

## LOCHNAGAR : SOME REMINISCENCES.

BY J. R. LEVACK.

WITH the single exception of Ben Rinnes, up which I had been taken as a small boy, Lochnagar was the first mountain I ever ascended, now almost exactly thirty years ago, and it has remained my favourite peak ever since, the number of ascents during that time averaging two per annum. They have been undertaken at all times of the year, including New Year's Day. It might be interesting to readers of the *Journal* to recall some points about one or two of the excursions.

My first one was from Braemar in the month of July, on a fine, clear day, following two of continuous heavy rain. My companion and I had only the vaguest idea of the lie of the ground, and especially of the distance, although we had a map. We bicycled up to Callater and wandered up the very obvious path round Creag-an-Loch and up over Cairn Taggart. At the foot of the eastern slope of Taggart we saw some men repairing a fence, and when we reached them we asked them if the hill on the east side of the valley was Lochnagar. To our dismay we were told it was the White Mounth, and that Lochnagar was hidden by it and more than two miles further on. We trudged on and ultimately reached the summit cairn. The view was perfect in all directions, and, of course, absolutely new to us. My recollection of it all was that of a vast sea of rolling hills as far as the eye could reach, and a bright blue sky overhead, flecked with little white cloudlets. A short rest and some food, and we returned to Callater very pleased with our day. The Callater route to the summit is a good six-mile tramp—rather rough in places, especially above Loch Callater—but along the flat plateau of the White Mounth it is like walking over a golf course, with the added advantage of superb mountain scenery in all directions.

My first winter climb was in February, many years ago. Three friends, expert mountaineers and members of the Cairngorm and Scottish Mountaineering Clubs, kindly took me as passenger up the Black Spout.

It was in the days before motor cars, and an expedition to Lochnagar always meant a week-end in Ballater or Braemar, with two nights in a hotel. We arrived in Ballater in wet and stormy weather on a Saturday evening. After dinner we asked the hotel-keeper if we could have a "machine" next morning at 7.30 to drive us to Allt-nagiubhsaich. He thought we were mad, and said so, rather forcibly, but ultimately promised a trap for 8 a.m. Next morning, equipped with full climbing kit, we climbed into our open "machine" and drove off in pouring rain, which very quickly froze on our coats and remained so all day.

The tramp along the path to the Fox's Well is always interesting and is soon done. One and a quarter hours is about the usual time taken. We were out, of course, for a snow climb, so we left the path at the foot of the Ladder and crossed the Col, and dropped down into the Corrie. The view from the Col was superb, all the gullies filled with snow, and the frozen loch below. We clambered round the head of the loch and up the snow-covered steep scree slope to the foot of the crags and the beginning of the Black Spout. Here we rested for a little in a diminutive snow dell and had some food. Then we put on the rope (my very first experience of it), my place being third on the line. We moved off up the steep snow slope, the leader kicking steps with his heavy iron-shod boots, and the rest following up as if mounting a stair. Very soon, however, the snow became too hard for kicking, and the ice-axe had to be brought into use, the leader doing all the hard work of cutting the steps, while the others waited, firmly anchored, till it was their turn to move, one at a time.

First impressions are always lasting, and I shall never forget the curious sensation of mingled exhilaration and mild excitement as I stood motionless with my two companions in our steps, while there was no sound of any kind except the chip, chip of the leader's axe, and the steady,



*J. Keiller Greig*

THE TOP OF THE BLACK SPOUT GULLY, LOOKING EAST.  
Black Spout Pinnacle in middle distance tipped with sunlight.



*J. Keiller Greig*

NEAR THE TOP OF THE LADDER.  
Looking West into the Eastern Corrie.

gentle hiss of the dislodged ice particles, as they shot downwards past us. Once my companion behind me suddenly sneezed loudly, and nearly startled me out of my steps! Close to the top of the gully the angle steepens considerably, and the snow that day became very hard as we reached the steep part. Fortunately, there was no snow-cornice at the top of the Spout, so that there was little delay in finishing the climb. We unroped at the top of the gully and walked over to the main top. Out of the shelter of the gully, we were exposed to a stiff, cold N.-W. breeze, so we did not linger long at the summit.

