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by James R Marshall

Sheets of flame reveal partner Wheech (otherwise Robin Smith) doing a dervish dance round the hut's mangled old stove; his fat-fingered fumble provides an amusing ten minutes of cosy reflection before the soothing hiss and familiar gloom swallow the hut. But thoughts of prolonging the horizontal are rudely thrust aside as his hacked and filthy visage, that could frighten lesser men, peers over the bunk to pronounce the day 'the mostest fantabulous' of the week.

An hour later, bellies filled with rich greasy omelettes and all goodies that happened within reach, we are toiling towards the tall white face of Orion, intent on making a superb *Diretissima* by the great ice fall which pours from the 'Basin' to the floor of Zero Gully.

By the time we have staggered to the base of the wall, the route is dissected into his and mine sections; so Wheech leads off, up a pleasantly fat ice slope, whilst I sort out the many slings, hammers and karabiners from the bag.

At 50 feet Wheech's tour had misled him on to a thinly iced slab, where it was obvious he would either waken up or roll back down to the hut; his bow-legged bumbling at the foot of this great ice wall seemed as out of place as a can-can in the Swan Lake; however, by performing an exciting traverse of crampon scarts to reach thick ice, the rapid progress is resumed and a large ledge reached 150 feet higher; joining Wheech after being truly stung by his *mauvais pas*, we searched for a peggable crack with delayed success. The situation was magnificent: above us a great groove, rich with ice, swirled into obscurity; rightwards, Zero Gully took on the air of an escape route, whilst the great iced slabs to the left promised future 'joyous days upon the mountainside.'

Fully whooped up and anxious to reach passage to the wall which we both felt was somewhere about 100 feet above, I climbed over Wheech into the groove and hacked and whooped the way up over grand bulges, howling immense jug-handles in the ice; an ice column runner gave joy at 90 feet, then a little higher the angle eased, and a small hole under a rock roof 40 feet above promised security. Gaining this hole, I hacked away a curtain of icicles and squeezed in like a frightened ostrich, to manufacture a belay on an inverted channel piton in the rock roof; this didn't instill a sense of security so with an incredibly awkward manoeuvre the axe was driven into the floor and a cowardly sprauchle backwards performed to stand secured by slings above the void. Feeling brave once more I took the rope as Wheech came on, babbling back and forth about character, quality and senility.

We were now at the question point of the route; to the right, the difficulties were obvious and in sight, whilst above nothing could be seen but a steep icy rib and a skyline begging the question; naturally the unknown appealed, so the bold climbing machine hacked away up and round the rib out of sight, but unhappily not of sound. A few minutes after he moved from sight, a horrible flow of oaths seared down the sterile slopes; I thought he was in a *cul-de-sac*, but no, he had climbed into easy ground, with the way to the Basin clear, and the share of labour too small for a step-hacker of Wheech's calibre. With an added sense of satisfaction, I watched the rope snake out at an increasing pace and soon the ostrich act was repeated, as I removed our comforting anchorage. The climbing above was delightful and somewhat reminiscent of the slabs of the Crowberry Gully junction, but continuing for greater lengths.

A short wall above Wheech led on to a long snow rake, where a quick cramponing crawl brought us to the snowfield of the Basin. From a rock belay on the right edge of the depression, Wheech cut up an ice slope for 100 feet, then made an icy 50-foot traverse rightwards



57. Chris Gilmore on Harrison's Route, Carn Dearg

to belay at the foot of the Second Slab Rib of the Long Climb. Standing at the belay in the Basin I couldn't help recalling the last visit, when Patey and I had made the girdle traverse of Ben Nevis; there had still been traces of the Smith-Holt rope leading out by the 'V' Traverse to the North East Buttress, from their ascent of the Long Climb one month earlier which unfortunately, owing to lack of time, stopped short at the Basin. It was this sense of

