

## WIN FOR THE MOUNTAIN.

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ON March 17, 1950, I found myself toiling up the relentless flank of Lochnagar and feeling very much like an overloaded pack-horse. My sole consolation was that Douglas Sutherland and John Morgan, the instigators of the scheme, seemed to be in similar case. That night our camp threatened to be torn from its moorings in the mouth of the corrie and hurled back into the Dee valley. Sleep was almost impossible and it was not until after 9 o'clock the following morning that we ventured to emerge from our sleeping bags.

On the way to the cliffs we discussed what to attempt. The discussion was a mere formality as all our hearts were set on a winter ascent of Polyphemus Gully, and indeed, after our sufferings nothing less would satisfy. Conditions were not good, as the storm of the previous night had swamped the cliffs in powder snow. Stonefalls were unlikely but we were prepared for small avalanches. Steep snow slopes swept up into Shadow Couloir. From the rear of the Couloir sprang the great 100 feet pitch which seemed to be the most serious obstacle in the gully. It was really a wall in which the gully had carved a shallow gutter.

We roped up and I climbed a snow-choked funnel to a recess below an overhang where I belayed Sutherland on the first ice pitch. The left wall of the gully was thickly veiled in snow, fashioned into vertical flutings by the wind. Sutherland swung his axe and raked away the snow curtain revealing solid grey ice inviting attack. The ice was dull and lustreless except where a green-shining whorl, like a bubble in bottle glass, caught the eye. He carved steadily up the wall to a promontory, 15 feet above my head. A shelf, buried deep in soft snow, led up to a shallow cave in the bed of the gully. To reach the cave took an hour as the powder had to be cleared to a depth of 2 or 3 feet before steps could be cut in the hard surface beneath.

I joined Sutherland and surveyed the fearsome looking



second pitch. Above the cave, an overhanging gutter curved left. The 50 foot left wall was very steep and hung in bulging folds of ice buried beneath wind-packed snow. Quite unconcerned, Morgan was sitting at the foot of the gully, playing a mouth-organ with the philosophy of the winter gully-climber. Close to the cave a rib of ice, distorted by bulges and cavities, had been formed by the dripping of an overhang at the top of the wall. I chose this rib and very slowly began to cut my way upwards. The ice was tough and wet and all the time I was a target for the stream of drips from the overhang. The first 20 feet occupied an hour and then I made swifter progress after the welcome appearance of a solid flake of névé on the right. Using this as a handhold I made contact with the overhang sooner than I expected. The overhang presented a knotty problem until I saw that the top of the rib had formed a stalagmite with a delicate crowning spire of new snow. I swept aside the decoration and cut across a bulge to the lip of the wall. A moment later and I moved on to the easy snow of the gully bed. Twenty feet up, in a corner below a vertical wall I drove my axe in to the head and summoned Sutherland.

He could hardly move his limbs after his long sojourn in the cave, but to a zealous climber such a thing is no deterrent and ere long he was at my side and playing Morgan up the pitch. A glance at my watch brought the rather alarming knowledge that we had been on the climb for four hours. The gully here twisted left and Morgan disappeared round the corner at a great rate. Soon, however, the rope slowed and then crept out inch by inch and an hour had fled past before Sutherland moved off. I followed and rounded the bend to come face to face with a sharp bulge formed by a mixture of ice and treacherous snow. Under the lee of the right wall the angle relented slightly and here our leader had hacked a ladder of steps. Some distance above, I found the others belayed to their axes, at the foot of a long stretch of hard snow.

For 200 feet we made good progress up névé with a slash of the axe and a hearty kick sufficient for a good step. Above us the gully seemed to meander round a corner and finish



easily in a snow-filled amphitheatre. Before the bend was a steep chute of soft snow which gave Sutherland an hour's hard work. Morgan joined him at a precarious snowy stance beneath a partially iced overhang. There they both stood and exclaimed and their demeanour made it clear that something special was barring the way. The gully, instead of curving in an easy snow-slope, swung hard left in a right-angle groove, almost bare of snow and ice and fully 50 feet long. Morgan investigated but the groove held naught but thin wet snow. Once past the overhang above the stance, an easy snow-gully appeared to lead to the amphitheatre. Accordingly, Morgan applied himself to the overhang but without success.

