

SHADOW BUTTRESS "A"—LOCHNAGAR.

By G. ROY SYMMERS.

THE evening of the 17th of September, 1932, was passed by four members of the Club at the Spittal of Glen Muick. Seated in solemn state we whiled away the hours of darkness by playing whist. A rug-covered soap-box, situated in the centre of the apartment adjoining the byre, served as a card-table. In the immediate vicinity were scattered, nay, stacked, an assortment of suitcases and cabin trunks, some bearing steamship company's labels, gave our humble chamber the semblance of a custom's house, whilst others, brass bound at the corners, were more in keeping with our appearance. But for the presence of two "bergens" tucked away in an unobtrusive corner, an intruder might have mistaken us for a gang of bootleggers or part of a crew of buccaneers.

A grim and silent struggle, interrupted only when the writer upset his two-legged stool, was proceeding. The two senior members were defending their position against the determined onslaught of the juniors. At times, the clanking of chains, heavy breathing and other bovine noises issued from the adjacent byre. Ultimately the juniors gave in; they were heavily defeated by their inexperienced use of good hand-holds, coupled with a complete ignorance of the first principles of footwork and combined tactics.

An effusive greeting accompanied by the rattling of chains welcomed the writer as he entered the byre in search of the cold-water tap. After a mug of tea and a light evening meal the two younger members were banished to the warmth of the hay-loft and to their sleeping-bags. Entitled by reason of our grey hairs and the worrying thoughts of a sleepless night, Ewen and I stayed up late and went for a walk by moonlight. As we left the shadowy fir trees a picture of unrivalled beauty unfolded itself before us. Encompassed by steeply escarped foothills, sparkling and shimmering in scintillating mercurial splendour, lay Loch

Muick, curving away in one long sweep to the base of Broad Cairn's shapely cone, over which a ring-encircled moon shone from a blue and brilliantly starry sky. The night was breathless, but even so, the evening air was laden with the sweet fragrance of moorland and bog. As we walked and smoked, now the burbling protest of a burn as it forced its way through the unnatural restriction of a highway culvert, then the startled cry of some suddenly awakened wild creature broke the silence. Here at least, we needed no Jasper to remind us that "life is very sweet, brother." Quietly we turned and retraced our steps. The "staircase" was adopted in preference to the sporting and highly sensational "outside" route to our sleeping quarters. The brass-bound treasure-chests, which had already produced several "rabbits," were not to disappoint us, even at this late hour. From a nail in the wall hung an alarm-clock! We both regarded this curiosity with interest, which rapidly changed to disfavour when we discovered on closer inspection that the infernal machine had been set for 6.30. By mutual consent an adjustment of 330° was made and we turned to our sleeping-bags in a more peaceful frame of mind. Let us now draw the curtain and turn from prelude to adventure.

At 11.30 a.m. on the 18th, four climbers flung themselves down behind one of the huge boulders on the rock-knoll below the Central Buttress, glad to get out of the stinging sleet-laden wind. We had come to the parting of the ways. Middleton was obviously eager to make his debut as a leader. Lees, his companion, showed the characteristics of an excellent second. His deportment bore not a trace of excitement, his mind was evidently supremely and completely occupied in an attempt to forecast the contents of a tin box, the latest yield of the treasure-chests. Ewen appeared to be torn between the anticipation of a new climb and a feeling of responsibility towards the younger pair, who were for the first time leaving his charge. I, contentedly aware of the friendly granite at my back, the sleet-revealed wind whistling past and the jagged skyline far above, felt with renewed force the awe which Lochnagar's corrie has always

inspired in me. Thus we lingered, each eager for action in his own way yet glad to stay a moment longer.

With a brief, "Good luck!" we parted company, having arranged to meet again at the top. Lees and Middleton set off across the screes bound for Raeburn's Gully, while Ewen and I, mounting rapidly, headed for the foot of the Shallow Gully.* To the right of the latter the buttress rears itself in a terrific vertical face which is obviously unscalable. The reason for this unpropitious start is to be found in the presence of a broad ledge† which runs round the buttress some distance up. This grass-covered shelf starts at its lowest point about eighty to one hundred feet above the screes and slants in a spiral fashion up and round the nose of the buttress to the right. Reaching our agreed starting point, we roped up and I led the first pitch. The attack was to be carried out by way of a steep gravel shoot, the entrance to which was guarded by a vertical wall of granite about eight feet in height extending a considerable distance either way. A route was discovered up the middle of the wall and then the shoot was tackled. This proved to be very disagreeable and I was not long in coming to the conclusion that the shattered rock-wall on the right was healthier. A belay was found about fifty feet up, and the second man brought on. Ewen avoided the introductory wall by a movement to the right and was not long in coming to the same conclusions as myself regarding the quality of the rock. Having carefully stopped short of a nasty-looking section in the shoot above, I had the doubtful pleasure of watching Ewen disporting himself in the foulness of the gutter over my head. Exercising extreme caution, he succeeded in mounting a further fifteen feet before deciding that he had had enough. The return proved even more troublesome than the ascent, and I was quite relieved when

* *C.C.J.*, Vol. 12, pp. 10 and 188.

