

A MONTH IN LOFOTEN

BY A. M. BINNIE

MANY of us regard the invention of the internal-combustion engine as the greatest misfortune that has befallen mankind in the last five hundred years. There is one part of the world, however, where the introduction of oil as a motive power has proved a blessing and not a curse, where a citizen is neither deafened in his home nor run over if he ventures outside it. In this favoured spot, the Lofoten Islands, where roads are almost non-existent, communications in the days of sail must indeed have been precarious. Steam transport on a small scale is not feasible commercially, and it has been left to oil to ease to a marked extent the existence of the fishermen who live and work on those inhospitable coasts. The fishing season is at its height at the beginning of the year, so that in the summer a fishing boat, for use as a base, can now be hired with little difficulty. Thus some, at least, of the serious obstacles which confronted the early explorers of these islands no longer remain.

None the less, it was with some feelings of doubt that last July Malcolm, Harold Herbert and I set off northward to Bergen, where we took the daily steamer along the coast. It may be mentioned that Norwegian steamer traffic is carefully organized into three classes : first the hurtigrute, on which fast steamers ply (in fact, hurtle) between the chief ports, stopping every few hours for a period which may be as long as a whole day. Intermediate traffic is taken by the lokalrute, a kind of Personenzug on an exceptionally zigzag course. Last comes the godsrute, by which freight and the captain's friends are conveyed. We travelled on the *Richard With* (more easily recalled as the *Dick Whittington*), which is named after the shipowner who was so helpful to Ouston.¹ This journey of approach was a delightful contrast to a night in a French train, although, as an American tourist shrilly informed the captain, the ship was the oldest and smallest in the service. In return for lessons in advanced English, the captain's daughter instructed us in very elementary Norwegian and we were given the freedom of the bridge. The pronunciation of the word Lofoten proved a constant stumbling-block, and to the end of the voyage my efforts were rewarded only by peals of happy laughter

¹ *A. J.* 21. 402.

from an appreciative audience. At Bodö we saw the mail-carrying aeroplane which (postally speaking) has brought Svolveer within two days of London. The previous year the road from the S. was opened as far as Bodö, and there we took on board a number of cars for Narvik. From that point it is possible to drive to Tromsö. At Stutvik, on the mainland opposite the Lofoten Islands, we left the *Dick Whittington* and crossed to Svolveer, the chief port of the islands, arriving at midnight in brilliant sunshine.

After a few hours at the excellent hotel on the quay (it seems inaccurate to write 'next morning'), we called on Herr Gunnar Berg, the British Vice-Consul, with whom we had been in correspondence. With his help we immediately chartered the *Langnat*, a fishing boat, and obtained the services of her half-owner, Adolf Nielsen. Feverish shopping was now essential, for we had brought only tea and chocolate from England and fruit from Trondheim, but in spite of our poor command of the language Svolveer provided all we wanted except meat. Thus we were able to set out the same afternoon for Östpollen, a bay on the E. side of Östnesfjord, an hour and a half away. True, it was raining, and I could not help thinking of Collie's description of his camp on the other side of this fjord:—the rain, the days of rain, the hand stretched from the tent to place a saucepan outside, the same hand three hours later drawing in the saucepan now with three inches of water in it, and finally the fountain which sprang up inside the tent.² Moreover, not two miles away was the place where Mr. Thomas and Dr. Kennedy, their tent beaten flat, were compelled to build a house.³ We were more fortunate, since in the *Langnat* mere rain could be defied. She was a strongly built vessel, about thirty-five feet long and very broad in the beam. Forward there was a small cabin with a stove and a table on the starboard side and three bunks opposite. A large hold, which surprisingly did not smell of fish, occupied the amidships section, and the engine and wheel house were aft. An important feature was the winch (operated by the engine) which was essential for handling the heavy anchor and the immense length of chain required for these deep waters. The outfit was completed by a Norwegian flag, only hauled down when obviously it was on the point of being blown away. Adolf proved a splendid companion and boatman, and a reliable fisherman as well; only once did he fail to secure our supper. He spoke no word of English, but Malcolm, who had self-sacrificingly taken a course

² *A. J.* 21. 97.

