

BEN NEVIS AT EASTER.

BY MALCOLM SMITH.

THE experienced mountaineer who reads this may possibly think that the climb which I am attempting to describe was nothing to make a song about. I, alas, am not experienced. My modest tale of peaks, all bagged by the easy routes, would soon be told. Rocks and gullies I had left to the young and nimble, and to the rope and ice-axe I was a complete stranger. Also the Fort William Meet was my first. I did want to climb Ben Nevis, and hoped that amid the glamour of my Clubmates' triumphs among the crags and corries my own modest ascent would pass unnoticed.

The walk to the S.M.C. Hut on Friday morning was nothing out of the ordinary, except that my share of the rations for nine hungry folk for twenty-four hours weighed considerably more than the usual hill lunch, and made what should have been a pleasant tramp a somewhat laborious trudge. The start had been propitious, however, for an unexpected motor bus and a penny fare had saved four of us a good mile of hard, high road. At the distillery we took to the heather and, with the Allt a' Mhuillin Burn for guide, commenced the tramp to the Hut. For the month of March the weather was distinctly warm, and as numerous burns had to be crossed, progress was somewhat slow. For the first two or three miles the scenery was rather plain, but slowly the bold headland of Carn Dearg came into view and was passed on our right hand, to be succeeded by the stupendous array of towering precipices, the North-East side of mighty Ben Nevis itself. The rough and rocky track had been getting gradually steeper, and the soft air of the coast had changed to a cold wind blowing right in our faces as the valley narrowed between the steep slope of Carn Mor Dearg on the left and the terrific and awe-inspiring face of Ben Nevis on the right.

For a long time we had been looking and hoping for the first glimpse of the Hut and our journey's end, but it proved most elusive until almost before we realised it an extra steep

pull brought us to a level plateau in the middle of the valley, and there it was. The other members of the party had reached it before us so the door stood hospitably open. At once our loads were dumped off and we examined the marvels of the interior of our temporary abode. It is really a misnomer to call it a Hut. An up-to-date dwelling, replete with all modern conveniences from the mountaineer's point of view inadequately describes it, but as this is a record of a climb and not a description of housing property, it is sufficient to say that it contains everything that the knowledge, experience and ingenuity of its designers could possibly foresee, and nothing whatever which could possibly make for the comfort and well-being of its inmates is lacking. We were continually making new discoveries; in fact it was not until we were on the point of leaving next morning that we realised that our very cosy bunks might have been rendered even warmer by the use of hot bottles. But, as the most useful member of the party remarked, she had enough to do boiling water for tea, supper, and breakfast.

Standing in the centre of the valley at an altitude of about 2,500 feet and facing the rugged pile of crag and gully of the Tower Ridge and the whole tremendous array of the precipices of the Northern face, there must be few, if any, dwelling places of man set in such scenes of savage grandeur. To my inexperienced eye those cliffs seemed impregnable to human effort, and I realised that if there was an easy route to the summit, it did not lie on this side of the mountain.

Lunch over, no time was lost in attacking the Ben. There was some talk of No. 3 Gully, and a strong party, consisting of McCoss, Miss Bruce, Symmers, and Orkney, set off complete with rope and ice-axes. Another party, not so strong, of whom I was one, walked up the valley without any definite objective, while Doctor and Mrs. Hendry elected to remain at the Hut and housekeep. Of the second party's doings there is little to record. We reached the foot of the cliffs at Corrie Leis hoping, perhaps, to find some hitherto undiscovered and easy means of ascent to the summit, but Ben Nevis was experiencing the mildest

winter ever recorded, and the snow on the almost vertical slopes of the corrie was too soft and thin. One sank through it to the loose and treacherous scree, causing small landslides. The side of the Carn Mor Dearg Arête, like an unscalable wall, towered above us, so we decided to call it a day and retraced our way down the corrie to the Hut. Here a scene of domestic bliss awaited us. The Hut had been spring-cleaned. A bright fire crackled cheerfully in the workmanlike range, where a steaming kettle announced that tea was ready. Off came our heavy boots and, with dry stockings and the goloshes which the S.M.C. have thoughtfully provided as part of the Hut's equipment, we soon felt ready for anything which the morrow might have in store for us.

