

THE BROKEN PEAK.

NORMAN WILLSON.

It had not been necessary, on this particular morning, to come down to a six-thirty breakfast in order to catch the only fjord steamer of the day. The throb of the little vessel's diesel engines and the pleasant lazy gliding through the still and sunny waters of the fjord on those perfect autumn mornings, which had been our fortunate lot since we arrived at Oye, had so often been the prelude to our day's climbing.

To-day, however, the fjord steamer had long since come and gone when six of us sat down to an unhurried breakfast, and the sun had some time ago topped the rampart of peaks which towers above this little community on every side save the one where lay the fjord like glass in the slight haze of an 'Indian Summer' day. The silence and serenity was broken only by the waterfall that came down from a few thousand feet somewhere above our heads, on the other side of the village. Behind the hotel, rising almost from the garden, rose Slogen, its graceful pointed summit 5,000 feet above and scarcely more than that distance away horizontally. Hidden behind Slogen was Brekkeitind — the 'Broken Peak'—a shattered mass of rock with jagged ridges extending in four directions to cradle three glaciers in the cwms between. This peak, which we had seen and admired from the summit of Slogen, was our objective.

The Norwegian guidebook gave the time by the easiest route as 5 — 6 hours; but we had already learned to accord considerable respect to these 'times.' Moreover, we had planned a route traversing all three glaciers, and having several strenuous days behind us did not propose to hurry. Our intention of spending the night at the Patchell Hut (2,800 feet) was also as good a reason as any for having an off-day — and it would be cooler going up through the woods in the evening. The day was therefore spent in unhurried preparation: food for our meals and some to spare, a rucksack-full of wood for the stove, ropes and ice-axes. We carried no blankets, to save weight and because the weather was hot.

By four o'clock we were off. We had intended to walk the mile and a half of road to where the track began, but we found that our rucksacks were already stowed in one of the hotel cars; it was clear that our host had no intention of permitting our tricounis

to be eroded by a metalled road. So we rolled away in state through the village, to the discomforture of three sweet young Americans who rose as one woman, with cameras ready to click, prepared to immortalise in their albums these curious English ruffians.

There was a good path to the hut, clearly marked — on the map. There are many such in Sunnmore, and there is a simplicity and directness of purpose about them. Whatever may intervene, they push straight to their objective. In England artful zigzags and deviations naively suggest that you are not really going uphill; in Norway the path makes no secret of the steep gradient. It climbs so directly through a dense tangle of birch-scrub and undergrowth that your eyes and feet are constantly out of touch — but this, of course, is when you have discovered where it begins, a problem not to be solved with map and compass. This path chanced to be one we already knew, so that it was merely a question of putting one foot above the other through woods and scrub for some 2,000 feet, when the angle eased off, the vegetation became less dense, and it was less oppressively hot. I remember the path pleasantly for the numerous plants of Grass of Parnassus which grew beside it in the moist undergrowth.

Out of the woods, we were glad of the cool breeze. Here we had reached the high valley of Habostaddal. To our right rose the twin peaks of Smorskredtind, to our left soared Slogen and Brekktind. Behind us, and far away below, the steep-sided valley of Norangdal, from which we had ascended, lay with the blue-green fjord in its lap. Another twenty minutes over level rocky ground, bare now of scrub, brought us to the hut and — so quickly do climatic conditions change with altitude in Norway — within a few hundred feet of the permanent snowline.

This hut, which bears the name of an Englishman (C. W. Patchell, climbing companion of Slingsby) is small and primitive but sufficient to the needs of climbers. Six of us filled it completely. The six spring mattresses were welcome, but we had an inadequacy of blankets. The weather had been hot in the valley, but at 3 a.m. and nearly 3,000 feet up it was far otherwise, and miserably so. No doubt three of us presented a touching picture tucked up in a nice new Norwegian national flag; but as a blanket its warmth was — well, symbolical. A dark figure crawled across my legs and lit the stove to make tea, thereby becoming universally popular. At six o'clock we left the hut.

In a few hundred yards we had crossed the narrow valley and reached the moraines of the glacier. Now we came out of the shadow of Smorskredtind, behind us in the East, and into the early-morning sunshine, which combined with the steepness of the moraine to produce some warmth in our stiffened limbs. A tongue of glacier seemed to offer the easiest route of ascent, but the snow was hard-frozen and steep enough to make step-cutting necessary, so the large boulders of the moraine were resorted to again. This initial obstacle passed, the glacier proper was reached and gave no difficulty. Two hours easy going up the steep incline of snow followed. The only sound amid the silence of a cloudless morning was the swish of our boots lightly kicking foothold up the trackless expanse of white. Fantastically carved ridges enclosed us on either side, the summit towered in full view ahead.

