

## A NOVICE IN MOSS GHYLL.

By "UNST."

LATE in September, finding myself in Yorkshire and calling to mind that an old climbing companion was also resident in that county, I decided to call on him, with a view to persuading him to accompany me on any mountaineering expedition suitable to both. Arrived at his address, I was surprised and chagrined to find the bird flown. He had actually gone for a walk but was, with the collaboration of a third person, tracked down to a neighbouring house, where the ways and means of a trip to the Lakeland Hills were discussed.

The chief difficulty was transport. Neither S. nor I possessed a car, the main reason being a stubborn refusal to admit that such contraptions were necessary. My friend B., however, who had on this occasion been instrumental in conveying me some 40 miles to S.'s abode, was the owner of a Wolseley of ancient vintage, and, after a series of pretty broad hints, agreed to drive me to Wastdale Head on a given date, on the firm condition that he himself was not to be taken farther above sea-level than the Wolseley itself could proceed. He never climbed. Climbing, he said, did things to his stomach!

So far, so good: but the collection of both S. and myself by B. introduced complications. This is where the Novice appears. The Novice, a very keen and efficient motorist, owns a fast sports model, and had occasionally professed a faint liking for mountains to friend S. The fact that the Novice was very quickly persuaded not only to transport S. to Wastdale Head but also to accompany us on the gully climb (Moss Ghyll \* had by this time been chosen) goes far to explain why S. usually leads the climbing parties he accompanies.

\* Moss Ghyll gully; Scafell; "very difficult."

A description of the journey to Wastdale Head would be out of place, except to say that rain fell heavily the whole way, the Wolseley was a touring model, with additional ventilating shafts never intended by the makers. And the drive was about 70 miles longer than we expected, as we had fondly imagined, after studying a road map on which hills were not marked, that we could take the car from Seatoller to Wastdale Head, overlooking the fact that the massif of Scafell lies directly between these two places. When B. and I eventually arrived at our destination it was wet and windy midnight, S. and the Novice were sound asleep, and we decided, after consuming bread, cheese, and quite a quantity of beer, to follow their example.

Next day was fortunately fine. S., the Novice, and I set out for Moss Ghyll, leaving B. in the company of an overnight acquaintance, who proved to be a very competent authority on the Lake District, its topography, history, folk-lore, and people. The ascent to the foot of the Ghyll was made at a fair pace, and the Novice, if he were new to rock-climbing, was certainly very sound in wind and limb. Before roping up we paused to watch the last mists of morning, driven before the awakening sun, fade in wisps from the wide corrie, and to listen to the loud music of the tumbling streams, rising and falling on the wings of the wind.

We roped up, S. leading and the Novice third man. S. made short work of the initial cave pitch, which I avoided, shepherding the Novice over easy rocks on the left. I did not wish to introduce him to a very moist bit of back and knee work at the very outset of his rock-climbing career, and was also glad of an excuse to keep dry myself! The gully presented no real difficulty until Tennis Court Wall was reached. S. could make nothing of this, nor did combined tactics help to solve the difficulty. Then I tried the wall, discarding my boots—as I am wont to do in moments of stress—but failure was my only reward. Lack of foothold caused S. to lament that we had not brought rubbers, although it is doubtful whether on wet and slimy rock they would have

been of any assistance. If we had studied the literature of the climb more carefully before setting out, Tennis Court Wall might not have presented so formidable an obstacle. The footholds are far apart and difficult of access, necessitating a wide straddle. After a few more abortive attempts by each of us, S. took the alternative route, climbing to the roof of the cave, traversing along the wall, and turning the corner on to Tennis Court Ledge. His climbing at this point was pretty to watch.

