

A DAY IN SKYE

By Harold Leigh,

Gosh, how warm it was ! For days we had run wild over the Coolin, climbing anything and everything; our sole trouble being the unaccustomed brilliance of the sun, but on this June morning a certain listlessness had overcome the party. We were lazy and it was good to rest. Our recumbent forms littered the drawing room of Glen Brittle House, and deep breathing was the dominant sound. Most of us were re-living the last few days and in our semi-slumbers were performing mental gymnastics on the Cioch Direct, or route-finding on the Girdle Traverse of Sron na Ciche, or praying for another handhold on the South Crack of the Inaccessible Pinnacle, or doing all three things at once, when suddenly Ling's voice rang out and brought us back to earth.

" I've got it," he cried. " It's the **very** thing."

" Got what? " a sleepy voice replied.

" The climb for to-day. Listen to this," and he proceeded to read from the Scottish Mountaineering Club's handbook:—

" If regardless of a ducking, climbers can scale this direct— "

" Just the very thing for this weather," he commented, " I'm fed up with grilling on exposed slabs and dropping the only lemon over the edge of a precipice at lunch time. Why, only yesterday, we climbed down 300 feet for the blooming thing, only to find that it hadn't a drop of juice left. I'm all for bathing and climbing at the same time. Besides, it's sure to be in the shade and— "

" Yes, yes, but where is this climb and what is it called? "

" Oh, it's called the Waterpipe Gully." " What, **the** Waterpipe Gully? " - " Yes, why? "

" Oh nothing, only it happens to be about the most difficult gully climb in the British Isles, that's all." " I know, but— "

In vain did we quote from the guide that it is " 1,300 feet high and contains twenty pitches, some of them monstrous." Useless was the suggestion that 'it would take too long'. Ling had a reply for everything; and in due course Edmund Besler and I found ourselves detailed to form the fatigue party and see that Eddie Ling got his bathe.

The sun was hotter than ever as we swung- our rucksacks over our shoulders and set off leisurely along Glen Brittle. The sky was a perfect blue, decorated with distant fleecy clouds, and the Coolin had once again forsaken their black habit for a glittering armour of silver grey. Never did mountains look more entrancing. Presently we approached a herd of highland cattle.

" Perhaps we shall not have to climb after all," said Besler, as we passed one particularly ferocious-looking beast. However, it allowed us to photograph it without expressing its feelings with anything more than a disdainful snort, and we resumed our way.

As we left the track, which serves as the glen's main highway, and took to the springy turf of Coire na Creiche, we found a paradise of wild life. First an insect-eating plant and then a skylark's nest, or the track of a deer, would provide us with an excuse for a rest, while Besler told us all about the animal, bird or plant. It was at one of these halts that we espied the postman coming down the opposite slope on one of his thrice-weekly visits. Off bounded Ling to intercept him, while Besler and I, only too pleased, laid down in this Garden of Eden and mused on the beauties of nature. Truly, it was a marvellous spot. The flowers, the birds, the streams, the mountains, everything was just perfect. It was a sin to climb on such a day when we could lie and drink in such beauty. We said so to Ling when he returned empty-handed, but he was not to be deterred.

Onward we toiled until, as we rounded a shoulder, Sgurr an Fheadain hove into sight. What a grand face the Peak of the Waterpipe presents to Coire na Creiche ! It resembles an enormous pyramid with its face riven from apex to base by a gigantic cleft—

the Waterpipe Gully. A baby stream was issuing from the bottom of the gully and formed a series of pools of the clearest crystal as it wound down the corrie.

" Just asking to be bathed in," I commented as we passed one of them.

" On the return journey," said Ling.

Finally we arrived at the foot of the gully and, finding a shady spot, proceeded to investigate the contents of our lunch packets. After a few hurried mouthfuls, however, Ling clambered over the first chockstone and disappeared into the depths of the gully. Besler and I completed our meal and were once again resting peacefully, watching the graceful, effortless flight of two eagles which we had apparently disturbed, when Ling's voice broke the silence.

" Come on you blokes, it looks fine and it's lovely and cool in here."

It was. The gully was deeply cut and no sunlight penetrated its dark recesses. The left wall overhung continuously and pelted us with drops of moisture. The right wall towered vertically upwards and the bed of the gully was wet and very steep. I put on extra clothing and almost shivered.

By the time I had finished adjusting my ropes Besler had led up the first pitch, and I was bidden to follow. I had not noticed particularly how he had gone, and now I found myself at a loss how to proceed.

" How the blazes did you get up there? " I asked.

" Oh, that moss is alright if you don't pull too hard," came the helpful reply.

By dint of some marine gardening and a considerable amount of faith, I eventually arrived at the top and took comfort in the thought that, despite the quantity of slime and moisture which I had collected, there was plenty left for Ling.

Presently, we all three stood at the foot of the second difficulty, an almost vertical pitch of 80 feet.