I offered to try the left wall but the simple-looking route, which I could see from my position, 60 feet below, was invisible to my companions and they vetoed the proposal. We later found that the summer route did in fact take the left wall and we were attempting an unclimbed section of the gully. I next moved up to proffer assistance. Mounting the top of a massive spike of rather doubtful snow which thrust up beneath the overhang. I drove in a piton as a belay to safeguard the party while I offered my body as a step-ladder. First came Morgan but after a prolonged attempt he confessed his arms were unable to make the pull which would afford him a footing. Sutherland, made a similar attempt, but he, too, failed, and confessed that he lacked the confidence to trust all his weight to a fragile ringhold of ice. Personally, I was glad that I was not called upon to make an attempt, for the overhang was exposed and the strain of seven hours climbing was beginning to tell, especially as we were very wet. With more snow in the gully we thought that either the overhang or the groove should "go."

Zero hour, 5.30 P.M., had now arrived and we had to start the retreat. Morgan led and I belayed the others down from my piton before following. The next 200 feet of snow went smoothly, one man moving at a time. The others advised me to abseil the treacherous pitch at the curve in the gully, as some holds had broken away. Accepting this



welcome advice I began to search diligently for a belay or, failing that, for a suitable crack for a piton. By now, however, the night was upon us and, in spite of my diligence, I had little success. In answer to my demands, a torch was sent up from the depths and with its aid the piton was inserted and both our 100 foot ropes tied together and safely threaded. All this was not accomplished until considerable time and energy had been expended in unravelling the complicated network which every climbing rope forms in like circumstances. I descended the pitch, using the rope as a steadying hand-rail, and was soon reunited with my companions.

In spite of a steady supply of wet sleet from the sky, the morale of the party was very high (although Morgan's mouth organ had long since ceased to mellow the air). Even the prospect of the 100-foot wall below did not deter Sutherland as he flitted hither and thither seeking a crack in which to hammer a piton. At last the abseil rope was ready and I backed down the snow-roof. Suddenly, as my feet slipped past the overhang, I found myself dangling over a void of blackness and, since the rope was nylon, feeling very much like a yo-yo. After slithering down the wall I reached the cave and a moment later pendulumed across and down the shelf. One last flounder and I was below the last ice wall on the safe snow slope. I unthreaded myself and shouted up that it was "fine."

Before moving down the snow to a small bergschrund I shone my torch upwards and was astonished at the gigantic proportions which the pitch assumed in the rays. From my position at the bergschrund I saw Morgan had descended safely. Sutherland followed suit to within 20 feet of the foot when the iced rope slipped from his grasp and he accelerated accordingly. A slight rise hid the source of light from me but I could see the rays slanting upwards between the great walls, with a suggestion of aurora borealis. Any further Heavenly similarity was swiftly dispelled by the language which issued following Sutherland's rapid descent. For once the rope ran smoothly to drop in a swishing coil. It was well after 9 P.M. as we moved down



the snow and we had spent nearly eleven hours in the gully. I was truly thankful and I think the others were thankful too, that we were safely clear.

At the foot of the long slopes we sat amid the boulders and ate some food. The corrie lay in utter silence, except for the faint tinkle of water from a gully. We were tired, hungry, and soaked to the skin, with the prospect of a cheerless camp before us. The day could hardly be termed a success, yet I doubt if any of us would have exchanged the day's experiences for many a more successful but less memorable climb. The gully had beaten us, but in mountaineering it is the climbing and the comradeship, rather than the achievement, which is of the greater importance. Taking consolation in this, if we required any, we packed ourselves into the tent and with myself presiding over the stove as chef-in-chief, ate, talked, and laughed until 3 A.M., after which we slept the sleep of the weary and replete.