

Strange Encounter

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Easter was very late in 1981 and it was not until Friday, 17th of April that John and Pete were able to come up to Aberdeen to join me for a day on Lochnagar. We were late leaving Aberdeen and the sun was well up as we mounted the main path from Glen Muick. At this stage conditions still looked promising, a hard overnight frost having frozen the snow surfaces so that we crunched over the lumpy remnants of old footprints. As yet, the hill was empty although the main tourist route would see plenty of use later in the day. Just before the steepening to Cuidhe Crom we left the main path to cross to the col from where we could view the corrie and decide what to do.

There had been heavy snowfalls during the previous week and although a thaw had laid much of the steep rock bare, all the grassy slopes, ledges and fissures were still covered with snow and ice. This was the case even on the West Buttress which catches more sunshine than the rest of the Lochnagar cliffs. It was a magnificent sight, and Pete, for whom this was a first visit, was suitably impressed. Of course there was a flaw. The temperature had started to rise and a mild breeze was carrying wisps of cloud across the mountain. A weather change was obviously on its way from the south-west. Given the accumulation of snow on the upper part of the cliffs, the significant cornices, and the thaw setting in, a buttress climb was a more sensible choice than a gully even if Pete was desperate to blood his brand-new set of ice tools. We assured him that even if the snow had softened he would still find good use for them on the underlying frozen turf. In the end John and he opted for Route I on the Black Spout Pinnacle, a line which had the mixed climbing so characteristic of Lochnagar. I decided to go with them up the Black Spout to the foot of Route I and then by the Left Hand Branch to the plateau to wait at the summit of the Pinnacle.

By the time we reached the Black Spout a bank of mist was beginning to roll over the plateau edge and creep down the cliffs. On the first pitch of Route I there was snow on the initial slabs but almost no ice in the groove so it did not take long for John to establish himself on the big ledge of the Springboard and for Pete to follow while being photographed. On traversing the approach slopes no other climbers had been visible except for a pair high on Eagle Ridge and some others walking round the edge of the plateau near the regular route to and from the summit. Now, however, we became aware of someone else nearby. Climbing noises from above us on the other side of the Black Spout indicated there was somebody on the Black Spout Buttress. The mist had now reached our level and we were quite unable to see our neighbours. But we could hear them with almost uncanny clarity. There was the thumping swish that a mass of snow makes as it is dislodged to fall down

a fissure, the sound of an ice-axe head striking rock, the heavy grunt made when a body heaves upward accompanied by the scrape of crampon points. The last was repeated and there was something about it which held my attention. It had an unusual quality, a deeper note than the usual scratch of crampons and only when it came again did I recognise that what I was hearing sounded like the once so familiar noise of boot-nails scraping to hold on granite.

Conversation began to come across, and although there was no wind to speak of, it came in snatches as if deadened intermittently by the blanket of mist. This was still thin on our side of the Black Spout but much thicker on the other, from where tendrils of denser vapour drifted sluggishly toward us. I could see nothing of the other climbers. Although still fragmented, words and phrases were increasingly clear.

"That was a stiff pull," gasped a disembodied voice. "Once the snow goes there's nothing but grass beneath."

".... good grass though," said another voice, "not like the stuff I met last June Shelter Stone Crag slabs how it clung to the rock I'll never know."

".... disappointment in that big gully deserve a pipe."

A third speaker: "I was relieved to come out of that gully. The snow was much too steep to be safe in this thaw." He continued, ".... others all on the plateau well before us, even the Glas Allt group too late for the motor at Callater. Hope our bags were sent on from Ballater alright."

"Don't worry, Willie," was the reply. "If they've been missed I'm sure those coming with the later service will see to them."

".... forget Callater Ballochbuie roads still excellent even if the Top Man doesn't seem much interested in using them Braemar less than three hours by Garrawalt. If we're late the Fife will keep dinner hot. I gather there are to be a lot of us so they ought to treat us well."

"Can you see those guys?" I called up to my companions who were still visible on the Springboard.

"No, but we can hear them," John replied.

I turned away and started toward the Left Hand Branch. Before I entered it I paused and listened. The conversation from the adjacent buttress was coming across through the mist as clearly as if it were from a television set.

"This little wall looks pretty steep, just as you like it. Your honour anyway, I think."

"All right. I think there's a rocky crest all the way to the plateau, so it shouldn't need long. Take a hitch on that rock and I'll be off."

I knew from this that the party opposite were on a step of the buttress about level with myself, so I turned and called into the mist "Hello there!" There was no reply so I tried again, more loudly this time "Helloooooooooo there! Where are you from?" Even if the accents were Edinburgian, it

seemed to me rather offhand not to reply at all, so I let fly at full power with "Awaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa ye Raj!" like some dreadful Boor Boy reincarnation from the Aberdonian past. I was wasting my breath. There was no response except the continuing sound of climbing emerging from the bank of fog - for it was more of a fog, thick, with a yellowish tint, than the thin, sterile grey of a normal mountain mist.

At this point I felt a gust of colder air on my face and something seemed to be happening to the fog bank. It was rolling aside like a stage curtain to reveal two figures on the little col almost halfway up the Black Spout Buttress. One was seated, the other standing holding a rope leading from the rocks beside him up toward a third figure who was on the wall above and only partly visible. No bright colours were apparent, only the dull shades of gaberdine and tweed. I waved a greeting and shouted again, but although they must have been within a ropelength of me, they gave no indication of being willing to acknowledge my presence, or even aware of it. The mist billowed down off the Stack and enveloped me - regular mist this time and not the yellow fog which seemed to have disappeared. With the change went all sight and sound of the other climbers and I turned my attention back to my own affairs.