After the tense alertness required in a climb such as I have just described, one is tempted to relax and be a little careless in stepping about on the broad, flat summit ridge of a hill. One of my companions trod carelessly on a flat stone. Now, there are two ways of treading on such a stone in such a place. If one step on its upper half it is all right, but if one step on its lower half, which is generally badly supported below, naturally the stone tips over, and down one goes. My companion trod on the lower half of such a stone, tipped swiftly over, and bit his tongue badly. A few minutes later I fell in the self-same way, and cracked a bone in my little finger, nothing serious, but it put my hand out of action and made the descent of the snow-covered slope of the Ladder troublesome. This is the only accident I ever met with on a Scottish mountain.

The drive home in the "machine," wet, cold, and tired as we were, was as unpleasant as it could be. Looking back on these old expeditions, and comparing them with similar ones of the present day, the thing that strikes one most forcibly is the extraordinary improvement in transport to and from the hill. The miseries one endured in the old days while sitting in an open trap, hungry, wet, and half perished with cold, while the unwilling beast between the shafts moved slowly along the road, most of the time at walking pace, would scarcely be tolerated to-day, when one can be carried in comfort in a closed car to and from the foot of the hill in about a quarter of the old time. Not infrequently, in the old days, when driving home from a climb, one had

to get out of the trap and walk, or even run, behind to keep warm and prevent a chill. All this has been changed by the motor car, and it is now quite simple to climb Lochnagar, or even Ben Macdhui, in one day, using Aberdeen as a base instead of Ballater or Braemar. With aeroplanes it would be simpler still, and I can easily imagine, in the near future, a very popular Saturday afternoon excursion by plane to Lochnagar or Ben Macdhui, tea near the summit, and home again to supper in Aberdeen!

The ascent of Lochnagar, or, better still, the traverse of it from east to west, or *vice versa*, in thick weather, is always interesting, but not always easy, especially if there be snow in addition to the mist. Some years ago two young climbers and I planned a trip in early September up the mountain from the Callater side. We were staying in Braemar and were waiting purposely for a thick day to see what we could do by compass, aneroid, and map, by way of practice. The morning we chose was dull, with no wind, and the mist was down to the 1,500 feet level, so that all the hills round Braemar were shrouded and invisible. We motor-cycled to Callater, and found the mist down to the loch. We followed the path round the side of Creag-an-Loch and on to the west side of Cairn Taggart. Leaving the path at the point where it turns southward along Taggart, we set a course eastwards over the hill, down its east side, then up over Little Taggart to the top of the Stui Buttress. The direction decided, it was arranged that I should walk in front and be guided and controlled by the other two members of the party, each of whom carried a compass in his hand. I therefore walked in the direction indicated, with the two guides strung out behind, one 15 yards away and the other 30. Whenever I deviated in the slightest degree from the correct line, one or other of the two guides at once shouted that I was wrong, and I had to be steered right again. It is so very easy to wander off the right line on a rough hill side, much easier than when steering at sea. We moved on steadily, and ultimately arrived at the edge of a precipice, which I presumed was at, or near, the Buttress. Peering over the edge of the steep place,

I looked around and tried to recognize any signs of our objective. I was puzzled for a bit, but remembered that, when steering in mist, one is very apt to hold too far to the left, and so I moved along the ridge to the right for about 50 yards and, sure enough, we came on the well-known rocks at the top of the Buttress. These rocks project well forward from the general line of the cliffs, and, standing on them, surrounded on all sides with dense, swirling mist, we peered downward over them to see if we could find a way down. We had a curious, eerie, "lost-in-the-clouds" sort of feeling, but we promptly put on the rope and climbed cautiously down right to the foot of the rocks, still shrouded in mist. Then we climbed up again, and decided that we would continue on to the top of Lochnagar. The path to Lochnagar lies just a little way back from the Stui, and we quickly found it, but further along, near the last rise on to the summit ridge, it disappears, and careful steering is needed to reach the South top. This we did, and again steering carefully, we eventually reached the main top. We knew that other two parties were to climb Lochnagar that day, so, when we arrived at the top, we listened, shouted, and whistled, and listened again for any signs of them. The mist was denser than ever, there was no wind, and the silence was profound and impressive. We waited for any answering shout, but none came, so we concluded that we were alone on the hill. As a matter of fact, we learned later that neither party had got anywhere near the summit of the mountain. After a comfortable rest at the cairn, we steered our way back to Callater without difficulty, shrouded in mist right to the loch. It is not always easy to steer correctly when leaving the summit, especially in a high wind, with driving snow along with mist. Some years ago in early May a party of eight or nine of us reached the summit in such conditions. It was easy to follow the edge of the crags as far as the top of the Black Spout, but from there to the summit (a very short distance) the compass had to be used. The summit rocks were a mass of solid blue ice, nearly a foot thick in places. Five minutes' stay there was long enough, so, having set a compass course, we turned and, with a shout,