³ *Journal of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club*, 8. 167.



Photo, A. D. Malcolm.]

GJEITGALJAR FROM ÖSTNESFJORD.



Photo, A. D. Malcolm.]

RULTEN AND LANGSTRANDTINDER FROM GJEITGALJAR.

[To face p. 44.]



Photo, R. C. S. Low.]

GJEITGALJAR FROM S.

of lessons in Norwegian, was able to convey to him all but the most intricate of our wishes.

Next morning in improving weather we pitched the largest of the three tents which we had brought from England in case we failed to secure a ship, and later under misty conditions we set out for Gjeitgaljar, a peak of alarming aspect when seen the previous day. Its name proved too much for us and we were forced to adopt the irreverent alternative of Beetlejar. After the thousand feet of rock-shrubbery, which we later found to be the rule and not the exception in these islands, we discerned the foot of a snow gully up which we toiled for more than an hour. Suddenly we found ourselves above the clouds, and a marvellous view revealed itself—Rulten and its neighbours beyond the fantastic chessmen which form the S. ridge of Gjeitgaljar. It was now obvious that we were in the wrong gully, but we completed our ascent of it to a notch in the impracticable W. arête of the mountain. We were forced to stop at this impressive spot; in front lay a considerable gulf, at the bottom of which was a little snow basin, while above, the truly vertical W. face of the peak rose abruptly to the summit. We therefore descended the steep snow of the gully back into the clouds and might well have imagined ourselves to be engaged on an Alpine expedition but for the sudden call of a cuckoo close at hand. Thus we soon reached the next gully (further to the west) which led easily to the snow basin. Even at this point we were uncertain of the way, and we traversed most of the sharp ridge which forms the cirque until we attained the final tower at a place diametrically opposite to the ship. A snowy scramble soon put us on the summit, which was reached at 10 P.M. Never has a mountain been ascended by a more tortuous route, for which we blamed the mist, unreadable maps, defective information and our own stupidity. But all this, as well as the oscillatory nature of the journey from England, was forgotten as we looked on the magnificent scene: the half had not been told us. Our deviations, however, were not fruitless, for we noticed that from Östpollen it was almost certainly practicable to attain the peak by passing between it and the Troldtinder, reaching the usual way on the final tower by means of a long snow slope. As far as is known, this route has not yet been taken. As we turned to go, after identifying the peaks which hitherto had been merely names on a well-thumbed map, we were startled to observe away to the E. a ship apparently floating in a mountain tarn; it was some time before we realized that we were looking into Troldfjord, to which the northbound hurtler was paying a midnight visit. The following day we

climbed Store Rörhoptind by its N. ridge. The route lay first to the pass which leads over to Rörhopvand and then up grass slopes which slowly narrowed and steepened. Thus before we had fully realized it, we found ourselves on a gendarme cut off from the main mass of the mountain. We were compelled to retrace our steps for some distance before it was possible to traverse round the base of the obstacle. The final tower provided a steep and fairly difficult climb, which led to a capacious summit guarded by really startling precipices in every other direction. From here we witnessed an attack on our tent by some cows which had managed to come along the shore from Liland. We therefore descended the N.W. face of the mountain, down snow and rock slopes, in a bee-line for our possessions.

The next day provided a memorable climb. We took the ship round to Reknes on Öihellesund and anchored in a natural harbour, the breakwater of which was formed by a moraine. About 10 A.M. Malcolm and I set off for the E. peak of Rulten. The day was exceptionally hot, the lower slopes exceedingly rough, and we were glad to find some shade under the small three-headed peak which is conspicuous from the shore. The climb begins a little later : it has twice been described in these pages,⁴ so that it is sufficient here to remark that the route is intricate and varied. In its early stages the obstacles are short steps separating turf ledges, and it is necessary to crawl through a couple of caves. Higher up is a pretty arête, followed by a very long gully which is bridged by an immense boulder. To avoid a subsidiary peak on the ridge, a somewhat disheartening descent is then required, but the climb ends with a pleasant chimney, which is crowned by the summit cairn itself. Although the height of the mountain is only 1062 m., the ascent occupied fully seven hours. We could fully realize the satisfaction with which the first climbers stood (after so many disappointments) at last upon the top. We arrived there too exhausted to roll boulders over the northern cliffs, a traditional amusement, or even to unravel the complicated topography of the Langstrandtinder group, an omission which we later regretted. It was 1 A.M. before we were back at the ship, the descent finishing, appropriately enough, with a *rappel* from a birch tree to the shore.

