

“ BE IT EVER SO HUMBLE.”

MALCOLM SMITH.

FANATICISM, salvationism, and all the other “isms” pertaining to mountains and mountaineering were the stock subjects at our mid-week meetings. Something was lacking if the conversation were not piloted into the old channels and the hoary topics once more hotly discussed. So it happened, one summer’s evening round a hostelry table, argument had waxed . . . and waned, when Winram, in an endeavour to warm things up again, mentioned the new issue of the S.M.C.J. As everyone had read it we immediately sailed in on this fresh tack and ordered another round.

In that issue, “Mountain Howffs,” an account of days and nights spent in caves and natural shelters, written by that doyen of troglodytes, Jock Nimlin, was considered the most interesting on account of its novel theme. We found ourselves in complete agreement with the writer that nights spent in a natural shelter were infinitely superior to those in windy, weighty, combustible tents. (With Winram as partner in an Arctic tent on a blizzardy night, combustibility is no small drawback!) Agreeing also that, in a mountain howff, one is in a more complete unity with the scene, we questioned why climbers in other airts should have their A’Chrois caves, Cobbler caves and Lost Valley howffs while we Cairngorms devotees did not enjoy this pleasure. True, we have the Shelter Stone, the cave on Devil’s Point, and the warren under Red Craig in Clova. But the first is a show place, visited by any Tom, Dick, and Fair-Weather Harry, and the second awkward of access, since the ascent and traverse over slabs is tricky, nay—exciting mountaineering. Furthermore, sleep is not to be casually wooed when one’s bed is inclined at the respectable angle of 25 degrees; and the monotonous drip from the roof would drive any sleepy-headed speleologist to the borders of insanity. Besides, the airy bed on Bod an Deamhain, if slept in for purposes other than enjoying the unusual, is not very convenient;

Corrour Bothy is much handier. The Red Craig caves, draughty, dirty, set in pastoral scenery at an elevation of 750 feet—nigh sea level—were dismissed as being of no interest to us.

Other caves there were in the Cairngorms, we felt sure, but their finders had been discreetly silent—an understandable discretion when the hovel that is the Shelter Stone is considered. When we went our respective ways that night it was after reaching the unanimous decision to find a howff of our own. We had become cave-conscious! In the succeeding weeks, therefore, though ostensibly on the normal ploys of the climber, we kept a weather eye for any unusually large boulder or hollow which might afford a place for bivouac. This resulted in an assorted bag: a two-man shelter on the Meikle Pap moraines, an unsatisfactory, open-sided cave on the talus slopes of Creag an Dubh Loch, and an open cave high up in Corrie Fee, which had the doubtful luxury of cold water laid on—across the middle of its floor! Two meritorious solo efforts may also be mentioned. Smith (E. L.), having given up a glorious day on the tops, spent some grimy hours plumbing the depths of Balnamoon's Cave near the headwaters of the North Esk. But this was in alien schistose country and his noble sacrifice was not appreciated. Dey had made a speculative entry into a cavern under the Stag Rocks of Coire Domhain, but, after worming his way through 25 feet of muck and moss, he called it a day. Further afield we went, even to Coire Garbhloch of Feshie, which beautiful corrie yielded but a shallow sentry-box, a cave in appearance only. These, with a slabby-roofed shelter near the imposing cliffs of Creagan a' Choire Etchachan, were the total for many a week-end's search. Could it be that Cairngorm granite does not readily afford material for "setting up howff?" Whatever the reason, we were getting nowhere very fast.

Then came a visit to Beinn a' Bhùird, our old friend and favourite mountain, dear to our hearts for its spaciousness and its approaches—through the Slugain and up the Quoich, names which immediately conjure up scenes of upland beauty; for its corries, honest-to-goodness snow

cirques magnificently corniced even on their mild-angled slopes and for its inaccessibility, for one must work before its environs are entered. Friday midnight saw us ensconced by the little stream of the Slugain as it issues from the Fairy Glen. A fine starlit sky and no wind to disturb the peace of this birch-begirdled hollow made us dispense with our tent. Lying on the short cropped grass, drinking the final mug of tea, we worked out exciting plans for the morrow. Agley, apley went the best laid schemes! On awakening, we found that a wind, bringing low clouds and a smirr of rain, had sidled insidiously out of the south-west. A hurried breakfast and off we set up the defile, past the remnants of the lamented Slugain bothy, out into the flats above the Quoich, to be greeted with the sight of a grey surge of mist engulfing the lower rim of Coire na Ciche. This decided our day. No greasy, lichened rocks to force a route on; for us the simple pleasures of pottering in and around Coire an Dubh Lochain and Coire nan Clach.

The way to the corries from Clach à Chlèirich, up the rising ground between the Allt Dearg and the Allt an Dubh Lochain, lay over a terrain which immediately brought to our minds the possibilities of its harbouring a howff. Large boulders were broadcast far and wide with heather and whortleberry clumps between, devilish ground to go over in darkness. With this new-kindled idea of howff-hunting in our minds, we ranged far that day. From the junction of the streams we climbed into Coire an Dubh Lochain, where the misty backcloth had dropped to hide familiar cliffs, past the Dividing Buttress into Coire nan Clach—the Stony Corrie. Here nature's forces have been hard at work; "glacier howkit" and weather worn, the cliffs round this fine amphitheatre have tumbled until but a frieze of rock remains on the north and north-west. On the west a big promontory divides the corrie into two bays, where the snow lies far into summer. Farther round, next to the headland separating the main corries, are three buttresses whose upperworks have decayed and now lie a mass of debris on the corrie floor. Piled together in all their stony confusion the boulders of this maze attracted our immediate

attention. With visions of finding the howff to end all howffs we launched a full scale search, squirming, squeezing, jumping our way through the debacle. The crazy pile did nothing to help us, though a small tunnel under the apex boulder gave good shelter when the wind, in one of its fiercer moments, lashed squalls of heavy rain across the corrie.