Later on McCoss' party returned, having had a successful rock and snow climb up No. 3 Gully to the summit. Their posterior aspects denoted glissading on the homeward journey, and the Hut fairly filled with steam as they stood with backs to the fire drying their nether garments.

Supper was the next item, and what would we have done here without Mrs. Hendry? The sausages, bacon, tomatoes, and brown bread which had weighed down our rucksacks on the journey from Fort William, now fried to perfection, disappeared like snow off a dyke before the onslaught of nine hungry mortals. There were plenty of willing helpers to wash, dry, and stow away the crockery and cutlery, so with the Hut tidied up we settled down to a happy evening of bridge, talk, and tobacco. Gradually the bunks became occupied with blanket-wrapped forms. The last bed-goer turned out the lamps, and soon nothing was heard but the sounds of slumber, blending with the howling of the wind round the Hut.

Next morning (Saturday) our waking thoughts were of the weather. The Doctor, who was first up, replenished the fire, which was still alight. He then went out for water but returned for an ice-axe, and the sound of chopping from the well told of a frosty morning. Our morning toilets were necessarily somewhat sketchy, and once more our invaluable cook produced another batch of sausages, bacon,

and tomatoes which, with the keen mountain air as an appetiser, we disposed of with the same celerity as supper. Breakfast over and the dishes washed and stowed away, we set to work to clean up so as to leave the Hut in as spic and span a condition as we found it. While thus engaged we were visited by two young men, members of the Rucksack Club, who had spent the night in sleeping-bags out in the open. I might also mention that, at the summit the previous day, McCoss' party had met another hardy pair with an Arctic expedition tent, which they intended to pitch on the snow-covered top of the Observatory and there pass the night.

During breakfast it was decided that a party, consisting of McCoss, Dr. and Mrs. Hendry, S. C. H. Smith, Ritson, Orkney, and M. Smith, should climb Carn Mor Dearg, from there traverse the Arête and make the ascent of Ben Nevis by the Eastern summit ridge. Kits were soon packed up and at ten o'clock the key was turned in the door. Miss Bruce and Symmers set off with the intention of climbing the Tower Ridge, while the other party departed in the opposite direction and on an easterly course crossed the Allt a' Mhuillin for the steep slope of Carn Mor Dearg. The weather was all that could be desired, crisp and frosty, with bright sunshine. The lower slopes had a fair covering of mossy turf, which made the going easy to begin with. This gave way to a long, steep stretch of boulders, rock, and scree, where care had to be taken to avoid dislodging loose stones. The higher up we got the steeper appeared to be the slope, and as you can't sail a boat to windward except by tacking, so we pushed ahead by diagonal traverses, and whether going on all fours is orthodox climbing I don't know, but I certainly found this method frequently necessary. This part of the climb was the most fatiguing, but as height was gained, the superb views across the valley of the Ben Nevis precipices became more and more impressive and gave excuse for frequent halts. The snow-line was reached at about 3,000 feet, and owing to the frost a fairly hard crust had formed, ensuring good footholds. It was just as well I thought, for now the slope had vanished and



Easter, 1932.

S. C. H. Smith.

NORTH-EAST BUTTRESS, BEN NEVIS.

we seemed to be on a vast convex roll of snow, from which neither the valley nor the top were visible. I looked up at the boot soles of the man above me and down on the cap of the one below. The footsteps of the leaders, however, provided an excellent staircase, and using these and my ice-axe, and endeavouring to look as unconcerned as my neighbours, I continued my laborious progress until a mighty cold wind and a flat, narrow ridge appeared before my eyes and the top of Carn Mor Dearg (4,012 feet), and the first lap, was attained.

It must be from here that the finest and most comprehensive view of Ben Nevis is visible. In the clear air across the valley every feature of the rugged mass of buttress and gully showed up in perfect clarity. On one of the snow slopes below the snow-corniced ridge of the summit a pair of climbers, reduced by distance to the merest specks, could be seen going slowly upward. The intense cold did not permit of a prolonged inspection, so after our breather, we started off along the ridge to where it narrowed into the Arête. Before doing so, however, as all notable achievements nowadays are recorded on the films, we decided thus to immortalise ourselves, and our various efforts to appear like "expert climbers negotiating a difficult ridge" were duly "shot."