After such a strenuous start to our holiday, some rest was essential. We therefore crossed to Digermulen and replenished our supplies. The capacious shelves of the shop were none too full, as this was the slack season ; but it was here that we first noticed, hanging from the ceiling, the spare wheelbarrow wheel

⁴ *A. J.* 22. 10 *sqq.*, 43. 274.

which is such a distinctive feature of these seaside stores. The demand arises, so we concluded, from the serious inequalities in the tiny plots of ground which serve as gardens. To complete this trippery day we visited Troldfjord, with which we were so delighted that we stayed two nights. It is a pity, however, that the base of the cliff, which forms the northern portal, should have been defaced by seamen who have painted up the names of their ships and the dates of their visits. The *Butterfly*, the only British name, must be held up for special obloquy. A storm blew up in the night and many mosquitoes crept into the tents. At Östpollen and a little S. of Reknes we had found excellent camping sites on turf, well away from bushes, but at the head of Troldfjord, where space is constricted, no convenient positions exist, and we suffered accordingly. After this experience we did not camp ashore again. Store Troldtind being the object of our visit, next morning we started up the path (the only one we ever encountered) which was built to Troldfjordvand for the convenience of tourists. Of the pier where they formerly debarked no trace remained, and the path itself was in bad condition and showed little sign of use. It ended at the lake, where the ice was breaking up and, as we mounted the rough slopes above, we could see for ourselves the truth of the oft-quoted statement that nine-tenths of an iceberg lie below the surface. About a thousand feet above the S.E. corner of the lake we crossed a glacier, and passing up névé slopes on the E. side of the peak, reached another which led to the foot of the S. face. A short climb up this face landed us on the level summit ridge, which to us seemed the best viewpoint in Östvaagö, displaying peak, glacier, lake and coast in disorderly profusion. To my mind a mountain view to be perfect must include the sea, and it is to this that much of the charm of island climbing may be attributed. Arran, Skye and Corsica are alike attractive, but Lofoten with its glaciers and its low sunshine can have few rivals.

The next day was poor and we contented ourselves with moving round at high tide to the head of Grundfjord, the mouth of which is blocked by a bar at low water. The opportunity of ascending Blaafjeld came at once, and again low-lying mist made the expedition both long and interesting, involving an unexpected visit to all the four glaciers. We had intended to climb the W. peak via the first side valley on the W. of Grundfjorddalen, but as we ploughed through the marsh in the main valley we missed the correct turning point and took the second side valley instead. We crossed the main stream dry-shod by means of a pier cunningly constructed opposite an overhanging tree, and in an hour

and a half more found ourselves on a glacier fed by three snowfields. In the prevailing conditions of mist it appeared that that on the left, by far the largest, ended abruptly under the N. peak, while the central snowfield was unpromising. We therefore went up to the right, and soon reached a little col separated from the N. peak by a tower of unpleasing aspect. This we eventually ascended by going down on to the glacier which lies on the N. of the group and then climbing the easy W. ridge. The ridge is extremely steep on its southern side, and our chance of reaching our objective seemed remote. However, it was found possible to rope down to the col between the tower and the N. peak, and a further descent took us to a large glacier remarkable for the abrupt manner in which it ended in a narrow cleft, at right angles to its direction of flow. To the head of this we toiled in great heat, and then a short ascent over steep grass, recently uncovered by the snow, led to the summit. As we reached it, we were suddenly rewarded by a glorious view of the green country to the W., with Higravsfjord at our feet, all the more welcome after hours of looking at mist, rock and dazzling snow. We returned by the route which we had intended for the ascent. This lay down a southern ridge as far as a well-marked but narrow col. There it was possible to turn off to the E., down over a glacier and two frozen lakes to Grundfjord.