Our blood was up; we must find the cave, this grail of ours! In the next two or three hours we covered the whole corrie and scarcely a boulder lay unsearched, when suddenly, I saw what appeared to be the dark shadow of a crevice under a pyramidal block well over on my right. I shouted to Winram, intent on searching his own allotted area. He dashed across and together, with the bated breaths beloved of fiction writers, we advanced expectantly. It was it! Our spiritual home! Our Howff! In the damp, dark atmosphere of the mist-laden corrie I must admit it did not look a prepossessing place at first glance. On closer inspection it improved. A large block lay on a smaller slab forming one straight wall, and a semi-circle of rubble and small blocks provided the other walls and further support. Much work would be needed to make it windproof. The ceiling was flat, a quartz encrusted slab of pink unweathered granite standing about 5 feet off the floor. From the middle of the floor there rose a stony stalagmite, a veritable aiguille, fully 3 feet in height, 2 feet in width and 3 feet long at its base, weighing the devil knew how many pounds. Its removal would be difficult, too big to lever, it would have to be cut into pieces. We were elated, however, by our find, though a little disconcerted over the block. With a last look at the cave, we sped down the Quoich to our bivouac and food.

The tale of our discovery was unfolded to Tewnion that night when, surprisingly, he came up the glen alone. Over the final mug of tea and cigarette we waxed so enthusiastic over the cave that Tewnion, who had previously listened to our outpourings with but little interest, was won over. We decided to go up again next day so that he, the expert on stone, could view the "aiguille" and advise on its removal.

But fairer weather brought about a swift change of plan, subtly executed by Tewnion, ever ready to haul some dissenting companion to the Garbh Choire. We were still protesting vigorously when, at the Sneck, rain began to fall. Over the floor of the rough corrie we traversed, past the magnificent Square-face Buttress, past the Flume, a fine waterfall gully, to the foot of the Mitre Ridge. The initial groove on the original route was horribly wet and, after two or three attempts, Tewnion gave up. His excuses that his hands were numb, the rock too greasy, the day too cold, earned our ridicule.

It was not until the last week in May that we again visited the howff. Winram and I came up on the Saturday morning, light of step after a satisfying bivouac under the stars by the side of Slugain's stream. On a second viewing the cave did not seem to be the home from home over which we had previously enthused. The Dru, as we had dubbed the boulder rising from the floor, seemed to have increased in size and the openings under the roof slab were not minute. We set to work to effect a face-saver; it had to look its best for Tewnion and E. Smith who would arrive tired, and so, perhaps, a bit crusty about midnight. Boulders and moss were stuffed into cracks, and heather brought in to cover the floor until the den looked presentable; but that boulder, horrid excrescence, troubled us. What reactions would Tewnion and Smith display? Lights dancing down the Quoich heralded their approach, and our torch and shouted instructions piloted them to the cave. Winram and I, thrusting mugs of steaming tea into their hands, in the hope of kindling any spark of good humour still left in them, waited for the onslaught. It never came! Our fears need not have been. Tewnion surveyed the Dru with critical eye: "We'll drill a hole here, a hole there; put in a wedge this way and another that way," he said. But, like the proverbial plumber's mate, he had forgotten to pack the tools needed for Operation Dru. When we finally let him crawl into his sleeping bag to lick his wounds, we fitted ourselves into the odd angles formed by the boulder and settled for the night. The weather broke during the small

hours but the cave stood the test: our only problems were the entrance and the dreadful Dru.

The ensuing week-ends were spent on other mountains dear to our hearts, but we went up to the cave again on a fine night in August. With Petrie in place of Winram, we set to work on the Dru with a drill and a mason's 4 lb. hammer. We worked with a will, and noisily. Had any other climber been in the corrie that night he might have thought that the most horrible supernatural agencies were afoot: lights showing among the boulders; the musical sound of steel on steel; gales of laughter echoing from the crags. Ferla Mhor would have been a child's plaything that night on Beinn a' Bhùird! By three in the morning it was all over. Seven holes were drilled and four cuts made before the pieces could be rolled and levered to the entrance where they closed in and built up the entry, thus disposing of our last problem. Before turning in for the morning we went outside for a breath of fresh air. What an exquisite situation we were in! Below, in the valley mouth, mists were welling into the corries, creeping up, drifting back but never advancing: round us were the stern cliffs, forbidding in the light of a thin moon. When, eventually, we retired to our sleeping bags, the floor of the cave, laid bare of its heathery covering in places, in no wise hindered the well-won sleep of four tired trogs.

To celebrate the extraction of the pestiferous tooth we climbed two routes on the virgin rocks of Coire an Dubh Lochain next day: the week-end built up to a fitting climax in as fine a thunderstorm as any of us had seen in our climbing days. The heavens opened but we remained dry and dry we have remained on all subsequent visits. We have come to know the Ben in a more intimate way than would otherwise have been possible. The corries have much to show their devotees and I would recommend others to explore these fastnesses, for surely these walled recesses are the area's greatest asset.

We are devoted to our howff. It appears to be unique in its situation and is remarkably easy to get at, though some may doubt that a ten-mile stumble in darkness and

carrying a week-end Bergan to just over 3,000 feet could be called easy. It is ideal for sleeping four and there is water within 10 yards. It is rain-proof but not yet drift-proof, as we discovered one night of blizzard. Climbs of every degree of difficulty lie at its doorstep; we have even done one before breakfast. I may eulogise but I doubt if anyone will think as highly of it as the finders—it means so much more to them than just a hole under a big slab. It is a friendly gift from a friendly mountain.