the unfinished that was partly responsible for our very presence on the face at the moment. However, Wheech was finished with the work above and I hastened to join him, where I was rather disappointed to find the rib above too thinly iced for comfort. An exploratory traverse 10 feet round the corner disclosed a well-iced wall, shining green in the evening light and perched over the now impressive drop of the wall beneath: 130 feet higher the hunt for peg cracks failed in the gathering gloom of night and a belay in powder snow brought the sharp edges of frost and fear into the struggle: Wheech came and went, swapping wet gloves for dry, trending left and up by shallow grooves, over treacherously difficult breaking snow and verglassed rocks; night was fully launched when the rope ran out, but the moon stayed sly behind a blanket of cloud. Following up was like walking on eggs, the dark pit beneath our heels sufficient warning to take care; a short step of ice above Wheech led on to the high snow slopes which form beneath the terminal towers of the Orion Face. Here the expected respite failed to materialise; knee deep and floury, they whispered evil thoughts, threatening to slide us into the black void and extinguish the winking lights of the C.I.C. Hut. Floundering up this snow, doubts plagued the mind; our original intention to spiral up rightwards round the towers lost its appeal on the face of such threat; perhaps a move left would bring us on to the crest of North East Buttress? But again the snow. Great shadowy forms confused the issue, so we persisted with the straight-up as being mentally the least trying.

A yell from above lit the night; Wheech had found a rock belay. A jumble of talk awakened vague morning memories of the face, then by right of sequence I deprived partner Wheech of his dry gloves, leaving him to fight the cold war whilst I tackled the obscurity above. A scrabble up a cone of snow above the belay led to a well-iced groove; it was necessary to feel the angle ahead with the hands, as up here everything was whitened by fog crystals and in the misty gloom distance was incalculable. Up above there appeared to be an immense cornice; the thoughts of an enforced bivouac beneath the icy beak passed absently through the mind as I chopped away at the ice. About 40 feet up, the groove steepened to a bulge; finding the holds with the cramponed feet was extremely awkward at times, and often moves were made hanging from the handholds whilst the crampons scarted about in search of the 'buckets' cut below. Above, the bulge loomed more ominous, so a trouser-filling traverse was made on to the right wall, along a short ledge; then a frightening move, leaning out on an undercut ice hold, to cut holds round a rib on to the slab wall of a parallel groove. The ice here was only about an inch thick and moving into the groove was very difficult; the cat crawl up the thin ice remains imprinted in the memory, for at this 'moment of truth' strains of an awful dirge came up from the Blackfoot 90 feet below, "Ah kin hear the hammer ringin' on somebody's coffin..." Other ditties may have followed, but that particular one registered and stimulated progress across the slab to a comforting snow-filled groove, where the calf muscles could recover.

At last things were beginning to take shape; a large cornice at my level closed the top of the first groove, and above me was a steep wall, thick with ice. This looked the way and, having no desire to freeze, a short traverse was made up the thinly iced slab to an accommodating ledge; then the great hacking resumed. Strain on the back of the legs was becoming very trying, and I had to cut a deep step occasionally to stand on to relieve the calf muscles. I began to worry about the length of rope, feeling much more than 140 had passed; the thought of having to continue without a belay gave further chill to the night; then suddenly there was no more ice to cut, and in front a gentle slope catching the cold filtered moonlight shone in a heart-warming scene. Whoops of delight went down to thaw out Wheech, then up a couple of feet to discover the rope was out, a retreating belay from the edge as Wheech came up the snow cone enabled me to take an axe belay 10 feet back. It was grand to be able to sit down and relax. A whooping session began as Wheech came up in a series of frozen jumps, purring about quality and character. "What a climb!" was our chorus, then

his amorphous shape appeared over the edge, covered in snow, ironmongery clanking, like some armoured beast from the underworld. Gathering up the rope, we rushed up to the plateau, to arrive at the point where the North East Buttress branches from the summit plateau. Then stowing heaps of rope, slings and snow into the frozen sack we pushed off across the misty plateau making for the hut, heat and the big sweet brew, occasionally stopping to howl into the night what a 'mostest fantabulous' climb we'd had.

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