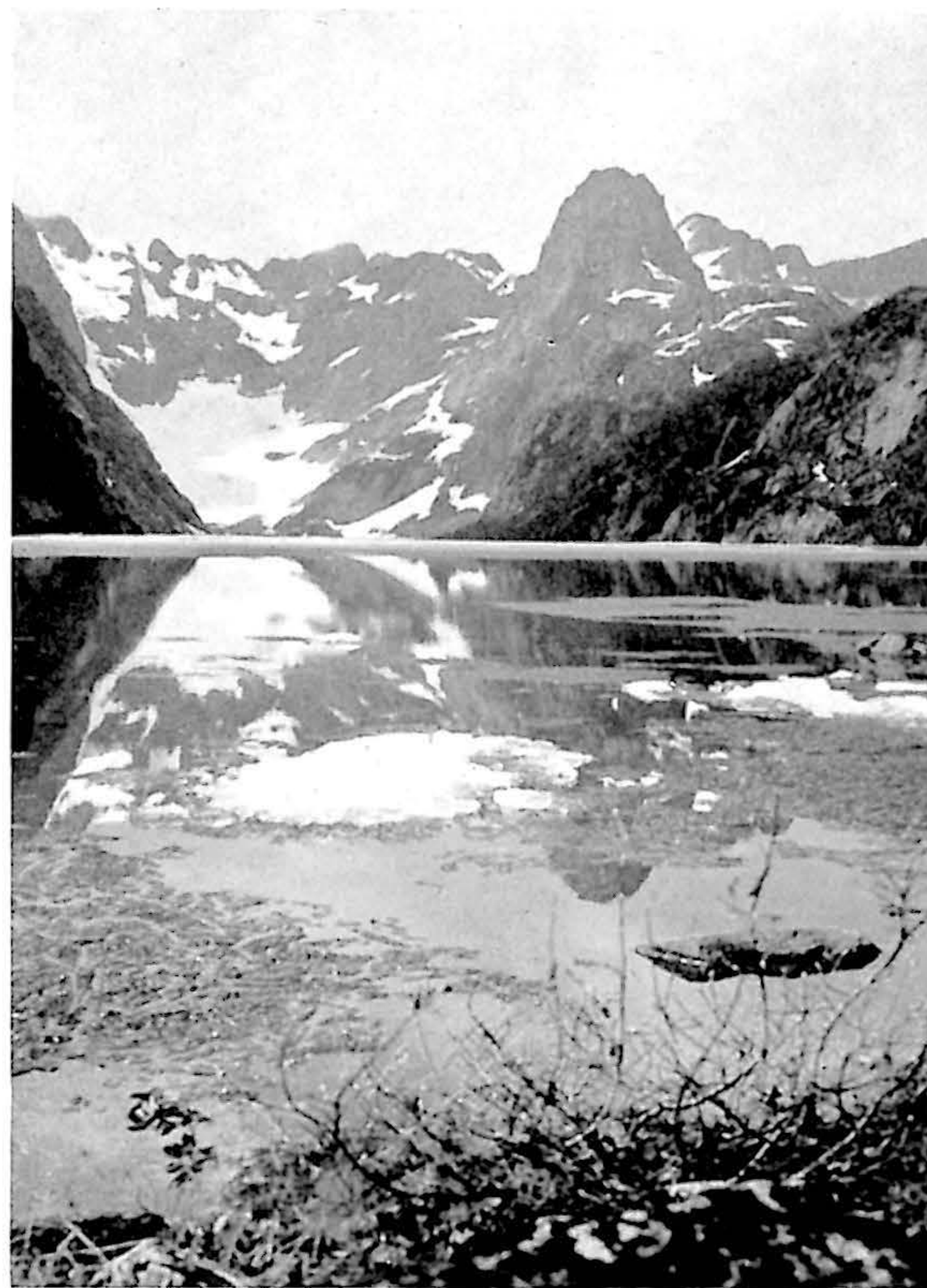
A visit to Möisalen (on Hinnö), the highest peak in the islands, occupied the next two days. After passing through the Raftsund, where our modest speed was greatly increased by the tide, we obtained more supplies at Hennes and then anchored at the head of Lonkanfjord, surrounded by impressive peaks which up to the present have been neglected in favour of Möisalen. Most of next day we lazily watched the clouds skimming the summit of our peak, and it was 9 P.M. before we set off. By midnight we had reached the base of the W. ridge, where we left the sunshine and entered a chilly cloud. The ridge was easy; yet to our surprise we found a couple of chains on it, too firmly fixed to be removed. Travellers, even surveyors, are rare in this district, and it seemed unlikely that prospectors from the old mine above Lonkanfjord would have reached this considerable height; so the origin of these unnecessary aids remained a mystery. The summit provided no view, and at 5 A.M. we were back on the shore. Some accurate stone-throwing was required before Adolf was roused to take us on board.