A word here about the Arête, which runs in a South-Easterly direction and forms the connection, about a mile long, between Carn Mor Dearg and Ben Nevis. Studying it beforehand on the map and in my ignorance of the sharp ridges of the West Highland tops, I had imagined a fairly wide and flat surface affording an easy mountain walk. Imagine my dismay then when actually seeing it. Width and flatness it had none nor was there any semblance of a path. It looked exactly like a gigantic dry-stone dyke, rather broken about the top. Here soaring up to a pinnacle, there dropping down to a saddle, the sides always terribly steep, sometimes positively sheer, and powdered snow blew off it in the wind gusts. Its appearance did not seem to worry the others, so I took my place near the tail of the party and trusted to luck.

It was just like walking along the top of a wall, and soon I found that I had made two mistakes in my equipment. A loose raincoat which flaps about the legs and even tries to blow up over the head is no use for ridge-walking in a high wind, while the foot of the rucksack should be secured round the waist to prevent it blowing over also. When the wind, combined with slippery rocks, prevented an upright posture, I found it necessary to descend a few feet and progress along the weather side, using the topmost rocks for a hand rail. The scenery was wonderful. I had brief impressions of dizzy crags and yawning chasms, with snow swirling about their dark depths, while during brief halts ever-changing views of the Allt a' Mhuillin and the massive front of Ben Nevis were revealed. After a scramble over the highest point of all and a steep descent, the ridge swung round to the right above the Corrie Leis, and when this was passed it widened somewhat. The last rocks were left behind and right before me was the steep Eastern summit-ridge of the Ben, covered with good, hard snow and with no lack of foot-holes left by those in front. The strong wind which had been such a nuisance on the Arête was now right behind and greatly assisted me on the last lap. Here I met a party of half-a-dozen young Englishmen running swiftly down. They informed me that they were bound for the Arête and were hurrying up to get warm. I was warm enough, and felt pleased that I had not met them on the Arête which, doubtless, they would also pass at a run, in contrast to my undignified scramble. Ritson now overtook me and together we continued. The slope gradually eased and merged to a broad, wind-swept plateau of glistening untrodden snow sparkling in the bright sunshine. From the middle of it arose two irregular snow-covered shapes. We had reached our goal.

We found the rest of our party getting what shelter they could at the old Observatory, which had the appearance of being built entirely of snow and ice. Here we off-loaded rucksacks and ate our sandwiches. The distant hills were hidden in haze, so that our view was rather limited. All around was a wilderness of mountains, all of a monotonous

brown in colour save where the higher slopes merged into peaks of glistening white.

I personally felt a little disappointed, as I thought that the view from the highest summit loses something by the mere fact that one is looking down on everything. On the top, however, in spite of the mild winter, the conditions seemed positively Arctic. I do not know what the temperature was, but it must have been well below freezing point. After the heat of climbing we soon felt rather chilly so got a move on. Our descent was to be by the Observatory path, but we made a detour to the right and, approaching as closely as we could to the edge of the precipices, looked down on the buttresses and gullies we had gazed up at from the Hut, while across the valley lay Carn Mor Dearg.

After the thrills of the ascent the journey homewards was rather an anti-climax. We had some mild glissading while the snow lasted, but very quickly we were off the snow and on the scree, and then the path with its seemingly countless traverses. At Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe I saw two figures apparently about to sail a model yacht on this most desolate sheet of water, but a nearer view showed them to be the two aforementioned adventurers with the Arctic tent. They were evidently choosing a more temperate climate to sleep in, though to my idea their proximity to the water suggested damp, but perhaps they were undergoing some hardening process.

Climbing the mountain from this side must be a dull business, but the monotony is relieved from time to time by wonderful views into Glen Nevis. Cutting corners wherever possible we eventually reached the lower levels. Sheep appeared, then Achintee Farm and the hard road. We "put on a step" but it didn't last long, and so we returned to civilization. A football match, houses, and Fort William. Some small boys greeted us with "Ye've been hiking the Ben," and when we had passed them in dignified silence, "They've got these things on their backs." Last of all the Alexandra Hotel where, with the inner man refreshed by pints of tea and the outer by the most luxuriously hot baths, our adventure came to a most satisfactory termination.