plunged downwards in the teeth of the gale. Great clouds of dry, dusty snow swirled about us, so that we had difficulty in seeing even our compass clearly. In less than five minutes we were completely lost, and I was positive that we were descending the west slope of the hill. Therefore we called a halt and demanded from two compass-bearers that they should give us east. Moving then in this direction, we quickly reached the top of the cliffs and the rest was easy, the descent being uneventful. At least one member of the party, who had never been out in such weather before, was thankful when we got off the hill, and said so to me. I think he was afraid that he would never see Aberdeen again.

The number of people one meets with on the top of Lochnagar who have not the least knowledge of the names of the hills they are looking at is extraordinary. I once met a solitary tourist near the top who did not know even the name of the hill he was on.

One of the most fascinating parts of the game on the summit of a mountain is to try to name all the hill-tops visible from it, but many people seem content to reach their summit and remain blind and indifferent to the view round them. To help such people the Indicator was erected on the summit rocks, so that they could identify and name the peaks for themselves. The story of the erection and unveiling of the Indicator has already been fully told in these pages and does not require to be repeated here. Suffice it to say that the Indicator has proved to be of the very greatest help to visitors to the summit.

No matter how often one has been to the summit of Lochnagar, a trip up the mountain once again is as interesting and charming as ever to the mountain-lover. There is always something fresh to note, some new beauty of hill, loch, or sky to be admired and marvelled at. There are, curiously enough, some people who do not care for hill-climbing. They think the physical exertion expended in climbing a hill is out of all proportion to the benefits gained. Possibly, but every man to his taste.

A friend of mine, not a mountaineer, was once inveigled by an artist friend of his, who had been commissioned to



*J. Keiller Greig*  
LOOKING NORTH-EAST OVER THE EASTERN CORRIE.  
The Meikle Pap in middle distance.



*J. Keiller Greig*  
ON THE RIDGE BETWEEN THE MEIKLE PAP AND THE "LADDER."  
Looking West over the Frozen Loch to the Summit.



paint a picture of the corrie of Lochnagar at close quarters, to accompany him up to the col at the foot of the Ladder. It was a broiling hot day, and my friend had to carry the food and a rather heavy metal oil stove to make tea. He very soon got heated and rather winded. Sweat ran from every pore, and he was afraid to rest or take off his coat, in case he got pneumonia, so he toiled on till they reached the Fox's Well, where he unslung his knapsack. Looking round as he mopped his steaming brow he muttered, half to himself and half to his companion—"And this is what that — fool Levack calls pleasure!"

## HOGMANAY AT BRAEMAR.

What shall we do with Club Cairngorm ?  
We'll drink to the founder thro' whom it was born.

\* \* \*

What shall we do with President P[arker] ?  
At midnight we'll treat him to sweet harmony.

\* \* \*

What shall we do with Irvine of Drum ?  
We'll appoint him the scribe all our doings to sum.

\* \* \*

What shall we do with Butchart, the Brave ?  
When snow's on the hills we must let him rave.

\* \* \*

What shall we do with Birnie Reid ?  
We'll put him on straw for his mid-day feed.

\* \* \*

What shall we do with the two of the Scrimms ?  
We'll drive with them at the risk of our limbs.

\* \* \*

What shall we do with Nesta Bruce ?  
We'll get her the Ghillie from Cluny Hoose.

\* \* \*

What shall we do with Symmers called Roy ?  
We'll send him to climb the Old Man of Hoy.

\* \* \*

What shall we do with Morison John ?  
We'll get him a car that won't go wrong.