

## A VIEW FROM THE GAP

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The dankness proffered no enthusiasm, the greyness no exhilaration, and the silence weighed us down. Above us, the ever steepening curve of snow, occasionally broken by grey-green ice undulating over outcrops of rock, held little pleasure for us, and so with a temper derived from discontent we kicked viciously into the brittle frozen snow covering the avalanche debris below No. 2 Gully. The line of the comb reared above our right shoulders, and calf muscles began at last to tire. An excuse to stop and crampon up.

Leaving the silence behind us, we moved ahead easily, almost with pleasure, up firm snow to the foot of a delicate snow arete coming up from the Garadh to the foot of the gully. As the guide book prophesied, the base was cut off by an enormous blanket of shimmering ice, bulging and undulating, and yet, like an enormous jelly, quite smooth; visible but untouchable, a giant octopus green and gleaming, trailing vast drooping tentacles to the snow below. It was repulsive. To the right the mass curved upwards in a series of bulging steps lying against a rib of frozen scree, verglas and powder snow, and further to the right laps of ice tumbled down over some rocky steps. Malcolm Cochran kicked up the last steep snow, moved along under the tentacles and disappeared behind a bulge, from whence came the steady thwacking noise indicative of step cutting in ice, and the gleaming showers ran away down the slope in a noisy tinkling stream as the rope steadily moved out. The rope movement and the sounds of step cutting were continuous, for Malcolm cuts steps in a flowing, effortless way; his steps are always where they should be, they fall into the right place naturally, and above them he climbs quite silently—a technician. The contrast in our styles is enormous; my movements are jerky, spasmodic, humdrum, up-and-down; steps come and go—good ones, poor ones, too many, too few, and the whole business is carried out in a torrent of invective, self-criticism and the joy which arises from desperation! This is known as the outcrop upbringing.

We remained in shadow all day; it was cold, and as the wind scuffled the snow across the little arete from the Garadh the arc of snow led the eye down quite steeply to the complications of the Comb and then up across to sunlit snow and rock. To the right, across No. 4 Gully, I could see South Trident Buttress perfected by a magnificent tapestry of ice. In place of the waterfall was a highway of ice, up which the eye of faith could discern a route for the morrow, until withdrawn from its speculations by the sudden shattering tones of metal hammered into rock, a tuneless clanking accompanied by

grunts, and a cry to follow. The snow was too dry and too soft, but above the ice was delightful and a flight of delicate scrapes brought me up to Malcolm.

"Sorry—no belay!"

"What about the peg?"

"Crack's blind!"

I cut round him to the right to a series of ice bulges and put in two ultra-hopeful ice pegs, retired, and hammered my axe in. It popped out, so I tried elsewhere. Malcolm excavated a rock groove from below soft unstable snow, which moved off at a high velocity (too high for comfort) accompanied by that nerve-wracking slithering sound well known in this sort of situation.. Crampon points were teetering on isolated outcrops of verglas and frozen rock, and further clearing operations produced "white-out" conditions.

And then the rope began to move again—steadily, methodically, leading to where a piton was being driven in with a joyfully secure sort of ring. Collecting ice axe and odd pegs from where they had fallen, I set off up the groove, which was coated with soft, pitifully useless snow, and then out over the bulge, following the well-cut trail.

To reach the gully proper we had to traverse left, and were relieved to find not ice, but good hard snow. This allowed us to gain a rapid 350 feet, by which time it was 3.00 p.m. and we had five hours of daylight left. On the Ben time is like a cancer, always present, always gnawing away, leaving us to do what we can towards striking a balance between caution on the long unprotected runouts and a satisfactory rate of progress. We paused awhile; below us the gully dropped away steeply, and the steep slopes of No. 3 Gully seemed flat, level terraces. Our angle of perception had changed.

Above this point the gully narrowed, and a tricky bulging ice pitch guarded the way. However, Malcolm soon got over this and another one hundred and twenty feet of climbing brought the final chimney within reach of inspection. It was not a pleasant sight; the narrow ice-choked chimney was protected on the right by overhanging ice bulges and on the left by a series of deceptive ice-coated ledges. Higher, the chimney twisted to the left and included a chockstone, now a wide bottomless bulge of ice. Above this was a steep narrow ice ramp hemmed in between vertical walls covered in verglas.

