

ONCE MORE—A CLIMB.

BY G. ROY SYMMERS.

IT may be remembered by some of our members that, in writing an article for *The Cairngorm Club Journal* some time ago dealing with the rock-climbs on Lochnagar, the writer stated with regard to the Tough-Brown Ridge that he was certain that a comparatively simple route existed on the upper part of the climb, and at the same time made some criticism of the methods employed by the pioneer party in making the ascent. I should like to take this opportunity of entirely retracting these premature opinions, and at the same time expressing my admiration for the two men who as early as 1896, when rock-climbing as an art was still in its infancy, worked out a route on this face of Lochnagar.

On October 10, 1931, W. Ewen and the writer set out for the North-East Corrie with the conviction that we were to carry out a programme such as never was and never would be again. To start off, just as a kind of introduction to the sterner events to follow, we had scheduled the ascent of the Tough-Brown Ridge in two hours. Little did we realize as we laboured up to "the col," burdened down with two hundred and forty feet of rope, what hazards we were to encounter on the first stage of our ambitious venture. What that venture was does not concern the reader. It is sufficient to state that the Tough-Brown Ridge was a completely satisfactory day's climbing without any further additions.

The first section of the climb, a traverse slanting up into Parallel Gully A above the first unclimbed pitch, was familiar ground to both of us, and in order to gain time, our proposed expedition being a long one, no rope was used.

The indefinite-looking second pitch in Gully A was soon lost and forgotten about in the interest and excitement of breaking, for us, new ground: ground untrodden for thirty-five years, the sacred sanctuary of ptarmigan and golden eagle. Events moved rapidly. We traversed out of Gully



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R. Donald.

THE PARALLEL GULLIES AND TOUGH-BROWN RIDGE.

A-B Parallel Gully A Climb.
 A-C Tough-Brown Ridge.
 D 1930 Route.
 E 1931 Route.

F Long Stride Corner.
 G Difficult V-shaped Chimney.
 H 12 feet Vertical Wall.
 K "Flying Buttress" Pitch.

A immediately above the first pitch, and from this position had to make a way upwards and across Parallel Buttress to the evident grassy platform below the second pitch in Parallel Gully B. Numerous mossy ledges were available for this purpose, but what at first appeared an easy problem turned out to be quite a different proposition. We had paid our fee for admission and were now being introduced to the entrance of the maze. The face was a network of ledges, each ample in itself, but unfortunately for our purpose also more or less independent in itself. As a whole, instead of being a perfect network, many independent areas of mesh were linked together only by single threads. Our only hope of getting across the Buttress was to pick out these single threads and utilise them as a means of traversing the web. Before entering on the climb we had made a study of this section with a view to obtaining a broad idea of the best route to follow. From our inspection it appeared that the best method of attacking the problem was to get up on a level with our objective as quickly as possible after setting foot on the Parallel Buttress. The route we adopted consequently followed the lines we had thought best from below. Considerable difficulty was met with in driving the attack straight up the buttress quite close to Parallel Gully A. A smooth, V-shaped chimney housing a wedge of moss in its recess did not appeal to the writer, who contented himself with belaying the rope and offering Ewen his blessings, while the latter, by dint of much scraping and wriggling, succeeded in getting up. The ascent of this chimney leaves a very small margin of safety, and if it were not for a crack on the left in which a leg can be jammed, I doubt very much if the chimney would "go." Joining Ewen, I carried on to a slight overhang, where it was necessary to remove an insecure block of granite. This was a ticklish business because of our cramped quarters, and the difficulty of estimating where the boulder would fall and how much would fall with it. Retreat was not too welcome a thought, our station being completely devoid of any belay, hence it was decided to let "her" go. Ewen, ostrich-wise, tucked himself into a tiny recess to the right, and I, close up

to the block, flattened myself against a rib on the left. The rope meanwhile was kept taut against the face immediately below the boulder. Slowly I edged the mass from its insecure position into one of instability, and then, as it fell, gave it a mighty thrust to clear my feet. The operation "came off" beautifully, and for two seconds we had the awe-inspiring sight of seeing this huge fragment of mountain leaping down the cliff-side in a welter of moss and flying splinters, thundering its impetuous path in ever increasing bounds to the screes far below. It vanished from sight over the final edge, there came a momentary lull in which we listened to the echoes rolling round the corrie, then a roar from below, and one more particle had gone to the forming of a future mountain. We looked at each other and our thoughts were the same. The work had been well executed, and the departed block had left a nice platform which Ewen quickly gained from my shoulder, after which the climbing was quite straight-forward. Joining Ewen at a convenient belay, I carried on upwards for a short distance and then traversed sixty feet to the right along a broad ledge, at the far end of which was another belay. Ewen then followed me up, and at my belay made a short descent on to a further ledge which conducted us right to the grassy platform in Gully B which we desired to reach.

