

WINTER ON THE STACK

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WE wandered out into the cold darkness of very early morning, a breakfast of haggis and pemmican doing its best to dispel the chill of a bitter night from our aching bodies. The frozen earth rang under our feet as we left the bothy with its floor of ice, but soon the only sounds were the swish of snow and an occasional rude word as one of the party tripped over a hidden boulder. The bothy and its burn had fallen out of sight before the sun rose to thaw our tongues. The point under discussion was whether the glittering crags of Lochnagar would yield to us the jewel we coveted. At the lip of the corrie we saw that while the buttresses were thickly plastered with fresh-blown snow over ice, the gullies contained only an occasional ice-fall. It was plain that for a first winter ascent that day we must turn to a buttress. The Stack with a golden crown of sunlight appeared most desirable and so it was decided.

The frozen loch quickly dispelled our hopes of an easy walk to the foot of the climb by grumbling under weight and our trials started in the deep, soft snow. Ptarmigan running lightly over the surface inspired pardonable feelings of jealousy. It was my misfortune to be in front at this stage and with the threat of an ice-axe point poised by Gordon, I lost no time in ploughing a path up the Spout towards the great overhanging bulk of the Stack. It was now midday but the greater part of the corrie remained in shade.

The first pitch started with a 50 foot slope of thick green ice, but my offers to meet the others on the top, or to go back and have supper ready, were treated with scorn and we roped up. Mike attacked with vigour and had soon traversed round a corner to the right, leaving a neat line of steps. Gordon followed and I left my seat with some reluctance and almost with the loss of an essential part of my trousers, which had frozen on. I joined the others in a small recess on the first platform, where we were temporarily stopped by a vertical wall, plastered with foot-thick snow, and leading to an ice and snow-filled groove. We were now in the central line of the buttress and the overhung drop below was appreciable. Undaunted, the leader said "Press on!" and I was pressed on to the wall so that he might step off my head to reach the base of the groove. He wormed up for some 10 feet, giving us below the impression that it had started to

snow heavily. Gordon took delight in standing on my head and, being left alone, I was not ashamed to give a loud cry of "Tirez la corde" as I attacked the wall.

The next ledge was overshadowed by a huge overhang but Mike pointed out to the right and immediately disappeared. The progress of his rope gradually came to dead slow, ran out quickly for 15 feet, and he had made it. Gordon's successful arrival above took a full run-out and I started round the corner to be confronted by an awful sight. A foot-wide ledge ran slightly upwards to peter out under a mantelshelf; below there was nothing visible but the snow of the Black Spout, separated from me by a vertical 170 feet of air. I could see nothing of my companions, but the rope was being twitched gently from somewhere above. The mantelshelf presented an unforeseen difficulty for I found at the crucial moment that my legs would not bend. Looking down, I saw that my trousers were frozen stiff. I also saw the drop, and with a great heave, accompanied by a cracking sound from my trousers, my face was submerged into the soft snow of an easy slope, at the top of which my companions waited with ribald comments on my mode of ascent.

We were now on a broad terrace, leading us left to seek our passage under the massive overhang of the main buttress. From a good stance and belay, an upward traverse to the left was made into an open snow-filled chimney. Above the chimney a near-vertical slab was crossed with many peculiar contortions on my part. Afterwards, I was told that an ice-axe driven into the snow in a certain place found a small crack, and thus provided a handrail to make it perfectly simple. A rather delicate hand traverse led farther left to further freeze my delicate fingers. But frozen fingers hold well when one's heels are kicking wildly over 200 feet of space. Thirty feet upwards and to the right by two chimneys brought us to an alcove, just too low to allow standing erect and too cold to sit down in, where the party was reunited. Here we discussed the effect of smoking upon the blood-vessels of the skin, with experimentation, but no definite conclusion was reached.

Owing to the continuous hindrance of soft snow which had to be cleared we were now far behind time. We did not regret too much the time wasted beside the loch, for the full moon was rising to give us ample light. The next pitch gave me, as the last member, plenty of time to observe the moonrise, between intervals of standing uncomfortably and sitting even more uncomfortably.

A chimney to the left led upwards to a block, and above it, a shelf

sloping upwards to the right. Mike brought Gordon up the chimney to the block, which was out of my range of vision, and an increasing urgency in the voices above gave me an impression of difficulty encountered. From the top of the block a delicate balance move is made to the outward-sloping ledge. I had gathered from the conversation that the vital holds were buried deep in ice, when the clatter of ironmongery and an apologetic shout indicated that the move had been solved by a piton. There were slow scraping sounds and a tense silence: Mike's voice, a tone higher than usual, announced the possibility of his imminent take-off. The rest was silence, but after several centuries my strained ears could detect no further movements. Then a shower of snow and ice made me look up to see Mike clinging to a wall directly above me. He moved out of sight, called down, and it was my turn.

Once on the block I could see what had happened. The layer of soft snow had suddenly moved off, to leave the leader clawing at the verglas underneath. As I made my way along the shelf, my trousers emitted rhythmic crackling sounds, and above the wall I found two frozen figures unhappily sharing a cigarette.

From the left end of the platform, a tricky snow-covered slab led to easier ground. As the soft snow down our backs froze into solid lumps, Gordon and I apathetically watched the rope slide over the slab, while conversation with the leader was limited to exhortations to speed, mingled with colourful language. Above, we waded along an awkward terrace to the first wall. A long icy crack rising gently to the plateau was overcome by wriggling in the prone position, our discomfort increased by the dangling of a foot in space above the Left-hand Branch.

The beauty of moonlight upon the snow-clad hills demanded that we linger on the top. However, the intense cold and the presence of a small bottle of brandy in the bothy forced us to retreat quickly. The leader had already set off with the utmost despatch and we certainly could not allow him to drink all of it.