Leading now, I moved up the first narrow rivulet of ice, compressed by the bulging left wall, and climbed twenty-five feet, using a series of niches excavated by the piton hammer, after which I was glad of a rest. The obvious exit was a pull out on to and up the left wall, and a swing up using a sideways hold for crampons on the

verglas. This was thwarted by the rucksack catching on the far side, which permitted me no other move than to drop back into the gully for a rest.

Malcolm then thought that it was his turn, so whilst I belayed with an axe knocked deep in the ice and a peg in the wall he made rapid progress, having left his rucksack behind. He pulled out on to the left wall, where he agreed that the appearance was deceptive as the ledges sloped outwards at about fifty degrees. He knocked a peg into the ice bulge, and paused. Then delicately, very carefully, but nevertheless very strenuously he leant out across the void, the two front claws stroking over the tops of minute ice bulges, and gently bridged up, out and over the bulge. There was a frantic scramble, ice whirled past, crampon points waved an urgent but incoherent message, and then he moved quickly; with his back against the right boundary wall and with crampons dug viciously into the left wall he drove in another peg—and then silence.

I broke it with encouraging noises, and was answered by grunts full of feeling. He made some further progress up the chimney, poised on ice, surrounded by ice, appearing from below as a squat ungainly figure crouching antagonistic against an alien world.

“What now?”

The description in the guide book gave no ideas, but memory of Jimmy Lees' article in the 1960 *C.U.M.C. Journal* served.

“There should be good holds on the left wall,” I encouraged, helpfully, hopefully. Laughter, somewhere between joyful gurgles and hysterical babblings, broke loose above, but activity broke out also. He began intensive clearing operations on the left wall, which, owing to the fact that I was immediately in the line of fire, greatly increased my sense of participation in the climb. To watch the exploratory movements of a body suspended on two crampon points and swaying in and out on a verglas wall eighty feet above created an almost unbearable tension, but suddenly he made a huge movement up and to the left, followed by another.

“O.K., cracked it,” came floating down as he moved on to the large block crossed by millions on the Tower Ridge pilgrimage.

I dug out my belaying peg, arranged Malcolm's sack in mine, gathered the equipment together, put it on my back, and subsided to the floor. Carrying two rucksacks, spare clothing, food, torches, 240 feet of rope, spare slings, snaplinks and pegs is not amusing. I struggled desperately to fit in the first chimney, and the pull out on to the left wall was distinctly unpleasant. I paused at the first ice peg, attempting to extract it; tapping, knocking, cajoling, cutting down

beside it, cutting round it and finally twisting eventually freed it from its bloodstained hole, causing its owner to execute a startled teeter on crampon points. Above, the bulge leant awkwardly, and the sack pulled outwards badly, but the use of a piton and the hammer allowed the necessary grovel over to be made. For the next part the ice was at an angle of seventy degrees, and the unrecommended practice of backing up on disarranged verglas and a heave on a peg ended that section. Another struggle resulted in a record pink patch of ice, but at least the peg was out. The left wall, smeared with verglas and covered with powder snow, looked appalling. Above, a gentle tinkling sound intrigued me.

“What’s going on up there?”

“Why?”

“What’s the noise?”

“Shivering and peg rattle—can’t stop it.”

I took this to be a comment on my rate of progress, but in Tower Gap at 7.00 p.m., soaked through by sweat and perspiration from within and by melted snow and ice from without, and in a steady breeze with only shirt and anorak, Malcolm was understandably freezing up.

“How do I get out of here?”

“Heave on the peg, and then grab a jug five feet up and left.” A pity, I had just removed the peg. A struggle with the rucksack and I could bridge out, wider and higher, and then turning half right jerk the bag round in an arc. A furious scabble, and I joined my leader, a frozen lump, chattering, shivering, miserable, wet, cold and covered in snow and ice, his face a blotchy blue and white.

The Gap seemed hard, the sack swayed on my shoulders, and my bloodstained hands inspired no confidence. On Tower Ridge there was no welcome trail home, just slow, tedious snow clearing operations to reach the grey verglas beneath. A little corner was choked with ice, but a sling over an ice bulge solved that problem. Malcolm, a shivering blurr, came up to me and I continued along the ridge, now bathed in a pale pink glow by the setting sun. We reached the last rock buttress and Malcolm, having thawed out a little, assumed the lead and made a series of delicate balance-movements across a line of friable bulges, finally disappearing into the night. Ice whirled away into the gloomy depths somewhere around No. 2 Gully, and I followed the last line of Cochran steps.

Tower Gap, West Gully and Glover’s Chimney not only provide the view from Tower Gap, they also provide a fitting way to reach it.