As we had now obtained a good impression of the northern end of the islands, we set off after some sleep for Moskenesö, an island near the southern extremity of the group. Our journey



Photo, A. D. Malcolm.]

TROLDFJORD.



Photo, A. D. Malcolm.]

TROLDFJORDVAND.

[To face p. 48.]



Photo, A. D. Malcolm.]

E. FACE OF KROKHAMMERTIND.



Photo, F. A. Pullinger.]

OLSTIND.

of about 130 kilometres was accomplished non-stop except for a brief call at Svolvær. We were roused next morning by a low humming sound, and found that we were anchored at the head of Forsfjord (above Reine), where a power station has been built to utilize the water in Tennesvand. We started at once for Hermansdaltind (1034 m.), the highest peak in the island. After a struggle through fern shoulder-high, we reached easier ground at a col to the S. of Pt. 808, and the N. ridge of the mountain was attained by a long détour to the right. The ridge began at a deep col, where the only climbing in the ascent was found. The step was adorned by a fixed rucksack cord, doubtless left by a descending party; and above this point broken rocks led to the summit. The map shows Moskenesö as highly indented with fjords and studded with large lakes, but on the spot its appearance is still more fantastic. Apart from the upper rocks of Hermansdaltind, the whole island bears obvious signs of ice action, and most of the peaks are formed of huge slabs, unbroken from summit to coast. Thus lines of ascent are somewhat restricted, and Longstaff will here find ample confirmation of his dictum that mountains with only one way up are always interesting. After obtaining some idea of the complicated topography of the island, we descended by the easy S.E. ridge to Tennesvand. During a drizzling off day we moved to the head of Kirkefjord, where a small rock-fall occurred, the only one we witnessed in Lofoten. Wherever a hundred square feet of level ground is available on the coast, a fisherman has built his home and seems prosperous enough. Yet Ruskin has pontifically remarked that man's rightly directed powers may find wealth in every falling rock and wisdom in every talking wave, from which it is evident that he never had the good fortune to visit the Lofoten Islands. Krokhammertind, our objective, was obviously unclimbable on the fjord side, and we therefore ascended steep grass to the col between it and Mantind. The E. face of the mountain is said to consist of a single slab. This may well be true, but for us visibility was limited by mist. We descended some distance from the col and then crossed the slab at a point where its angle eased just enough for nails to grip. This loathsome but impressive traverse of two or three hundred yards ended suddenly at the edge of the slab, which was sufficiently broken for turf to find footing. This we ascended, leaving the mists below, and were soon upon the summit. Once again we enjoyed the magnificent panorama of peaks and cloud-filled valleys which was such an unexpected feature of our visit. We returned by the way we had come, but we crossed the slab more rapidly as a block of snow, the size of a small church, was

now visible stuck precariously to the steeper part above. Early in the summer this must indeed be a bad place. We next climbed Klokketind from the head of Vorfjord. As we toiled up the penible grass slopes, which form the lower part of the S. ridge, we decided that the path from Randa to the Dom hut, hitherto our hottest experience, was easily beaten. Although we found little snow in Moskenesö, an axe was always useful, the pick thrust into a quaking turf ledge providing a comforting hold. Higher up the route was much more interesting, and as we followed the summit ridge to the highest point the strange character of the island became still more apparent. Most of its northern part is occupied by a large lake, Solbjörnvand, and from what little dry land remains weird wedge-shaped peaks protrude at intervals.

