

No. 2 GULLY BY TORCHLIGHT

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Considering the particularly severe conditions on Nevis during Easter, 1951, the party that set out to tackle No. 2 Gully was ignorantly optimistic and indefensibly light-hearted. Only the leader mistrusted the expedition from the start, and he was carried forward by a desire not to disappoint the others. Out of the four members of the party, only C. and myself were in any sort of training, J. and I had practically no experience of snow and ice work, and only C. had any detailed knowledge of the Ben itself.

A very late start was made from Fort William, and the party ambled gently along the pony track from Achintee on a perfect sunny morning. The slow pace was originally set to encourage those members who were out of training, but after a mile or so the sun imbued all the party with a leisurely contentment in their surroundings and the lack of any desire to exert themselves. On arrival at the C.I.C. hut a lengthy halt was made during which we consumed a large lunch, and the ascent to the gully was started later than ever by an overfed party gazing dreamily up at summits bathed in idyllic sunshine.

The first slopes went easily, if slowly, with nothing to contend with beyond an unexpectedly deep layer of dry snow, sometimes resting loosely on ice in which step-cutting was necessary. It was on the wide traverse before the gully proper, where all were plunging about in deep snow with elephantine struggles, that the confidence of the party received its first jolt. C. suddenly called a halt and announced, "This is only wind-slab; it's exceedingly dangerous and may avalanche at any moment; we shouldn't be on it at all" (long pause) "—I don't like it." After prodding about with an ice-axe, which descended into a gaping black hole beneath loose snow and a thin compacted layer, I discovered the meaning of wind-slab and let out a horrified yell; this and the holes impressed the others even more than their leader's warning.

The party continued cautiously, hoping for better footing, and then realised that safety could only be assured when two members had firm belays in the gully proper. From then on at least one member was anxiously calculating the distance between the leader and the gully entrance and weighing this against the slowness of the party galumphing about in loose snow; it seemed impossible that our movements should not avalanche the whole

slope. There seemed to be a long crack leading from the gully wall up on the left—or was this imagination? At this point, C. turned round with bewildered face and announced in cheerful tones, almost indignantly, “I can’t *think* why this slope hasn’t avalanched yet!”

Remarks like this are engraved in the memory, especially as C. had already descended one Nevis gully in the company of an avalanche.

Within the narrow gully, if the spice of immediate danger was lacking, conditions were less pleasant. The draught up the gully was particularly powerful; spindrift was whipped up from the floor, powdered snow lashed from the gully walls either side, whilst from above C. shovelled down a cover, up to 18in. deep, of loose dry snow before it was possible to cut steps—the combined effect was to envelop the whole party in its own little blizzard until one felt that the whole world was a cloud of whirling blinding snow. As No. 1 cleared the ground for new steps, those already cut were completely obliterated, and No. 2 had to clear them where it was possible to guess their position or to cut fresh ones. These burrowing antics were repeated by Nos. 3 and 4, despite the fact that the party were in very close formation.

The sun was now setting. It chose this evening for a splendid display. In intervals between whirls of snow it was possible to look back and see, framed by the gully walls, ridge after ridge of snow summits bathed in a pink Alpine glow and topped by small rosy clouds.

As darkness fell the cold intensified and everything began to freeze up. Clothing stiffened, locks of hair formed miniature icicles, eyebrows shaped themselves into little ice bushes, and eyelashes stuck together as we automatically closed our eyes against the whirling snow. The party began to fight its way rather grimly up the gully. Everyone was putting forth maximum effort with apparently little effect. The only view was the twisting gully walls, with an occasional glimpse of stars overhead seen through blinding snow. I was much intrigued to hear No. 3 encouraging No. 4 by promising a view of the cornice or a lessening of the slope beyond certain outjutting rocks—promises which I was quite sure would not be fulfilled for a considerable time.

It was a relief when the slope steepened further, the loose snow decreased in depth, and we were cutting hand and foot-holds up the final ice slope to the cornice. This year the cornice was

a magnificent double one—a large overhanging ice roof festooned with icicles and a subsidiary snow lip underneath. We all crowded thankfully into the shelter of the cave between the two cornices, rather dubiously belayed into the snow lip. My fears for our security were increased by one of the party who was so numbed with cold and exhaustion that she insisted on sitting, quite imperturbably, on the very edge of the loose snow lip, dangling her legs over space, until pulled into the cave by the rest. We were rewarded, however, by a fantastic scene. Torchlight revealed a glistening ice palace of strange whiteness and beneath the small circle of light was a gulf of black walls and misty darkness suggesting infinite depth. It had the faery quality of Walter de la Mare—

*“Elf-light, bat-light,
Touchwood-light and toad-light.”*

Suddenly a light shone in the C.I.C. hut in the glen below, a small signal from the normal world. G. produced amazing supplies from a small rucksack—a thermos of hot coffee, a small flask of rum, sweets, glucose and chocolate. He seemed to have come prepared for this strange midnight picnic between the two cornices. A bivvy was even mooted, as we were loth to leave the comparative comfort for the bitter cold of the summit; but it was ruled out as unwise without further equipment.

We made our exit from the gully by a traverse between the two cornices to a steep loose snow-bank in which we plunged above the knees as we struggled up. The snow-bank must have been considerably disturbed by our passage, but our guardian angels were in fine form by now, and we reached the summit safely. The final struggle came when we discovered that the snow slopes down to Lochan Meall-an-t-Suidhe were hard ice. It was necessary to rope down and cut steps all the way to the lower Pony Track. This took several hours of concentrated effort, for any major slip would have involved the whole party. But a grand display of the Northern Lights, apparently put on for our especial benefit, enlivened our slow progress; and when, at last, we were stumbling down the Pony Track, a large moon rose majestically over the shoulder of Carn Dearg.

It was a strangely-lit scene as we turned to say farewell to the Ben, massive and imperturbable in the moonlight. Tired as we were, some of the serene greatness of high mountains seeped into our spirits and left us at peace.