

Mountain supreme - yet conquered [continued]

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MOUNTAIN SUPREME — YET CONQUERED

by W. Stettbacher

(Continued)

After having made out the account and placed the money due to the section owning the hut, in the cash box, we descended to St. Niklaus. On our way down, I spotted an Edelweiss for the first time in my life. I know that on many former occasions, I have passed through districts where the Edelweiss grows, but I have never set out specially to pick this flower. Lower down, we followed the normal route. It turned out to be very unpleasant, and slippery. The path was covered by fallen trees, branches and small particles of wood. This was the result of heavy snowfalls and rain the previous February, when big masses of rock had detached themselves a few hundred yards over the hamlet of Schwideren. Enormous boulders of rock hurled downwards, uprooting all the trees in their path. By good fortune, only a cow was killed when a cow-shed was demolished, but several large boulders of rock lying barely 50 yards away from dwelling houses bear testimony to the narrow escape some of the inhabitants had.

Our next objective was the TAESCHHORN, one of the peaks in the Mischabel group. Although, with its 4,490 metres, it is the third highest mountain entirely on Swiss territory, it is little known to the general public. It is even higher than the Matterhorn.

The ascent of the Taeschhorn over the Teufelsgrat is one of the longest, most difficult and dangerous ones in the entire Alps, and, for this reason, the ascent over this route has been repeated a few times only. Even the normal routes are dangerous, chiefly because of their length and because of the quick changes in the weather around this particular mountain. Climbing conditions in this area may be so bad, that the Taeschhorn cannot be climbed even once in a summer. A mere glance at the log (*Hüttenbuch*) in the Taesch hut will show that this peak is very unkind to would-be climbers. You will find in almost every case entries such as "have had to return owing to bad weather" or "abandoned because of snowstorms".

This mountain has been on the list of *Viertausender* for more than thirty years, but the mere mention of it met with a stony silence. Conditions are always said to be dangerous and bad.

My present guide, as befits a former member of a Himalaya expedition, is very venturesome; already in 1964, he would willingly have attempted this climb, but this was at the end of a week's climbing, with a catch of four *Viertausender*, and I felt that I might not be up to the task without a few days' rest.

After staying a night at St. Niklaus, we took an early train for Taesch, from where we idled up to the Taeschalp. The footpath turns about half-way into a newly constructed road, which connects with a hydro-electric works at the end of the valley. Even if up to now only local motorcars and jeeps are allowed to use this road, I feel together with the Swiss Alpine Club, that this spells ruination to another unique beauty spot.

We entered the restaurant at the Taeschalp for a welcome lunch. The Taesch hut, in a commanding position at a height of approx. 2,700 metres, was now plainly visible from here. We reached the hut in a good hour, during which time our eyes were focused either on the impeccable white dome of the Weisshorn which has always been one of my favourites, or on the carpet of alpine flowers, for which this region is justly well-known, spreading before

us. This is a real paradise for colour photography.

The Taesch hut was constructed about twenty years ago, by the section Uto (Zurich) of the Swiss Alpine Club, to which I belong.

When you walk up to such a hut, there is always an air of expectancy. One never knows whether one meets there a crowd of day trippers (*Hüttenbummler*), for the access is easy, and the panorama grand. The hut has one drawback for climbers intending to conquer the Taeschhorn, that it is situated at too low an altitude.

As is happened, there were not many day trippers or climbers in the refuge, and there was no need for anyone having to sleep on the floor or on tables.

When reaching such a hut, it is advisable to call straightaway on the guardian and, in my case, to present my credentials as member of the Swiss Alpine Club. Members quite understandably pay less for staying the night than non-members. Quiet-spoken, but of aristocratic bearing and old world charm, this guardian has been in charge since the inauguration of the Taesch hut twenty years ago. He seems to be able to keep order with little fuss, and last but not least, happens to be an excellent cook. He tried to dissuade me from having a go at the Taeschhorn, as he regarded conditions as highly dangerous. No one had climbed it so far this year.

Outside the hut, some of the climbers present were baking in glorious sunshine. There was one particularly tough-looking individual sitting on the grass whom I rightly presumed to be a guide. His companion, very cheerful and good looking, but not so robust, might have been his tourist. How deceptive appearances can be! The alleged tourist came smilingly towards me, expressing his pleasure that I still looked fit and well. He had seen me since the war on many a *Viertausender*, and he vividly remembered how some twelve years ago, in the face of a threatening storm, Gabriel and I had stormed up the Strahlhorn at record pace. Gabriel is my former guide Gabriel Perren who had the reputation of being the fastest mountain-walker in Zermatt. This gentleman turned out to be the leading guide of a rather large party, and also happens to be the chief of the Zermatt mountain rescue squad. This guide, a Mr. Petrig, took charge of the recovery of the body of poor Mr. Stricker. He said that I doubtless had come to climb the Taeschhorn; it was strange how all climbers of long standing seem to leave the Taeschhorn, and also the Dent d'Hérens, to the end of their career. He suggested that we might have at least a try. On reaching the upper part of the Weingarten Glacier, where the real difficulties begin, we would find out for ourselves what the real conditions were. If too difficult or dangerous, we could make a diversion and climb the easy Alphubel, as he intended to do with his party.

How appearances can be deceptive, is shown by an experience I had some twelve years ago. When standing in the main street of Zermatt with my former guide Gabriel Perren, a man of small stature had just arrived by train and was about to walk past us. About 75 years of age, he looked very frail, and could have passed as a former clerk in a solicitors's office. But he turned out to be Joseph Knubel, now dead, one of the greatest guides of all time, and in the early part of the century the constant companion of Winthrop Young, the well-known English climber. Knubel's feats of strength, his arms of steel which saved many tourists in a number of impossible situations, have long ago become legendary.

(To be continued)