Malcolm had now to return to England, so we went northwards to Stamsund, a rising port on Vestvaagö, where he caught the hurtler to Bergen. We particularly missed his linguistic powers, but by then Adolf had become accustomed to our strange habits, and if we pointed to a watch and to a place on the map we were duly transported at the right time to the desired spot. To occupy the day which intervened before Leslie Letts was due to arrive, Herbert and I decided to climb Vaagekallen. After spending the night in a sheltered cove at Guldvik, we landed S. of the peak and made our way up the delightful valley which lies between it and Kvandalstind. Below the col we turned off to the right and reached the shattered ridge of the mountain. This suddenly narrowed to form a sharp horizontal arête which had to be traversed *à cheval*. The remainder of the climb consisted of easy scrambling on the S. face. The day was exceedingly hot, and it was in vain that we sought an exposed position, where some cooling breeze might be found. The dreaded Vestfjord was without a ripple and in it the reflections of the mainland peaks fifty kilometres away were clearly mirrored. It seemed impossible that 'the Lofoten Islands lie twelve hundred miles north of London,' a geographical fact without which no Alpine Journal article on this district is complete. But such genial conditions do not always prevail, and Mr. Randers-Heen's account of his winter ascent describes a very different scene.⁵ As evidence of the gales we found embedded in one of the summit cairns a stout iron rod with a piece of sail cloth attached; the rod had been bent through a right angle where it emerged from its supports. At midnight Letts was found at Stamsund, and next morning we tied up at Kvalvik on Flakstadö in order to ascend Stjernhodet.

⁵ *Norske Turistforenings Årbok*, 1935, 184.

A grassy route, winding between belts of slabby rocks, took us to the foot of a long easy gully which led after three hours to the summit ridge. This is crowned by three towers, of which we chose the central. The climb was disappointingly short, but it was pleasant to be on a fresh island and to enjoy a spectacular view of Klokketind, a sharp needle when seen from here.

It was of course desirable that the newcomer to our party should have a closer view of Moskenesö, and for this purpose we selected Olstind, which we ascended after an off day in Vorfjord. Our choice was fortunate, for a bizarre expedition resulted, even when judged by the standards of that remarkable island. At a low level the mountain is defended by a lofty rampart of slabs, unbroken except for a ravine on the S.W. side. This terminates in an immense vertical cleft, but it was possible to move into the ravine above the obstacle by means of grass ledges adhering doubtfully to the slabs. Letts is at home on vertical turf, and the traverse was successfully accomplished, two tottering birch trees and a stone embedded in the grass providing some sort of security. No signs of previous travellers were visible, and it is to be hoped that the climb will not become popular; a few parties in wet weather would kick down the ledges and make the route impossible. There were a couple of steps in the ravine itself, after which we turned to the right up a long easy gully; and this led out on to the slabby slope which forms the upper part of the mountain. In his account of the first ascent Collie has related how he made a fire of peat at the summit.⁶ We were able to set light to the cairn itself, which was covered with turves. It burnt splendidly, and perhaps to the tale of the Maelström nearby we have added a companion legend of the Volcano in Lofoten.

