle for a beginner as they appeared to be so delicately poised. However, in this case appearances were quite deceptive. Upon investigation this barrier resolved itself into three distinct steps. The first pitch, some thirty-five feet in height, required some negotiation at the start and at the finish. The next one, about fifteen feet or so, was easily surmounted by a traverse to the left. The final pitch, which is the most interesting, and which has marked the limit of the ascent of the gully on some former occasions, is in the form of a double cave pitch. The upper one is reached by climbing the left wall and traversing back to the right. Wedged in this cramped recess we rested and revelled in the view. The overhanging boulder, which forms the roof of the cave, was overcome by using a threaded rope and a “stirrup” made from a length of thin rope doubled and threaded behind the chokestone. This boulder required two tries before it was conquered, and provided the thrill of the climb. Before I followed on, Symmers cleared away much loose stone and the going was greatly improved thereby. The next 150 feet was “after” the Black Spout, and the rope became a nuisance. About a hundred feet from the top were two uncomfortable pitches formed by masses of rock wedged in a narrow part of the gully. The rock was rotten and covered with slimy green moss, but by keeping to the left we avoided the worst of the difficulties, getting very grimy in the process. Above this the gully divided into three. The left branch looked as if it might go easily but the rocks looked loose. There should be plenty of hard work for those who like it in the right hand branch. Straight ahead, the final obstacle, about ten feet high, was climbed on the left on some rather unobstrusive holds. The exit on to the plateau is a gravel shoot set at a decidedly slippery angle, on which I thought Symmers was quite

unnecessarily slow. I had to crawl up ignominiously "a quatre pattes."

It is interesting to note that we saw no sign of the through-route which the late H. Raeburn mentions in his description of the climb.

II.—THE WEST GULLY.

Emboldened by our success in Raeburn's Gully the previous week, the West Gully was tackled enthusiastically if somewhat less hopefully. It was raining hard when we left Ballater by car for the Spital of Glen Muick. Crossing the footbridge, which was then undergoing reconstruction, we reached Allt-na-giubhsaich about 9 a.m., and the foot of the Black Spout about 10.30. It rained hard all the way to the col. At this point the weather cleared a little but the cliffs were veiled in mist, and it seemed as if we might have some difficulty in deciding where to attack the gully.

At the foot of the Red Spout we passed a veritable plumber's paradise. Water gushed from holes in the turf, for all the world like a burst water-main. By the time we reached the cliffs above on our way home, the flow had ceased as if the tap had been turned off. We examined these holes a fortnight later and found them to be almost three feet deep above a subterranean burn.

By the time we reached the screes to the left of the gully, the sun had dissipated the mists and we had the choice of three routes. The right-hand one was obviously out of the question. A regular waterfall was tumbling down it. The left-hand one was not much better, and I doubt if the middle route, which we chose, was any drier than the others. Scrambling up the steep vegetable slopes with some difficulty and considerable discomfort, we reached a heathery ledge, about two hundred feet above the screes, and traversed to the right to enter the real foot of the gully. The vegetation was very thick and



August, 1928

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THE CENTRAL BUTTRESS LOCHNAGAR.

[The dotted lines indicate the routes followed. On the right, ending in a cross, is the abandoned course up the shallow gully. On the left, starting at the top of the broad gully referred to, is the route followed to the summit of the buttress.]

countless Alpine plants flourished luxuriantly without much fear of disturbance. The first section of the gully was the most disagreeable part of the climb. It consisted of rotten slabby rock set at a steep angle with grass and moss and any amount of water. These conditions continued until, at about half the height of the gully, the first pitch was encountered. This was a slab of rock about seven feet high, which formed the door-step to a small cave under an overhanging choke-stone. The upper edge of the slab was sharp and presented no difficulty—not so the choke-stone. It was overcome by climbing out to the right and then traversing back to the left, above the overhang, on rather small holds. Above it the gully branched on either side. The left branch was well defined and rather steep, but the right one was not so distinct. Here we rested and hoped that the sun, which slanted down the left branch, would mitigate the general dampness. So far the climb had been very, very wet, especially the cave below. Directly above us, the gully narrowed considerably and a huge cave-pitch seemed to hint that the left-hand branch might have to be tried. As a further deterrent, the cave was a regular shower-bath. It must have been at this point that Raeburn made use of a threaded rope. We decided to tackle a narrow crack in the perpendicular right wall instead. With the help of a shoulder from Symmers, I reached a comfortable hand-hold and so on to the platform above, he following on the rope. The wall above, about twenty feet high, was climbed with some difficulty, much moss and dirt having to be cleared away before holds could be discovered. Here again the gully had two exits. The left branch seemed the less formidable, but as it was a variation we decided to carry on straight ahead. The gully now became very narrow and steep, and above a short pitch of rotten rock, we reached a cave below a mass of boulders, piled above the choke-stone in the grandest confusion, forming an absolutely perpendicular pitch about twenty

