

THE LINK

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OF the buttresses of Lochnagar, one of the most intriguing is the Black Spout Pinnacle. Rising like a supporting column by the gateway of the Black Spout, and tiled by overlapping black slabs, it is small wonder that even as early as 1902 Raeburn answered the challenge of its appearance. Its left flank sweeps round in a roof of fairly gently tilted slabs to Pinnacle Gully No. 1. On the right, however, an almost vertical wall plunges into the Black Spout and its Left Branch. This steep wall continues, though rather slabbier, round the base of the buttress toward Raeburn's Gully. One-third of the way up, at about 200 feet from the base, occurs a grassy ledge known as the Springboard. Above this ledge rises a very steep face like an elongated isosceles triangle bounded by the slabby roof on the left and the Black Spout wall on the right. The apex of the triangle is formed by the Nose, a jutting prow of granite, from which a narrow ridge rises to the summit.

Equipped with such defences, it is not surprising that the first successful frontal attack was not made until 1949. This was Route I, which reached the Springboard from the Black Spout and then slanted by a chimney to gain the roof slabs of the left flank. In 1953 Patey and Taylor made Route II. Following the examples of Raeburn and Bell, they climbed a prominent crack slanting up the Black Spout wall from the Left Branch junction to reach the central face. Unlike their predecessors, however, they used stocking soles for a sensational traverse across the face, 80 feet below the Nose, to reach the slabby left-hand flank and so join Route I near the top. During his all too brief sojourn among us, Jerry Smith made a valuable contribution to Cairngorm climbing, of which the most outstanding route was Pinnacle Face. This climb, done in rope-soled shoes, breached the impressive lower girdle of slabs by slanting leftwards to gain easier ground among the slabs above and to the left of the Springboard. In 1956 the first winter ascent was made by way of Route I.

The exploration of the Black Spout Pinnacle illustrates perfectly how the passage of time brings new knowledge and techniques which result in changes of climbing atmosphere. With each change the standard of new climbs in any particular area advances. These advances are less a question of sheer technical difficulty than changes

in the character of what seems possible. Who in Raeburn's time would have thought Route II feasible, and who in Bell's heyday, or even in 1950, would have seriously considered Pinnacle Face? Yet both these climbs would have been within the compass of these men had the time been ripe and the atmosphere conducive. Our own area has always lagged well behind more highly exploited climbing grounds in rock-climbing development. Pinnacle Face was what we might term a break through in Cairngorm rock climbing, for it heralded other routes similar in character which now represent the best of summer climbing in these hills. It is significant that its author developed his technique in the south, and by applying it to Lochnagar granite brought about a change of atmosphere which persists to-day, when the steep open faces yield the finest climbs. Routes like the Citadel on the Shelter Stone Crag, Water Kelpie Wall on Creag an Dubh Loch, and several others, notably in Coire Etchachan, have all been made in this new phase of exploration and are all earmarked by the forsaking of the traditional nailed boot.

In 1956 the most recent chapter, though surely not the last, in the story of the Black Spout Pinnacle was written. Its telling is the real subject of this article.

Ken Grassick and I arrived in the corrie of Lochnagar on a grey, misty June day and, in spite of my lack of enthusiasm, he succeeded in coercing me to the foot of Pinnacle Face. The sight of greasy overlapping slabs tilting sharply up into the mist, together with the fact that we were wearing vibrams, hardly inspired confidence; but Grassick was off before I could summon argument to my aid. The gasps and grunts coming from above confirmed my suspicions that he had been over-indulging in night life. The granite seemed to exude a cold dampness, and when my turn came I spent some awkward moments wrestling up a diabolical little wall into an insecure and slippery groove. Sixty feet up I reached Ken, whose encouragement boosted my morale somewhat as I heaved up a short groove, raised a cautious head, and warily scanned a wide slab sweeping to an overhang. A ragged flake scarred its slabby surface, and to my surprise a series of knobbls on its edge provided easy progress. It led me leftwards beneath the overhang to a tiny stance furnished with a shaky flake belay. A numbingly cold wind had started to buffet me in irregular gusts, but unlike the "ill wind" of the proverb, it helped us by clearing the mist and drying the rocks.

Ten feet higher was a piton marking the crux. It offered security for a movement intimately concerned with the coefficient of limiting

friction. A mantelshelf had to be made to gain the slab above, which overlapped at chest height. After considerable skirmishing, Ken achieved this and then lurched crabwise to the right, allowing me a disturbing view of the soles of his boots as they projected over the lip of the slab. We began to comprehend Jerry Smith's seemingly unreasonable attachment to rope-soles. On easier ground a turf groove led back to the left for nearly 100 feet to a belay.

The next pitch was delightful. Twin cracks afforded satisfying jamming for 15 feet, whence a shallow flake beckoned invitingly up a bulging slab to another overhang. At this impasse, the flake conveniently provided a handrail to a corner 40 feet away on the right. Here I ran out of rope and used a piton belay. The 15 foot corner above proved much harder than it looked, and we found it cleaner and easier to climb by a projecting rib on the right. A good ledge led off towards the Black Spout and we sauntered along its friendly turf to Route I feeling very pleased with ourselves. Scrambling down the 100 feet to the Springboard, I could not help comparing our present easy passage with that of Jerry and myself a few scant months earlier when an armour of snow and ice had veiled the holds and ledges.