The steepening snow banked over the Chokestone led me up into the inner reaches of the Left Hand Branch. Most traffic had taken the main Black Spout, so there were few tracks in the Branch. The Crumbling Cranny, cutting into its right wall, was unmarked and offered an attractive alternative. At least I thought so, until I realised it had a substantial cornice which looked as if it might be weakening with the thaw. I abandoned it and regained the bed of the Left Hand Branch where the snow was more stable and the cornice easily passed on its left.

The weather conditions were unusual to say the least. The plateau and the corrie face to our east were completely clear, while a mild south-westerly air stream was bearing a cloud flow which swirled around the Cac Carn Beag and across the intervening stretch of plateau to spill over its edge and drape a mist curtain down the West Buttress crags.

I wanted to see how John and Pete were progressing on Route I, so I walked round the corrie rim, treading delicately as close to the corniced edge as was prudent. To get a clear view of the Pinnacle cliffs I had to go as far as the top of Shadow Buttress A where I was able to pick out my companions. They were past the main difficulties and moving right toward the upper Pinnacle crest. Beyond them the wall of thick mist continued to obliterate the Black Spout and the cliffs further away.

Returning around the plateau rim, I climbed carefully down to the little col behind the Pinnacle and traversed across the wall above Pinnacle Gully One, clearing the snow from the holds as I moved, until I could climb up onto its summit. Here I sat for half an hour while my two companions came up the last pitch of their climb to join me. After leaving the Springboard and

moving round to the face of the buttress, they had ceased to be aware of the climbers on Black Spout Buttress and asked if I had met them.

"No, but I'd like to," said I, "that conversation we heard was rather odd. They should be up by now so we might meet them on our way to the main summit." While talking we could see that the peculiar bank of cloud on the plateau was dispersing and the shroud over the West Buttress breaking up. As it did so, we scanned the crestal rocks of the Black Spout Buttress but could see no sign of the other climbers, so they must have completed. We seemed to have been the only visitors to the Pinnacle that day but as we reached the plateau we joined the main route up Lochnagar. This had a well trodden path of footprints on the compacted old snow and swung well away from the corrie edge to avoid the deep inlets of the Black Spout and its Left Hand Branch. Diverging to the top of the Black Spout Buttress we peered over for any sign of the party we had heard and seen so near us. We could see nobody. However, John had stepped down to a platform a few feet lower.

"They must be up," he said, pointing with his axe to where the leaning wall of a big boulder had sheltered a ledge and its drift of snow cover. "I can see their prints."

At this point the setting sun broke free to bathe the top of Lochnagar. The main corrie remained in shadow but the sunlight gilded the upper rocks and cornices of the plateau rim. A flight of half a dozen ptarmigan still in full winter plumage rose from the corrie gloom and burst into the sunlight, wheeling towards us to settle on the summit rocks of the Black Spout Buttress. They turned rich gold in the rays. It was highly picturesque and even breathtaking. John seized his camera and knelt to photograph as a pair of the birds croaked and lurched up the rocks a few yards below him. Our attention had now been redirected toward hurrying to the summit tor in time to catch the last of the sunset. This we succeeded in doing and were well rewarded by a reddened sun slipping behind a gold-lined band of cloud lying on the main Cairngorm plateau. I was still interested in making contact with the other climbers but realised that by now they must be on their way to Braemar, in the opposite direction to our own way off the hill. The daylight would soon be fading and it was time we were on our way if we were to get back to Glen Muick before nightfall.

We were all intrigued by the extraordinarily unilateral encounter with the Black Spout Buttress party and talked about it in the car on the way back to Aberdeen. We agreed that the reference to motoring from Loch Callater must mean that this group had some special understanding with Invercauld Estate, for permission to drive on that road is not easily obtained. I recalled headgear of some sort but no crash helmets; that and the absence of bright-coloured clothing might well indicate a sporting estate connection. Walking all the way to Braemar from Lochnagar was also unusual, although the quickest route would certainly be through the Ballochbuie directly to the

main road without crossing the Dee, using the estate road starting near the Garbh Allt falls. Perhaps the identity of a large group of climbers staying at the Fife Arms could be checked with the hotel. A few days later I tried this but drew a blank. Among visitors that weekend there had been no climbers corresponding to those we had almost met on Lochnagar, or any other large group for that matter. Later, as opportunities arose, I checked on whether any of the likely clubs had held a meet at Braemar on that date and drew more blanks. I let it rest, but a question mark remained at the back of my mind about the identity of the mysterious climbers.

Then one day I had a note from John. His slides had been returned and he enclosed a few for my attention. One of them was a close shot of a sunlit ptarmigan on a snow-covered ledge. In clear view were some nailed bootprints in the snow. I inspected closely and could see that none had been made by the thin blades of tricouni nails. All were the blunter marks of clinkers close set around the edge, of the boot sole, a nailing pattern which was long obsolete even in the nail-shod Golden Age of the post-war surge of exploratory Cairngorm climbing.

More recently I had occasion to look up a list of Easter dates and while doing so noticed that Easter Friday had fallen on the 17th April, 1981, the date we were on Lochnagar. This had occurred only once before during the Century, and that was in 1908. This rang a bell and I looked up the relevant Journal to find that the Easter Meet of the SMC that year was in the Fife Arms at Braemar, with a record number of over 50 members and guests attending. The account of activities at the Meet included:-

"Goodeve, Ling and Raeburn attempted the Douglas-Gibson Gully, but were driven back by the sudden thaw and avalanching in the gully. They eventually ascended by the north ridge of the Black Spout, and reached Braemar by the Garrawalt Falls."

This entered the guidebooks as the first ascent of Black Spout Buttress on 17th April, 1908.

It makes you think, doesn't it?