feet high. This provided a most amusing through-route. At the top of the cave we discovered a small window, and through this Symmers squeezed himself—his length of limb at this point a serious disadvantage. Puffing and blowing and muttering darkly to himself, he turned and twisted, kicking down stones and gravel on my defenceless head as I sat in an unavoidable pool of water, hoping that all these gymnastics would not bring down a certain unpleasant looking boulder on my toes. When my turn came, I too learned how hard and unyielding a rock can be. Another twenty feet of easy scrambling and we were out on the top and into the sun again.

III.—FAILURE.

After two glorious conquests earlier in the month, we had both admittedly a bad attack of "swollen head." So far as rock-climbing was concerned we were certainly "it" ! Our usual luck in striking fine weather held good, so that 11 a.m. on the 26th found us basking on the knoll of rocks immediately below our objective, the Central Buttress in the north-east corrie of Loch-nagar.

The project we had in hand was to try and force a route up a shallow gully on the right face of the buttress. From our resting-place this groove appeared to run almost perpendicularly up to the sky-line, giving out on the nose of the ridge somewhat more than half-way up. Besides the fact that the gully looked rough and the rock reliable, it gave very little else in the way of encouragement.

As we approached up the scree, its unholy aspect changed ; it smiled down on us ; what appeared hopeless from down below, now took on a semblance of simplicity. Lured on by this artifice, we, blind and innocent, full of pride, set forth to conquer. But after taking out fifty feet of rope, I began to feel a little uneasy. Things were more difficult than they

looked. Holds which from below seemed plentiful in their profusion had disappeared, leaving smooth, rounded granite slabs in their stead. Nor did matters improve! Above the little platform on which we were standing, a narrow chimney rose up to the skyline. Its steepness may be gauged from the fact that the continuation of the gully above could not be seen beyond its overhanging lip. Twenty feet of the sensational right wall was climbed but had to be given up. This left the chimney as the only alternative. Up it we had to go, or else return. Almost forty feet of continuous back and knee work landed us on a second platform. The gully above this widened considerably and the angle became less severe although still over 60°. An attempt some thirty feet up the centre was completed by an ignominious return. The left wall was next tried, and progress made to a small shelf which I had to vacate before Miss Bruce could take possession. An exposed, upward traverse on moss covered holds, allowed a second small ledge to be gained. Here a sharp spike of rock formed an excellent belay, round which the rope was hurriedly passed. A further short traverse, round an outstanding spur of rotten rock, landed me back in the centre of the gully. From this position no further progress could be made, and since there seemed every possibility of a rapid descent in the near future, I decided that we had had enough.

"Up, up," is one story, "down, down," another! The two hundred feet to the scree below looked very, very steep. To add to our discomfort, far below us, down near the loch, some unthinking idiots yelled to each other, making the corrie resound with the clamour of their cries, and the thunder of boulders which they from time to time dislodged down the slope. However, all things come to an end, and after having on two sections to use a doubled rope for the safety of the last man, we at length descended to the screes. It was with feelings of humble gratitude that we reached

the bottom of the gully. We had gone up full of vanity in our own prowess, we came down, gently down, back to earth.

Rather tired and somewhat disheartened by our ill-success, I suggested going to the top via the Black Spout. This time the proposal met with stern disapproval, at which I handed in my resignation. Miss Bruce now took the lead and went confidently up a broad gully some distance to the left of our abandoned course. This terminated on the main ridge of the buttress. The terraced left face was then climbed, until we could traverse across back on to the nose above a steep wall of rock. From this point a very distinct rib was followed up to a couple of small pinnacles. Below us on the right we obtained now and again a thrilling glimpse into the gully which had defeated us. The finish to the climb presented no difficulty and we moved up the last portion together, the rope being of little or no assistance.

We had now to find someone who could tell us the time, since neither of us had a watch. Imagine our surprise when the first person we met informed us that it was past five. We had been scrambling on the cliffs for six hours! It had been for my companion a day of success, for myself one of abject failure.