During rest and refreshment I sprang a surprise on Ken. Since my earliest acquaintance with the Pinnacle I had been aware of a potential line running up the steep face above the Springboard to reach Route II and perhaps even the Nose itself. No attempt had been made or even seriously considered, and it was only the recent developments in Cairngorm rock climbing which had revived its possibility in my mind. Three hundred and fifty feet above us we could see the Nose; it jutted forth, squat and ugly, and from it a crack descended to the Route II traverse. At the Black Spout end of the traverse was a kind of porch roof from which another, deeper fissure split the face to an overhang, 100 feet beneath. Below this interruption it continued as a trough which passed the rightward extremity of the Springboard, finally plunging to the floor of the gully as a thin crack. Ken was ready and eager for an attempt, and we agreed the major obstacle was likely to be the big overhang at the top of the trough.

I started from an upper ledge, balancing delicately over a peculiar little pillar and round a smooth corner to gain thankful entry to the trough. Moving up its cracked bed, I found a problem in the form of a large, precarious block. Shouting a warning, I eased past it using it as a momentary stepping stone to firmer holds beyond. It moved. Rumbling protestingly it slid downwards and ground to a

reluctant stop a foot or so beneath. Meanwhile, a watchful Ken had flicked my rope high and wide out of possible danger. Above this the trough reared in an overhang and I moved to a stance and belay on its right edge, where I was joined by my companion, who dealt conclusively with the offending block on his way. The whole cliff trembled as it thundered downwards and the familiar sulphurous smell stung our nostrils.

From our stance a shallow rib rose steeply and discouragingly to form the edge of the trough. At its steepest, the crest was fissured by kind of incipient flake which proved to be the key to the problem. I am always astounded by Grassick on a rock climb; that a man of his gross and ungainly shape could ever move gracefully would seem incredible, and yet he can, and does. Here to-day was gone the shambling gait he keeps for terra firma and in its place was a kind of tip-toe alertness. Smoothly he laybacked the flake and with reptilian grace glided up the slabby trough beyond to a belay hard under the big overhang we had noted earlier. From his position I edged to the right beneath the overhang, sidled round a big pointed flake, and found myself in a tiny alcove. This gruesome place rapidly drained me of every drop of confidence. Its two damp walls converged into an overhung pointed roof pushing me out of balance, and its turfy floor quivered with my every movement. The hungry maw of the Black Spout clinched matters; I banged in a shaky piton and yelled for Ken to deal with the situation. Disdaining my proffered shoulder, he squeezed past me after some mutual contortions, wedged his right knee in the crack splitting the apex of the roof, and thrust his head out past the overhang. On the second attempt he succeeded. Finding another crack, higher on the left, he jammed his limbs, one pair in each crack, and wriggled convulsively out of sight. When my turn came I found the whole thing most exhausting and I was gasping for breath as I swarmed caterpillarwise up the slab above the overhang. We agreed that what the pitch lacked in elegance it more than made up in character.

We had reached a kind of fork in the route, and from the shelter of a huge detached flake we scanned the prospect. Directly above an almost vertical wall soared 160 feet to our objective, the Nose. On its left a big groove led in 100 feet to the finish of the Route II traverse. This looked climbable but held some damp vegetation; we rejected it in favour of the steeper and much more exciting 100 foot crack leading up the right edge of the wall to the start of the traverse.

Straddling took me up an initial 10 foot chimney to the foot of

the crack. Here I twisted and turned in a stream of derisive exhortation from Ken, until at last I gained a lodgment and jammed my way up the crack. It widened, becoming easier as I progressed, so I left it in favour of the sensation provided by the central wall. This was slabby but not too steep at this point. Presently I stood on the traverse. Above me the wall tilted sharply to the vertical and, 20 feet higher to the left, one of Patey's giant pitons, the product of some stalwart Buchan blacksmith, condescendingly invited me to belay my humble rope. I reached it at the end of my 120 feet and yoked myself to its rusty but generous comfort. This piton is the belay for the crux of the traverse beneath, but Ken moved past me, up the crack leading straight for the Nose which jutted alarmingly a scant 40 feet overhead.

Twenty-five feet up he performed some peculiar antics to thread a sling behind a pendant block as a running belay. Using this as a stirrup, he knelt on the block and gave vent to an anxious gasp as it pivoted through an arc of 6 inches. However, apart from this eccentricity, the block was quite sound and he stood up with head and shoulders hunched under the jut of the Nose. From this position he extended an exploratory arm past the overhang to the right, followed with his head, and lurched round out of sight.

I joined him in an apparent cul-de-sac, its left wall the prow of the Nose and its right an overhang split by twin cracks. Ken pointed smugly at the cracks, but one glance was enough to make me seek elsewhere, and for a moment it seemed as if there was no alternative but retreat. Then to my joy I noticed that the left wall was split by a horizontal gash, like the lips of some colossal gargoyle. I heaved myself into the cleft, wormed along on my stomach for a few feet, stood up, and made a final stride across the extreme tip of the Nose, with almost the entire Pinnacle plunging beneath my heels. Such moments represent the acme of rock-climbing experience. With many exclamations of surprise and delight we scampered up the final arête to the summit, where we talked of the day's adventures and gazed contentedly at the long shadows creeping into the corrie.

Naming our route was easy; in fact, the idea of "The Link" joining the Springboard to the upper arête had been in my mind for years. The Link, though nowhere quite as hard as the crux of Pinnacle Face, had more sustained severity; together they had given us the best and most continuous rock climbing we had ever enjoyed on Lochnagar. The entire day, by its combination of excellent rock, steepness, sensation, and difficulty, is one which we shall never forget.