" Doesn't look exactly easy," said Ling, as Besler led up the bed of the gully.

" Wouldn't the right wall be better," I suggested. " At any rate it would be cleaner."

Half way up Edmund heeded my plea and traversed across, finishing up the right wall. Again it was my turn to climb, and now I wished I had not suggested the wall for it was so steep and so sparsely equipped with holds that only a judicious tautness in the rope above kept me in stable contact with the rock.

Easier climbing intervened until another gigantic pitch blocked the way. For a while I watched Besler not only climb the pitch with apparent ease, but also avoid the waterfall with which it was blessed. All too soon came my summons. With back against one wall and feet level with my head against the other, I slowly worked my way upwards, but, try as I would, I could not avoid the waterfall which splashed down upon me.

" If regardless of a ducking, climbers can scale this direct— " chuckled Besler, while I wondered if the alternative wall climb could have been more difficult. At length I arrived level with the final chockstone and rested a little before making the last effort. Wedged across the gully, I allowed myself to settle in my wet clothes, and found time to contemplate a little rock garden on an adjacent ledge, to which my attention had been repeatedly called by Ling as I was climbing. On restarting, however, I found that I too had taken root. No contortions of mine would suffice to persuade my body to resume its upward course, until, at last, in desperation, I hauled on the rope and landed in safety on the chockstone.

It was then Ling's turn for the showerbath, and when he was well and truly in, a gurgle arose for a tight rope.

" Don't give him one," called back Besler, with a laugh. " He brought us here."

So Ling, too, was fairly wet before he finally emerged over the chockstone. We were drying nicely, however, when we arrived some 500 feet higher at the foot of a huge stack of rotten rock which blocked the gully. This we tackled by a chimney up the 'stack itself. Picturesque words of warning about the looseness of the rock floated down as Besler and I in turn surmounted the obstacle, but it was not until Ling was solving the intricacies of the chimney that a practical demonstration of its looseness was given. I was sitting on the roof of the stack, taking in Ling's rope, when a resounding crash echoed and re-echoed down the gully. My first thought was that Ling was exercising his privilege as last man to remove some of the loose holds, but after the thunder had died away, I heard

Ling's voice calling for assistance. I heaved hard on the rope and called to Besler, who was investigating the next pitch. Quickly he descended and, passing me, told me to lower him, as he must climb outside the chimney. I strained hard on both ropes until, after an age of indistinct mutterings, a further crash of falling stone, and yet another crash, resounded. Then Besler called to me to take in his rope, and in due course he re-appeared.

" What happened? " I said.

" Part of the chimney collapsed and pinned Ling in." " Any damage done? "

" Nothing serious, but his ankle is hurt a bit."

Together we took in Ling's rope. He was, luckily, only bruised, and after a short rest we resumed the climb.

Several further pitches were passed without incident, until we arrived at the foot of another ferocious obstacle.

" At a point where the gully is narrow and both walls are unclimbable, there is a hopelessly steep pitch of 60 feet, up which the way is made by means of a chimney on the left, and then, stepping round a projecting rib of rock, the climber regains the main bed of the gully at a point where it is wet and mossy," I quoted from the guide book.

But Besler was already at work. Some 40 feet up he belayed himself on to a sound projection, one of the very few to be found on this climb, and I joined him. He left me jammed across the chimney while he pirouetted above my head. Ten feet higher he had to make the step round to the right. That this was not easy I could judge from Besler's expression, but eventually he reached a little platform safely.

" Ah," he sighed, on reaching this haven, and a few minutes later he was at the top of the pitch, but not without anointing my head with scree which, owing to my position in the chimney, I was entirely unable to avoid.

I followed up and soon arrived at the top of the chimney, but holds to enable the step across to be taken appeared to be completely absent. Manoeuvre as I would, I could discover nothing, and by this time I was not unduly fastidious in the matter of holds.

" Those eagles are overhead again," commented Besler helpfully.

" Just look at that flower on your left," said Ling, but at that moment I was far too much engaged in other matters to vouchsafe even an uncomplimentary reply. Finally, having warned Ling, I removed a loose spike of rock and, unfortunately, a certain portion of the wall as well, but after the avalanche had passed a small firm hold remained. On this I moved across to the little platform and duly registered my sigh of relief, but I was wrong when I thought my troubles were over, for the next portion of steep, slimy, rounded rock was most unpleasant to meet at the top of a stiff pitch. However, I presently joined Besler and proceeded to take in Ling's rope, not forgetting to ask him sundry idiotic questions as he was climbing.

A sporting final pitch under and over chockstones, where back and feet work was again necessary, brought us out into the sunlight on the top of Sgurr an Fheadain, after five-and-a-quarter hours of magnificent climbing.

" Glad you came?" said Ling.

" Rather," said Besler and I simultaneously.

" And now for a real bathe in one of those pools," I added.