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## **FIRST ASCENT OF THE DEVIL'S KITCHEN, 1895.**

By J. M. A. THOMSON.

At the beginning of March the Great Frost of 1895 had begun to yield along the North Wales Littoral, but the thaw had not yet penetrated to higher levels, and around Ogwen the streams were still silent and the mountains ice-bound.

At 10 o'clock on March 3rd Hughes and I left Benglog Cottage, and striking a bee-line across Llyn Idwal, then sheeted with seven inches of ice, proceeded up slopes of snow towards the Devil's Kitchen; the surface crust was fairly strong, and only occasionally did we break through and flounder in the deep, soft snow beneath. Within the chasm the gradient increased gently, but the slope finally steepened to a severe angle, and the labour of ascent was materially augmented by the powdery condition of the snow which kept sliding from above with exasperating regularity, and obliterating our steps as soon as cut. The slope tapered to a chisel-edge, ending abruptly at the mouth of a semi-circular cavern; this was roofed with rock and floored with snow, slender pillarets of ice in welded clusters formed the walls, the whole structure appearing so fragile and delicate as to suggest almost a creation of the fancy—strange and beautiful.

The cavern was some 25 feet deep from the roof; we fixed a rope to a planted axe and slithered down into it; the side we thus descended was a straight wall of snow and ice, against the outer side of which rested the slope we had previously ascended. The cavern occupied half the space between the walls of the Kitchen; outside it on the right stood a vertical bastion of ice, and this we hopefully began to attack. At first we could merely stand on the snow edge and deliver side-blows at the wall, for a large quantity of encrusted icicles had to be hewn away before it became possible to stand erect beneath and breast the obstacle. When a base of operations had been made we began to construct a series of steps easy of descent, by this means we were enabled to relieve one another, and endeavour to thaw in the relative warmth of the cavern where we found a welcome shelter from the wind which was constantly whirling the granular snow into columns and whisking its blinding grapeshot into our faces. Progress was inconceivably slow, for, as the right hand was always engaged in maintaining the balance, and there was no possibility of a body

swing, the axe could not be used to advantage. According to tradition, our ancestor Thor was armed with a hammer for his battles with the Frost Giants, and with such a weapon we, too, were luckily provided in the form of a hatchet, surreptitiously removed from the worthy Mrs. Jones' coal-cellar at Ogwen. This implement proved of the utmost utility until the head took leave of the haft, and, glissading the snow slopes, vanished from sight. The head was recovered, and the hatchet, ingeniously repaired with string, continued to render us valuable service.

At two o'clock we discussed provisions in the cavern. Twelve ginger-biscuits and a morsel of chocolate was all we could muster between us, for we had anticipated an early return to Ogwen; yet, as this meagre meal was to suffice till eleven that night, it must be dignified by the name of lunch. Hughes renewed operations, and with so much added vigour that, half-an-hour later, he cut right through the ice wall, and I exchanged places with him to gain a view of the situation. The aperture was large enough to admit head and shoulders, and opened into a circular pit, two-thirds of the enclosing wall being of smooth ice, and the remaining of sheer rock, down which a dribble of water trickled from above. It was about 10 feet in diameter, and stretched upwards some 20 feet from the place of puncture, and downwards perhaps 30 feet, but owing to darkness the bottom was not visible. The view was singularly impressive, and suggestive of grave possibilities in the event of a collapse. The presence of the pit was an unwelcome revelation; we had previously supposed the ice to be solid to the rock, and as it was plain that we were engaged upon a giant icicle of questionable solidity, formed by the freezing of the water-fall, we reconsidered the situation, and sorrowfully concluded that it would be unwise to attempt further progress. It chanced, however, that the hatchet had been left at the hole, and, on going up to recover it, I fell almost mechanically to hewing at the ice above, and was encouraged by a little progress. Hughes then came under me, and with incredible patience held my foot for thirty-five minutes until I could advance to small projection of ice festooned with icicles, which stood out from the main mass like a bracket from a wall. Hughes then retired to the cavern to act as sheet anchor in case of need, and here passed the time in elaborating many artistic designs, converting, as I afterwards learnt, the cavern into a comfortable boudoir, provided, too, with effective ventilation, for on striking the back wall of ice he broke into another chasm generally similar to that described above. My slow rate of progress was partly due to the impossi-

bility of delivering very accurate blows with the hatchet, inasmuch as it was necessary to bow the head at the moment of impact in order to allow the detached fragments to fall thereon—at least, this plan was found by experience distinctly preferable to the alternative method of receiving them in the face. At length the wall gave way again; it was stronger than might be supposed from its thickness, here less than an inch, for it was ribbed and strengthened on the outside by icicles in bas-relief. The hole proved useful as a hand—and foothold, and enabled me to reach sooner the level of a snow slope on the left, which hung over the entrance to the cavern, and from here I could reach with an axe to cut a step in it a foot above its abrupt termination. In the swing across the bearing powers of the step had to be taken on trust, and on such occasions few will not come nigh to momentarily envying the poet his “foothold tenon'd and mortised in granite.”

The change to snow was very welcome; the slope, however, was abnormally steep, lying, as it did, on the outward face of the great wedged rock that dominates the pitch, the angle of which, according to an imperfect measurement, is about 80 degrees. It was found expedient to hollow away the snow behind each step to avoid being tilted backwards by the bend of the knee in ascending. Thirteen feet above the gradient sensibly diminished, and the difficulties were at an end.

Hughes, who had come out on the wall to allow me the full run of our 80-foot rope, had long been waiting with eager patience; he now came up, making short work of the difficulties that had delayed me so long. After three hours' separation it was doubly pleasant to revel together in that exquisite feeling of bliss which is the climber's meed of victory.

It was now 7.15, and the intensity of the cold, far more than the gathering darkness, forbade a prolonged halt. We began to descend, as we thought, by the ordinary route, but the uncertain light and altered aspect of the surroundings may have misled us; we were soon descending a rapidly steepening sheet of ice, and chipping had already begun, when I suddenly recollected the irresistible charms of the descent into Llanberis Pass, and expatiated so eloquently thereon that Hughes uncomplainingly resigned all the pleasures in prospect of cutting steps in the dark down to the Cwm of Llyn Idwal.

The plateau looked quite unfamiliar in its covering of deep snow; in vain we scanned our surroundings for some trace of Llyn y Cwn, and finally discovered its existence beneath the snow we were treading. As we trudged slowly on, night came down,

and the cold was unspeakable; our one desire was to reach a lower level and be warm again, and down the slopes of Cwm Patric we plunged in a series of inelegant slides, and euphemistically termed it glissading. At rare intervals short gleams of moonlight displayed dissolving views of singular beauty, and then we took our bearings. At 10.30 we reached the Dolbadarn Inn, but our entry was delayed, for the lamplight showed that the nether portion of an under garment had broken loose from its moorings, and, being frozen stiff as cardboard, could not easily be arranged with equal respect for decorum and comfort. Once within the inn we were the grateful recipients of much kindly attention; it was no doubt partly due to the good offices of our host that a limb, now first discovered frost-bitten, returned five weeks later to its senses. We fully enjoyed the creature comforts, and sat up long discussing the little incidents in a climb which, though of such modest proportions, has impressed itself more deeply on the mind and memory than the ascents of several Alpine giants with snowy summits old in story.

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