We now decided to spend the remainder of our time on Öst-vaagö, so once again we turned northward, and after a night in a bay near Vaagekallen we landed at Reknes to see something of the Langstrandtinder. Published accounts of this group are most confusing; they have even baffled the indefatigable Mr. Spilsbury, whose admirable article⁷ on the islands is of such importance that we brought two copies with us. From the tarn above Kveitvik there are three routes to the main ridge: that to the left goes across Sneskar (almost the only glacier on the islands named on the map), which lies under the northern precipice of Rulten; and straight ahead a narrow combe, invisible from the tarn, leads to a sharp nick, the 'Fury Gap' of Mr. Pullinger's explorations.⁸ We turned up the valley on the right and ascended

⁶ *A. J.* 22. 332.

⁷ *Wayfarers' Club Journal*, 5. 50.

⁸ *Oxford Mountaineering*, 1935, 20.

the glacier which terminates under the lofty summit crags of Store Rörhoptind. From the head of this, two of the numerous Langstrandtinder were climbed, the double-headed one at the north-eastern extremity of the ridge being clearly the highest point on it: the line of vision from this summit to the large cairn on Pt. 932 (the only summit whose height is recorded on the map) intersects the sea near Vaagekallen. Herbert's time was now up, so we crossed to Digermulen where he caught the lokalrute to Svolveer.

For some time past Letts and I had had designs on Svartsundtind; that evening, therefore, we anchored at Faldvik and ascended it next day by the glacier and the E. arête. We had hoped for a good view of the Östvaagö peaks we had climbed, but the hot weather of the preceding three weeks had made havoc of the scenery. Earlier we had commented on the absence of scree, but now it was visible everywhere. Even the long snow slope which we had used in the descent of Blaafjeld had almost vanished, and the frozen lakes we had crossed that day were now free of ice. The following day was spent in a long journey round the N. of Östvaagö to the head of Higravsfjord, where we anchored off Budalen. From here Memorafjeld was a short ascent, although the day was so oppressive that we had to rest outside the village before we could face the hour's bush whacking that lay ahead. Above, we passed by a tarn backed by the cliffs of our peak, a typically Scottish scene; and avoiding the unpleasant direct ascent to the col between it and Trolddalstind we made for a large cairn on the S. ridge of the latter. It was not far down to the col, and the final ascent up the N. arête was soon completed. Next day we went ashore at Leirvikhaugen and walked across the narrow neck of low ground which connects the two halves of Östvaagö. A considerable population is here employed in painstaking agriculture; even a tiny plot surrounded by encroaching peat hags carried a stunted crop of barley. At Eidet we turned E. and ascended Higravstind (1161 m.), the highest peak in Östvaagö. Above steepish grass slopes we bore left up a very long gully leading to the intricate summit, which provided an entertaining scramble. That evening the weather showed signs of a serious break and my aneroid, long suspected by some as being out of order because it always read above 30 inches, now fell somewhat below that figure. We returned to Digermulen hoping for a further and final day on the Langstrandtinder, but this proved impossible and we reached Svolveer in a sea so rough that for the first time our large dinghy had to be hauled on board.

This simple narrative of our doings may perhaps serve to show

what can be done by an expedition (without a capital E) requiring little preliminary arrangement, and a holiday of this inexpensive kind can be confidently recommended to those with three weeks to spare who wish to enjoy some novel climbing. Ascents of all types of difficulty can be achieved, and doubtless many new routes (although few unclimbed peaks) remain to be found. Moreover, it is impossible to be benighted ; a start can be made whenever energy and the weather permit, and there is no fear of encountering other parties on the climb. But perhaps more attractive still is life on the ship, a moving hut all to oneself and capable of transporting ample supplies of food and raiment. Consider for a moment the consequences were an inscrutable Providence to flood the Alps up to, say, the 2500 m. contour. The intrepid mountaineer would embark on his vessel at the Riffelberg, and after a peaceful night anchored in a bay near the snout of the Hohlicht Glacier, he would climb the Weisshorn with his strength unimpaired by a steep hut walk. Returning in the early afternoon to a lunch of trout caught by his boatman, he would proceed to a cove in the Lötschental whence the Bietschhorn would be accessible the following morning. In like manner, but with a few off days for fishing, he could visit all the greater ranges, counting it a trivial loss that some minor summits (such as the Cinque Torri and the Gross Simmelistock) at one time famous were totally submerged.