

GARDYLOO GULLY

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"Very severe . . . in winter, the difficulty of the climb depends on the amount and the condition of the snow . . . under ordinary conditions there is a tunnel of varying dimensions under the big chockstone . . . the best way up this is usually up a steep icefall, which may be vertical for a short distance . . . if there is a great deal of snow, the whole through-route and chockstone may be completely covered, and the climb will be comparatively easy up a uniform snow slope. Obviously the time required depends on the conditions encountered." (*Climber's Guide to Ben Nevis*, by G. Graham MacPhee.)

"Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety."
(*Anthony and Cleopatra*, Act 2, Scene 2, by William Shakespeare).

There came to Fort William, after breakfast, on the second day of the 1948 Easter meet, cumulus cloud and a blue sky, concomitants that can by no means be guaranteed in that part of the Highlands. Another favourable portent was the sight of Cyril Machin sunning himself on a stone wall, in his Port-na-Long Harris tweeds and with his ice axe. Gerry Britton, Galloway and I speeded our preparations, for the prospect of a day out with Cyril was one to quicken the interest. Ensued the clatter of nailed boots on pavement, for Vibrams were fewer then, the slushy track by Achintee, the long slog up the pony track to the col, where for the first time one felt that there really were some mountains in the district—these may be touched upon in passing, and conveniently forgotten. They are avoidable by taking a bus to the distillery, then trudging up the floor of the valley to the Allt a'Mhuilinn. One might almost as soon forget the long toil up the Gully itself, where I learned that the name does not mean Beware of the Wolf, but something much more squalid. The chopping of steps was varied only by the kicking of steps, monotonous until the upper part of the Gully was reached. There the barrage that greeted the party was positively unforgettable. Pieces of ice, of all shapes and sizes, came cart-wheeling down. At times they became airborne, and hummed like bees as they flew by. To anyone who had lived through the blitzes in a large town, that sound meant "Duck"—and one never forgets how.

At the ice pitch, which to all intents and purposes was the climb, Gerry unlimbered his rucksack and produced quarts of hot coffee, for indeed, he preferred his climbs that way. Cyril produced a gully hammer and a piece of gas pipe flattened at one end. He took the right-hand side, and to that end hopped and skipped about on the greenish tinted ice, changing feet as though he were on gritstone. His ice chippings and a brisk deluge of water from the melting snow

above the right-hand wall, cooled our ardour as we waited for him to reach his first stance. I went up third. By that time, the holds were full of water, and Cyril's belay—the piece of gas pipe—now had a hole twice its own size, and would waggle two inches in all directions. I hoped that Gerry would be sure-footed as I brought him up, and he was. Then came the first sight of the cornice, which had collapsed in the middle—a horse shoe framing blue sky, over the marble white vista of the upper gully. Below, there was rather more rock about, with the seeming infinity of the Allt a'Mhuilina as a background. The last bit was just a stroll, with a shoulder-high scramble over the broken cornice. Suffice it to say that we then did the Dearg Ridge home, thus ensuring that we did not commit the unspeakable crime of arriving back at Rhu Mhor in decent time for dinner—and that Cyril went down with measles on the following day.

It was not until 1951 that Gerry and I felt equal to tackling it by ourselves—he, clanking like the ghost of the headless knight, with a fringe of ironmongery around his waist. Variety was added to the programme by a completely luxurious ride in Gerry's car up to Achintee and the scoring of a direct hit on Gerry's nose by an ice missile in the Upper Gully. Nowhere on the ice pitch did conditions tempt me to skip around like Cyril. Having tied my hapless second on to a fairly long snow piton, I went up an obtuse inside corner on the right, formed of fairly hard snow, then mantel-shelfed into a trough, green ice by now, that sloped upwards at about forty-five degrees. Icicles shattered and rained down on him as I blew myself up like a bullfrog in order to fill the trough and not slip back. From there on, I emulated the serpent, squirming caterpillar-wise on and up, probably the most ungraceful figure ever seen in the Gully. The first belay was in a saddle-shaped snowdrift, soft enough to take the ice axe up to the head. The next was under the cornice, where after tying Gerry on to a nice thick icicle, and standing on a previously collapsed cornice to gain height, I chopped a gorgeous big hole in the lip of the existing one, then climbed up and through it, with a final double roll on to the plateau, just in case the cornice, on second thoughts, decided to let go. That "After Gardyloo" feeling? It was manifested, on this occasion, by an earnest appreciation of the sunset glow on the snow-covered Mamores, and an equally earnest desire to slake our thirsts in the Nevis Bank bar.

There followed a series of most salutary lessons, delivered by the Ben in person, in order to cure any erroneous impression that Gardyloo was just "a piece of cake". On the following occasion, for instance, accompanied by a Cambridge man called Mike and John Davies, I tried to lead it, but found that the ice trough was quite a lot bigger—quite impossible for the wedging technique. The ice was

too thin for the cutting of steps, so I eventually shot out backwards, was for a moment suspended ignominiously in mid-air from a runner, then deposited on my back in a snow drift. Time was running out, so we came down, finishing in pitch darkness near the Aluminium works.

The next year, a doctor from Hull was my companion. He started an avalanche in a side gully, merely by laughing loudly, and since this phenomenon was new to me, the impression was profound. We joined forces with a couple of Scots at the ice pitch, and once more failed. This time I peeled off while trying to haul myself up bodily by means of a piton driven between the ice and the rock at the near, extremely rounded, edge of the ice trough. The piton came with me, and most of the ice. On our arrival back at the C.I.C. hut, another Scot glowered at us, saying, "Sae ye'rrrre some mairrrre that ha' been tryin' tae commit suicide!" He thought the cornice was not safe.