I might suggest at this point that a more simple route may exist below the one we followed. At all events there are very few climbs on Lochnagar which have a pitch as difficult, technically, as the chimney just mentioned, and if any way of avoiding it can be found, the climb will not suffer. Its elimination would still leave ample scope for the class of climber who delights in having nothing but a few blaeberry roots between himself and destruction.

The situation in which we found ourselves was an extremely interesting one. Below lay the unclimbed crack which takes up the position of first pitch in Parallel Gully B, a fearsome obstacle some two hundred and fifty feet in height, cleft between smooth, water-worn slabs set at a dizzy angle. The platform itself was very commodious in extent and almost horizontal. Above rose a series of

terraced slabs, culminating in a chimney with a huge choke-stone jammed at its summit. As we stood absorbing all the details of our station, we speculated on the possibility of climbing this second pitch. We concluded that the foot of the chimney could be gained by climbing the slabs on the left, and that by back-and-leg methods the choke-stone in all probability could be reached. Further it is difficult to say ; if a through-route exists, the finish may be comparatively simple ; in the absence of such, the exit would appear extremely severe, probably impossible.

We entered the next stage of our climb little knowing what the mountain held in store for us. Speaking quite personally, I was certain that we were just going to walk up to the ridge forming the left wall of Raeburn's Gully with little or no difficulty. At the same time, I must admit I had in the back of my mind some perverted idea that the old "Johnnies" who climbed rocks in the "nineties" always exaggerated the difficulties they encountered in their climbs, and by this means surrounded themselves with a kind of false halo. Such an attitude has completely vanished. I humble myself before their memory.

On the opposite side of Gully B from the point at which we entered rose a narrow chimney, which gave comparatively simple access to the lowest and most distinct terrace, stretching on a slightly upward gradient across the awful slabs which continue for almost half the height of the face. We traversed this airy balcony to its furthest extremity without finding any satisfactory route directly upwards. It was finally decided to make an attempt on a vertical face about twelve feet high, situated some forty feet from the point at which the terrace terminates on holdless slabs, and just to the left of a smooth chimney or crack. Ewen mounted on my shoulders, and from this eminence could reach a good hand-hold which, together with careful manipulation of his feet on my part, enabled him to effect a lodgment on the sloping moss-covered ledge above. The conquest of this face without combined tactics is in the writer's opinion impossible because of the scarcity and inadequacy of the holds. At this point the rope was quickly hitched over a

belay some distance to the right, and almost on the same level as Ewen after leaving my shoulders. This safeguard was absolutely essential; the climb could not be justified otherwise, bearing in mind the treacherous moss with which we had to contend, and our extremely exposed position on the brink of a cliff which descends in one leap to the scree three hundred feet below. Ewen then made a way upwards to the right and as soon as possible back to the left, where a huge, detached flake presented an adequate belay. Then my turn came. The problem was rather a nasty one, particularly in the absence of any footstool from which to "take off." My innate objection to using the rope when coming up second asserted itself and was responsible for quite a waste of time. I perambulated from right to left along the terrace in ardent search for some route whereby the ascent might be made without assistance from above, in vain. All the while I carried on a conversation with Ewen, fifty feet above, a conversation punctuated very frequently with comments on the rock which I am sorry to say I should not care to see in print, and which, alas, I subsequently learned, were absolutely lost on Ewen, who was effectively screened and almost out of hearing. Eventually, finding no alternative, I decided to have a "go," using the rope for hand-hold. Now an Alpine rope is rather thin, and in the course of a couple of hours' "shinning" over moss it is liable to become a trifle damp. Climbing four or five feet on the rope and then suddenly finding myself back on the ledge from which I had started became rather a boring practice, albeit a painful one after the fourth attempt. Being thoroughly tired of falling off I had a rest and smoked a cigarette, while Ewen, from his perch above, was attempting to gain some inkling of what was going on beneath. My vocabulary had run low, so I didn't worry him until my smoke was over. The next job was to get a fixed rope. After several failures this was established and another form of hoisting operation put into practice. With the use of the dry fixed rope as hand-hold, and a pull from above on the rope round my waist, quite startling results ensued. Upward progress was almost lift-like until I was just reaching

