

## THE CENTRAL BUTTRESS, LOCHNAGAR.

BY W. A. EWEN.

'Tis with our judgments as our watches,—none  
Go just alike, yet each believes his own.

THE morning of the 1st of May dawned fair enough, but by the time I called on Malcolm and Dason the sky had become overcast. I was pleasantly surprised to find that both had breakfasted; their attempt to convey the impression that the meal was a thing of the remote past was defeated by Malcolm's failure to masticate the last morsel as surreptitiously as he intended. There followed anxious glances at the clouds and much consulting of aneroids, pocket and pendant; with the gloomy prognostics of the local weather-worthies outweighing the optimistic observations of the hairdresser, we added raincoats to our packs and set out for Lochnagar.

At 10.25 a.m. we arrived at Altnaguibsaich, where a cheerful keeper was optimistic enough about the weather—"Shooers, jist shooers." Expecting reasonably fine weather between these, we dumped the raincoats. The aneroids were consulted and a weighty discussion followed. The owners were agreed that the O.S. map was probably right in recording 1,310 feet as the height of the loch. The considerable discrepancy in the aneroid readings was explained airily away. The glass was falling; this apparently did not affect the two instruments to quite the same extent.

On the way to the Well we passed two parties, the second of which intrigued us immensely. They were "travelling light," but were to attempt the Black Spout. A length of thin cord, meantime supporting a camera—the limit of its usefulness—was the main item of their equipment. But I trembled for the abuses to which it might later be put! I looked at the intrepid trio, and from them my glance wandered to Dason, laden with 80 feet of Alpine rope, ice-axe, "spare" clothing, camera (not to mention an aneroid!),

and then to Malcolm, only less lightly burdened, and I wondered if we were fools—or not.

A large party was going up via the Ladder and the tracks of a smaller party led over the col. Later we located them under Raeburn's Gully, mere specks on the snow. Again we trembled for the party following us; deep grooves lined the gullies; avalanche snow lay piled on the slopes, and many stones had fallen. This was no time for gully climbs so we devoted some time to examining the cliff for a safe route. The Central Buttress appealed to us all and we made for it.

On the lower outcrop of rock we dispensed with the use of the rope. Before commencing the buttress proper we stopped for our first lunch, at a point where we could see the activities of the climbers in Raeburn's Gully (at whose identity we could guess. Several prominent members of the Club seem to have taken the Gully on lease for the winter season). As we watched, we heard the sound of falling stones; the Raeburn's party stopped and we could imagine their anxious glance upwards. But the fall was well to their left, so they continued. Below us, the party with the "clothes-rope" were forging gamely through the knee-deep snow "roped" together. But there was some admiration mingled with our amusement; they were making forward with considerable determination, and were only turned back when the cornices began to peel off in quick succession and the impossible nature of their task became obvious.

Malcolm announced that an avalanche had come down the Red Spout; we had been too absorbed in the actions of the Raeburn's party to notice it. The next one made itself heard. Just at first, I thought it was above us and felt a desire to "duck." The roar seemed to die away, and we saw a beautiful cascade of snow pouring over the first (overhanging) pitch in Parallel Gullies "A."

Consulting aneroids, Malcolm and Dason announced the height. I expect they were both wrong. We roped up and started the buttress. Almost at once we saw the Raeburn's party come racing down. "Avalanche," we thought—and then we heard it. Our route on the arête was a

perfectly safe one, but to reach it we had perforce to climb over long stretches of iced vegetation, on which neither boot nor axe made much impression.

The rock arête proved quite interesting, particularly the small pinnacles on its crest, and led nearly to the top. The cornice above looked quite small. Anticipating no difficulty, we lingered on the ridge, watched the "Raeburn's party" (now attempting the Black Spout), photographed, lunched, and wasted time generally.

The climbers were just out of sight when an avalanche came down the Spout. Apparently it did no damage to the party, but it turned our talk to climbing accidents and from that to amusing coroners. When we re-started, Dason had reached a Macabre stage, inquests, I think. With a glance at the steep gully on our right, Malcolm requested him to stop—only less politely!

The obvious route was on the rock, but Malcolm and Dason preferred to flounder among the soft snow, which Malcolm called "perfectly good." I found the surface soft and ready to peel off, and if more snow than was strictly necessary was sent down on him, Malcolm can have had no objection!

When we reached the "summit" the observers got out their aneroids and, after a lengthy debate, announced that we had climbed 820 feet. A current piece of American slang fits the case. With much less calculation and much greater accuracy I was able to announce that we had spent  $5\frac{1}{2}$  hours on the Central Buttress. We reached the Indicator, in mist, mainly, I think, to give Dason the opportunity to turn out the food. Malcolm discovered that one party had got up the Spout branch. He then consulted his barometer and, without announcing the expected 8,000 feet, gave it as his considered opinion that the glass was going down! He received the obvious comment, "Cheer-i-oh."

We made our way down in thickening mist and had difficulty in locating the Well. Malcolm opined "Left" and Dason "Right." To be impartial, I kept a middle course. Then Malcolm had a brain-wave; the correct thing to do was to consult the aneroid! He gravely

announced that we were 200 feet above it. Twenty feet lower down we found it.

At the "corner" we found a pile of coats; the "clothes-ropes" party had gone astray. Then we picked up the Raeburn's party and hailed their camp through the mist. The present tenants of Raeburn's Gully were very much at home. After some conversation with Gordon, and a long distance chat with a voice in the mist, which invited us to soup, extolled Raeburn, and requested a taxi, we carried on.

It had been a glorious outing; at Altnaguibsaich Malcolm and Dason consulted their aneroids—and agreed that they were working well.

The writer paid several visits to the hill during this "avalanche period." As early as April 16 the cornice in the Black Spout had fallen forward, leaving a miniature "crevasse" behind. This was concealed by a covering of soft snow, distinguishable from the cornice snow by its colour. The leader was late, however, in observing this. On May 1 we counted eight large falls during our stay in the corrie. On May 14 we saw, from the summit of the Pinnacle, a large cornice break away in the Spout branch. Next day we returned (such was the fascination of these avalanches) and from the Black Spout Buttress saw a wonderful cascade come down the rock on the other side of the Spout. The crack of the falling cornice, the hiss and ensuing echo from the cliffs are hard to describe. They present a fine spectacle, but it should be remembered that stones often accompany the fall and the path that they may follow cannot be calculated.