Another Easter found me going up by myself. It was snowing at the hut and became a blizzard higher up. Could this be the time when the snow covering would turn the ice pitch into a mere walk? No! Although the ice trough was only at shoulder height, it was in the mood playfully to whuff about half-a-ton of snow into my face, of which I side-stepped all but the odd seven pounds or so that went down my neck. It was another failure, and raining pitchforks in the gathering darkness at the hut on the way down. The words "piece of cake" faded and died.

In 1956, fate seemed to relent; in company with a couple of Loughborough College types, the earlier portions of the climb had seemed very much as before. This time, however, the cave in the middle of the ice pitch went in to a fair depth. One could climb up inside it, out of a window that faced *down* the Gully, then up the vertical ice wall above the window. Merciful Providence had decreed that big bucket steps, ready cut, should be waiting in any place one could conceivably have wanted them, and a piece of one-inch conduit, with a carabinier attached, firmly whammed into the window sill. A complete purist might have ignored both the peg and the steps and insisted on cutting fresh ones, but I did neither. Add to this that the cornice was only knee high and the forbidden words "piece of cake" began to creep back into my mind again.

"He also serves who only stands and waits." That can happen in this gully. In 1957, a foursome—Norman Cochran, Malcolm, Peter Heaton and I, were joined by, or overtook, a fifth man, without an ice axe, fairly high up the Gully. Norman suggested, perhaps too gently, that he could come with us for just a little way, but should

leave us and go down when the Gully got narrower and steeper. At the foot of the ice pitch, he was still there—and a lover and his lass, taking the only feasible route on the right-hand side (no cave this time) were just cutting their first steps. From then until my next step forward was exactly one hour. The lover and his lass had gone; Norman had taken Malcolm and Peter along, and, in parting, had suggested, again quite gently, that the man without an ice axe should tie on to my rope. "So up the stairs I went again"—but this time the fairly familiar ice trough was well under a rock overhang, and for quite a time my feet were on the ceiling and my back was on the ice. A quaint position, but "It seemed the best thing to do at the time"—as the man said in court afterwards after jumping through a plate-glass window. I looked at the axeless man below, as he gazed in innocent wonder, through the V formed by my ceiling stretched inverted legs, and wondered just what would happen if . . . then felt for a chopped step with the heel of my right boot. Once found, and turning around on it until the axe could reach the first bit of snow above the ice pitch, I could hear a chorus of whistles blowing down below in the Allt a'Mhuilinn. Above the ice pitch, but not out of the Gully yet; my second to bring up and the belay no better than it needed to be, even though ignorant of the fact that the whistles betokened a fatality they worried me considerably. One way and another, it was a relief to get up and out of it; with the hour long wait, the acrobatics on the ice and the whistles blowing below, the words "piece of cake" never even came to mind.

Came the Easter of 1958 and, as on one or two previous occasions, I started up alone. It became increasingly apparent, as the slope became steeper, that there were people ahead of, and above me. As the whizzing debris increased in density and volume, I was inclined to place the number at over a score, though it was just possible to avoid the worst of it by keeping well to the left of the main avalanche track. The novelty of the ice pitch was in some sense a recompense for all the discomfort of the ascent. The cave in the centre was now a bridge under which one could pass. *Could* pass? Crowds *had* passed. Clambering up the last steep bit of snow before the ice pitch, legs and boots could be seen under the bridge, tramping rhythmically up and down. "Boots, boots, boots," came to mind, but was abandoned because I knew no more of that masterpiece. It was succeeded by "Onward Christian Soldiers". The tempo was all right but, after all, nothing was known of the religious views of all those boots. Another one of Kipling's "Thunderin' Multitoodinous Hooves" finally superseded it, and still saying it I passed under the bridge and joined them.

There were about a dozen there, marking time on the spot, and

one man pegging his way up the ice. It stretched upwards, in rolling ocean waves all the way up to the remaining bit of cornice, at an angle rather steeper than forty-five degrees. It was an hour-and-a-half before I moved forward again, having spent this time hewing a stance six feet by six out of the solid ice in order to keep warm. Even so my feet suffered some frostbite. Tying on to the tail end of rope and humbly, albeit precariously, balancing on one boot nail, I grubbed and levered out the pegs on my way up. My feet were not too good for the remaining days of that Easter meet. "If I were you," said Norman, "I'd sign a non-aggression pact with Gardyloo." A good idea, perhaps, but—"infinite variety"? What other changes might it be capable of making in its repertoire?

That question has now, in part, been answered. The passage of time has brought me with the advancing years no corresponding access of wisdom. Trying it with Malcolm and a lady, we withdrew because of the queue at the ice pitch. The following year the two Yorkshiremen who had been at the head of that queue, found in me a willing third. Finally, this Easter of 1962 I went up solo and found that it was all mine. The cornice was a bit hair-raising. Failing to make sufficient height for my purpose and in the face of an obstinate refusal by my ice axe to stick more than half-way in, I found myself standing on the head of it, to make the final mantel-shelf up and over. Recovery of the axe was effected by lying face downwards and lassoing it with a sling.

Surely, that is now enough—even for "infinite variety"?

