

ON SGÒRAN DUBH—BUTTRESS No. 5.

BY G. ROY SYMMERS.

Again I hear

These waters, rolling from their mountain springs
With a soft inland murmur. Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion ; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.

Wordsworth.

WHAT can compare with a quiet summer dawn high up in the heart of our native hills? Such was the question I asked myself, as I lay snugly in my sleeping-bag under the friendly roof of the upper Einich Bothy, giving ear to the harmony which came to me from without. My question did not receive an answer. The delightful transition period from slumber to complete wakefulness was cut short, and the human element in life was vividly impressed. From the stall next to mine (we were in the stable), resonating through the building, making the very rafters appear to vibrate, arose the song of one member of our party. Having been pestered for days with a doggerel chant which commenced "I can sing like a nightingale," I could not help thinking, even allowing discount for the wonderful range exercised, that the poor bird was not receiving quite its full share of justice. Hence, in the interests of justice, and because a small boulder was making its presence felt in the small of my back, I knocked up the party and set about preparing the breakfast. Meals even although indifferently cooked (of course I speak here on behalf of the cook) have a taste which they never have at home. (Calls of assent from my companions.) Please do not misunderstand me. That which is made by oneself, along with the assistance

of one's companions, eaten in the open air with an appetite stimulated by days of strenuous activity, goes down and tastes better than the finest delicacy at home.

Bear with me, gentle reader, No. 5 Buttress still lies at the head of lonely Loch Einich, the mist is slowly unfurling from its seamed and hoary brow—we are a paragraph nearer its conquest.

The business of washing-up completed, our party split, two members setting a course for Braeriach, whilst Miss Bruce and I hurried off to our buttress. As we traversed the west side of the loch the sun came up behind Braeriach, lending to its shadowy corries a sense of mystery. Beneath, and at our feet, the loch lay shimmering in the sun and lapping gently on the stretch of golden strand. Immediately above us, touched with delicate wisps of morning mist, towered the scarred and riven front of Sgòran Dubh. Our attention was taken by a fine gully which apparently split the buttress from scree to summit on the north side, and which commenced with a very fine initial pitch. This magnificent obstacle cannot be missed by anyone passing along the path by the loch-side, and it marks the start of our climb.

The first section, about ten feet in height, was found to be impossible because of the holdless upper surface of the gigantic choke-stone. Miss Bruce came to my rescue at this point. She climbed the right wall on loose holds and made a somewhat unsatisfactory traverse to a position above me. With the aid of the rope, I succeeded in making a long step to the right, which, without its assistance, could not be made under the present laws of gravity, there being no hand-hold to maintain balance while the step is being taken. Above this lower section rose a pile of precariously-perched blocks of granite which seemed on the verge of toppling down on our intruding heads. This upper division of the pitch must be fully twenty-five feet in height and cannot be termed easy. The start on the left over some big boulders is followed by awkward foot work on the left wall till a broad slab is encountered. Several narrow ledges on this slab provide the route upwards and across to

the right wall, where a vertical ascent over a choke-stone is called for. Wedged in a small recess at this point, the writer tried to thread the rope behind the final overhanging jambed-block and continue vertically upwards. All attempts in this direction failed. Looping the rope round a boulder, I made a speculative hand traverse over to the left wall, and was delighted to discover a possible exit on that side. Fortunately, after a somewhat constricted struggle up the space between a choke-stone and the left wall, there was sufficient hand-hold above the edge to admit of the pull-over being effected. Jubilation at my success died prematurely when I found that the other end of the rope was firmly wedged below. I had previously asked Miss Bruce to come off the rope, and to my dismay, when her turn now came, she had nothing to lend her even moral support. I played the rope just as the fisherman plays his line when the hook is caught on the bottom; at first gently and persuasively, then less gently and more persuasively, finally, like most fishers, I lost my temper. I cursed the rope, the rocks, not to mention myself, and ended up by jamming the rope at another point. I sat down and, I am sorry to say it, ordered Miss Bruce to climb up to the rope, when a sweet voice from the depths below answered, "Pull in the rope, I'm on the loop." When eventually she came over the edge, after having cleared the rope, I did the only thing possible under the circumstances, I apologised.

Now I can hear you saying, "This is a long story about the start of the climb." The buttress has a total height of 1,200 feet, and we've only reached an altitude of fifty feet above the screes. Do not look over the pages to see how much further you have to read. Beyond that initial pitch the climbing interest falls off rapidly. The upper part of the gully above the second pitch had to be abandoned. It grew slimy, slippery and slabby; in other words, quite abhorrent and not fit for man or beast. The grassy buttress on the right of the gully was climbed. The going here, although at places excessively steep, was not difficult except at sections where faces of loose, disintegrated granite had to be tackled. One of these faces forced us to make a descent



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THE CAILLEACH.

G. R. Symmers

into a little gully on the right, which led back, rather fiercely at the top, on to the main ridge near the summit of our first gully. Rather above half the height of the buttress we obtained a striking view of Raeburn's Pinnacle, or what is locally known as the Cailleach (old woman). Seton Gordon depicts having seen an eagle resting on this pinnacle. We were not favoured by such a noble picture. The monarch of the crags, although no doubt resenting our intrusion, did not obtrude his presence on us. At the very top, the various ridges forming the buttress converge and the last part of our climb was along quite a narrow ridge of low angle, back to the mass of Sgòr Gaoith behind. The route, taken as a whole, was disappointing after the really first-class start, but the rock scenery and general prospect amply repaid any lack in climbing interest.

We were back at the bothy by 2.30 p.m. to find the others waiting, and after a wash, set off immediately for Aviemore to replenish our supplies and indulge in an off day. As the sun was sinking low in the west, as the shadows were lengthening in Rothiemurchus, we stood by Barrie's grave and paid homage to Him who had called us to the purple hills.