out for the capacious hand-hold which Ewen had discovered from my shoulders. Then quite suddenly the rope, which was passing to one side of a rounded knob of rock immediately above me, decided a rather unexpected and quite uncalled-for preference in favour of the other side, thus causing me to perform a highly spectacular aerial glide, terminating forcibly in the chimney already mentioned. From this position I struggled on to the ledge, when it became an easy matter to traverse up to the right. While Ewen "held the fort" at the belay, I made a long traverse out to the right and inspected the possibilities of further progress in that direction. I was deeply impressed by the magnitude of the cliff at this point, but the possibility of finding a route upwards was very vague and an attempt completely unjustifiable in the absence of any form of belay. Returning as quickly as possible, I climbed up to the belay and carried my investigation to a point as far on the other side, that is to say, to the left of Ewen's station at the belay. Here it was evidently possible to gain a higher terrace, which was done without waste of time, as we were both beginning to feel a little "peckish." Nestling down on our diminutive platform we spent a very pleasant quarter of an hour, during which we set aside all thought of what was to come next, although the character of the climb we had embarked on was reflected by the fact that we ate only half of the food we had with us.

Our meal over, Ewen was tucked securely into a deep fissure, almost amounting to a narrow cave, opening on to our luncheon-site, while I half climbed, half projected myself on to the next ledge, directly above his retreat. From this position another traverse to the right was carried out to a point where a slightly overhanging face of rock some ten feet in height intervened between us and what is known in architecture as a "flying buttress." A slight descent and a further short traverse was possible, but again the way was barred by the presence of a second vertical wall. Returning to the first barrier, the writer brought up Ewen, and combined tactics were resorted to for the third time during the climb. On gaining the platform forming the foundation to the "flying buttress," we climbed the exceedingly steep wall on

the left directly upwards to yet another terrace. The holds on this section are extremely good, so that a feeling of airiness was to some extent minimized. A traverse was then made back to the left till a point was reached where it was possible to look directly into Parallel Gully B above the second pitch. The climb then continued upwards, tending slightly to the right and then back to the left over fairly difficult rock till a corner was reached from which it appeared possible to start up a steep terrace slanting a long way up to the right.

From this position we scrutinized the third pitch in Gully B, and were not long in coming to the conclusion that it was rather a desperate-looking affair. At the point where it occurs the gully ceases to exist, and an almost vertical precipice approaching one hundred feet in height takes its place. Both above and below this obstacle the gully is perfectly definite in character, but at the pitch smooth rock-face appears to be the predominant feature. There may, however, be some crack or hidden chimney in this face which, from our out-of-face position, was not visible. At all events the pitch looks an imposing one, to say the least of it.

Reverting to our climb: the next stage looked very treacherous, being mainly composed of moss and grass adhering in a very half-hearted manner to slabs set at a steep angle. The consequence of a slip on this section, although, perhaps, not so disastrous as in some of the earlier situations, would have been rather a rapid and unpleasant glissade for both of us into the depths of Parallel Gully B, about one hundred feet below. The writer skipped across the moss as quickly as possible, and before it knew what was happening and had time to vent its disapproval, he was sitting on the top of a block of solid rock with all the rope out, yelling for Ewen to come on. No time was wasted and Ewen went straight on, leaving me perched on my rock while he finished the terrace on to the ridge overlooking Raeburn's Gully.

On my joining him we stopped for a few minutes and looked down into the corrie, down on the lonely loch from which a turbulent wind was lashing foam and down on the shattered crags which we both admire, love, and respect.

From Raeburn's Gully the wind brought us the sound of dashing water, which immediately conjured up visions of numbed hands searching for abstruse holds in the assault on some dire pitch. The crash of a boulder over in the direction of the West Gully sent my thoughts flying to a day in May spent at the Dubh Loch, while I am certain Raeburn's Gully, at a more recent date, figured in Ewen's mind. As we stood, ever in the distance rose a roaring and moaning, the melancholy sound with which every climber in the rutting season is familiar. That sound brought pleasant memories to the writer of wonderful, lonely days spent in Glencoe only a week before.

Turning to the completion of our task, we made short work of the final portion of the ridge, and before many minutes had elapsed, shook hands at the top of the cliff in a bracing hurricane of wind blowing over the plateau from the north-west.

In what goes before, the writer may be criticized for having gone into the most elaborate detail in describing the route followed and in stressing the dangers and difficulties of the climb. Neither Ewen nor I have any desire to repeat the climb, and we are both of the opinion that the Tough-Brown Ridge was not meant to be climbed, and we certainly cannot put the route forward as a proposal to anyone desirous of an enjoyable day's climbing on Lochnagar. Whether we traced the route followed by Tough and Brown in the first ascent is hard to tell, but I am certain that if there are two routes, there are two only.

Now to the plains once more !