† This terrace can be seen to advantage on Mr. Dugan's panorama of Lochnagar in the *S.M.C. Cairngorm Guide*, opposite p. 80. As seen, picked out in snow, on that photograph, it takes the form of a reversed "S" lying about quarter of an inch to the left of the foot of the Douglas-Gibson Gully.

he again reached a level at which I might have been of some assistance in the event of a slip. The next move was to climb on to the insecure-looking masonry above my belay. This was fairly simple, and the following conversation then ensued: "What's it like above?" "Pretty hopeless!" "Any hope to the right?" "Not much, frightful looking chimney!" "Can I come up to have a look?" "I'm not sure that this platform will bear the weight of two!" This was news to me, particularly as I was situated directly in the line of possible avalanche. That settled it, and I shouted up to the effect that I was coming to have a look. The rock *did* appear rather shattered and insecure, but nevertheless bore up nobly, so that we were soon holding a council-of-war on its summit. A glimpse over the edge to the right revealed a steep chimney dropping some eighty feet to the screes. Our situation, however, was not quite so hopeless as it at first appeared to be. Crossing the 80° slabs in the chimney, about eight feet below our platform, ran a very narrow ledge. At the further end of this an open crack gave access in about fifteen feet to the start of the spiral terrace. The descent and crossing was mildly sensational but perfectly safe with Ewen belaying the rope from the platform. Once in the crack, everything was simple. The first half consisted of back-and-knee work with a finish on first-class rock out still further to the right. The descent of the second man can be safeguarded from directly above, and the whole problem is very interesting, not too difficult, and, treated the proper way, absolutely safe.

Our attainment to the terrace had been rather more difficult than we had anticipated, with the natural result that we started to think about what the ensuing section at the far end of the balcony would be like. Several casual inspections from below had led us to suspect that the hundred feet of rock above the upper end of the terrace would decide the outcome of our venture. Hence, hoping for the best, we cantered up and round the steep, overgrown ledge as far as it would lead us. At this point, we obtained a view of the routes open to us for the negotiation of the next pitch. These appeared to be two in number. To the right, a ridge



March 18, 1933.

W. A. Ewen.

LOCHNAGAR.

Arrows indicate the Terrace Start of Shadow Buttress A, mentioned
by G. R. Symmers.

(A) Summit of Shadow Buttress A.

went up at an increasing angle, at the same time narrowing perceptibly to a vertical or slightly overhanging block perched rather precariously on the brink of the first or left-hand gully of the Giant's Head Chimney* series. Some distance to the left of the ridge, forming the obvious alternative, lay (vertically) an uninviting shallow green chimney. Leaving this for further consideration, if necessary, we advanced up the lower portion of our ridge and gained a small platform (with belay) immediately below the overhanging block. A very careful inspection showed that the mass appeared to be maintained in position by one small boulder wedged beneath it. A conference then took place, which resulted in Ewen making an abortive attempt to scale an impossible chimney a few feet to the left, rather than sit below the overhang while I tried to scramble over it. In the end I had my way and, using the good hand-holds afforded, had the pleasure of standing on the top of the block and remarking, perhaps unkindly, "It feels a bit shaky, old chap, so hang on to that belay in case . . .!" An upward movement to the left finished the difficulty and we were soon climbing together over easy ground.

On reaching the main rib of the buttress (we had been climbing on the right face since leaving the spiral balcony), a fine view was obtained down and across the Shallow Gully. The Gully was seen to have a wide and easy exit, across which it would have been quite easy for us to traverse on to the Central Buttress at about the level of the small pinnacle. Our route, however, turned sharply to the right and continued up an interesting ridge. The first of a series of somewhat similar obstacles consisted of a fifteen foot chimney, sufficiently steep to induce respect but overflowing with good holds. The breeze, from which we had so far been sheltered, now began to make its presence felt, and after another two hundred feet we started to look around for a sheltered spot where we could eat and smoke in comfort. Such an ideal was hard to satisfy, and our ultimate selection was neither calm nor comfortable. Little time was spent there as we had to keep moving to induce

* *C.C.J.*, Vol. 12, p. 189.

some warmth. The thought that our two friends were probably being treated to the effects of a hurricane of wind and great volumes of icy-cold water in Raeburn's Gully made us quite genial, it almost brought the perspiration to our brows! Our smoke finished, we surveyed the next portion of the ridge. Just above the point at which we had stopped a large detached monolith of granite stood separate from the parent face. By climbing the crack behind it and then standing on its summit, it was possible with a long reach to the right to gain lodgement on the face behind. Once well launched out on this, the climbing eased off and soon the prominent "gendarme," marking the exit from the Giant's Head Chimney, was reached and so the summit.

Lees and Middleton were nowhere to be seen, so we came to the conclusion that we had reached the plateau first. Walking round to the top of Raeburn's Gully, we were just in time to see a most extraordinary exhibition by Middleton on the last pitch. His style, although quite unorthodox, was extremely effective, and we were soon congratulating the pair on their first break-away from the leading-strings. To our sorrow, we learned that the Gully had been almost dry and completely sheltered from the biting wind.

Our day on Lochnagar was spent; night was creeping up on us from the east while we lingered. No longer was our desire for adventure . . . our heights had been attained and we reconciled our thoughts to the anti-climax, if such it be, of the descent. Thus, ere long, we stood in the glen beneath, and, gazing upwards, admired the heights, as a mountain should be looked upon, from a valley deep and dark and distant.

[From an inspection of the foot of the climb on the 3rd of June, 1933, it appears that there has been a recent fall of rock from the face above, which may have altered the initial pitches up to the spiral terrace. As far as could be seen from the foot of the cliff the main features are the same, but it is possible that the climbing, in the absence of certain holds, may have become more exacting. An examination of the buttress further to the right reveals no easy route to the higher end of the spiral ledge, and the writer very much doubts the practicability of such a venture.—G. R. S.]