By 9-30 a.m. we had gained the rocks above the glacier. To cross over the jagged ridge on our right in order to traverse the second glacier, reaching the summit thence, meant an artificial detour and was abandoned. In front rose the wide gully, immediately below the final rocks, which is the usual route — but it was filled with very unsafe-looking snow. A route up the rocks of the ridge on our left appeared more prudent, and this we took. There was no great difficulty about these rocks, which were clean and sound; but whereas it had seemed that they would bring us to the summit in half-an-hour of moderate climbing, in fact they occupied us for over two hours. Thus can one's sense of distance be led astray in unaccustomed hills.

A final abseil into the gully beyond the treacherous masses of snow, a short rock-scramble, and another Norwegian peak had been bagged. Lying in the hot sun we could settle down to our sandwiches and our thoughts.

Mountaineering in Norway was very satisfying. We had met no one; there were no tracks on the glacier, no nail-scratches on the rocks, and (heaven be praised) no rusty tins on the summit. It was quite possible that we were the first to climb Brekketind this year. And all around, fading far away into the autumn haze, stretched endless range upon range of snow-clad tops. Had they all been climbed? Did they, even, all possess names? For us, here was virgin country, unknown, unexplored, a wonderland of pointed peaks, grey rocks and snow, with here and there a glint of the dark-blue fjords to add colour to the scene. This was real mountaineering, not too easy, not too difficult, needing no guides,



BREKKETIND (Norway)

Norman Willson

the peaks not so high that they could not be reached in a day. This morning's route had been easy enough, but we had had perfect weather and good snow; the glacier had shown only an occasional crevasse, and we carried no detailed large-scale map. But in less perfect conditions a route such as this could be sufficiently serious. Mountaineering 'sense' and the compass would be essential, though the available maps would scarcely help.

Two hours, perhaps, of pleasant idleness passed before we turned to the descent. Whither away now? The glacier by which we hoped to descend on the further side was 800 feet below at the foot of a great rock-wall. Would that intimidatingly steep face 'go,' and if not, what would? A return by the way we had come was unthinkable. Our leader dived into the first gully in sight and said, "I think it's down here," which perhaps is characteristic of him. At least the gully had the merit of being straight and direct, but this, it soon appeared, was its only merit. It would not have been so bad had there been a few belays, and if everything it contained had not shown such an abominable tendency to follow us down. Stones and rocks that shoot down at the least touch and in one or two joyful bounds arrive on the glacier below are apt to make one's thoughts a trifle gloomy. However, after 200 feet or so of this a traverse was possible on to the ridge on our right; a 50-foot abseil down an overhanging chimney to the snow of another gully followed, and the tension relaxed somewhat.

But not much. For by now it was mid-afternoon and the snow was soft and wet. Cautiously, with axes plunged right in, we worked downwards, leaving a mighty staircase of handholds and footholds in witness of our route. A slip here was not to be thought of, for an axe would scarcely have held. 500 feet lower easy rocks were reached and the ropes could be stowed away. I could look back at that staircase and recall the numberless times I had wiped the sweat from my eyes with a wet half-frozen hand before tucking the hand under my armpit to get some semblance of feeling into it. This snow-gully, incidentally, appears in the accompanying photograph and is the one with a flat top immediately below the summit. The route of ascent was on the hidden side of the peak. The two summits of Smorskredtind are seen on the right against the sky.

The bergsschrund offered no difficulty and in less than half-an-hour we had glissaded and run down the glacier. Seated on a convenient rock on the moraine we could allow ourselves the luxury

of our remaining food and a cigarette. And then, in the evening light, came the five-mile tramp down the wild valley to Urke by the fjord. It was 6-30 p.m., 12½ hours after leaving the hut, when we reached the tiny landing-stage at Urke; and the Broken Peak had become another link in the chain of mountain memories.

If it had not so begun, at least the day ended on the fjord steamer; a circumstance which, as usual, conduced to hot coffee in the little saloon.

There is much comfort in high hills
And a great easing of the heart.
We look upon them, and our nature fills
With loftier images from their life apart.

—G. Winthrop Young.