To save time I came up the wall direct, using the rope judiciously as an extra handhold. The Novice, after unsuccessfully trying to follow my example, cheerfully decided to be pulled up. He was—*non sine pulvere!* The combined efforts of S. and myself did not prevent him from descending to his starting-point on three occasions, and there was general jubilation when at last, his face, purple with exertion but set in an unquenchable smile, hove in sight. Moderately difficult climbing took us to Collie's Step, and here the fun started. Neither S. nor I appreciated that the correct way to tackle this pitch is for the leader to bring the second man up to the chokestone before he, the leader, crosses the step. Consequently, while S. passed the chokestone I remained in the cave with the Novice, who was gazing thoughtfully at the leader's boots, the only visible part of his anatomy. A few minutes passed and I heard S.'s voice, "Come up now."

I passed the chokestone and scrutinised the step. It consists of a short traverse with the merest cracks for foothold and no handhold worth mentioning. S. was perched in an excellent belay some distance above. The weather had deteriorated; here we were out of the gully and exposed on the face in mist and a howling wind. I had another look at the step. It seemed very thin. I called to S., "I'll take my time over this." His reply was characteristic, "Hurry up. I'm getting — cold." The step, like all steps, loses most of its terrors when tackled with determination and properly nailed boots, but it certainly deserves the adjective "sensational," while the paucity of handhold calls for perfect balance. Soon I was in the belay, and S.

advanced to the amphitheatre, where he could stand erect on the scree.

I had fears for the Novice, and they were by no means groundless. The promising beginner undertaking a course like Moss Ghyll, even in the company of more or less experienced climbers, will be overcome by some of the technical difficulties encountered. He had met trouble at Tennis Court Wall. He would certainly meet it at Collie's Step.

"Come up," I shouted through the whirling mist.

"I can't," he replied frankly.

"Well, try!"

I was quite determined on my course of action. As soon as the Novice appeared round that chokestone he would be pulled bodily to the belay. It was an excellent belay, and in it I was firmly lodged. Not all the king's horses, reinforced by all the king's men, at the end of a length of good Alpine rope would pull me out of it.

I heard some indefinite scrambling noises and tightened my grip on the rope. Then came the sound of boot nails scraping on rock, followed by a horrible silence. Still, if he slipped the floor of the cave was just beneath; but I was puzzled as to his whereabouts.

"What's the matter?" I called.

"I'm really stuck this time," was the reply.

I relayed this information to S., who was at first inclined to be unsympathetic.

"He'll have to come up," was the verdict.

Five minutes passed, and it was obvious that the Novice, though cheerful to the last, was utterly pounded. The weather was no better, and I was getting thoroughly chilled at the belay. When we realised that the Novice would never pass the step unaided, S., displaying good leadership, unroped and descended to his assistance. The Novice apparently had jammed his rope between the chokestone and the wall of the gully and was suspended in mid-air. How S. extricated him I do not know, but extricate him he did and shepherded him past the chokestone. S. then returned to the amphitheatre, still unroped, and the Novice came up without further difficulty.

Of the three routes leading from the amphitheatre we chose the easiest, Collie's Exit. We roped up on the scree, and the Novice was warned against that reaction which, after a gruelling pitch, makes difficult rock seem easy, and which has, on occasion, led to fatal slips. Collie's Exit is fairly exposed, but the handholds are plentiful; the Novice discarded all advice about climbing on his feet and came up *au naturel*, applying most of his anatomy to the rock, but thoroughly enjoying the scramble. The weather improved, the angle lessened, and the climb petered out. Soon we were standing on the summit ridge in brilliant sunshine. It was difficult to persuade the Novice that his toils were ended. "Is that all," he kept repeating, and again, in doubtful tone, "Is that all?"

After walking to the summit cairn, taking some photographs, and admiring the view, we descended by an easy gully over some broken ground to the corrie, and raced home over a mountain path. B. returned home after an exhilarating hill walk in exultant mood and full of plans for a future visit.

I may climb many mountains in varying company and lead or be led on many expeditions, but I shall never, as long as I live, forget the Novice in Moss Ghyll.