

Mountain Climbing [Conclusion]

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MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

By W. STETTbacher
(Conclusion)

Some climbers bring their food with them, and merely ask the guardian to cook it for them, or to get some drinks or tea; others, including myself, find it simplest to order complete breakfast, lunch or dinner whenever possible, just as in a hotel. Most of the guardians are good cooks, and willing to prepare a variety of dishes. Plenty of drinks, alcoholic and non-alcoholic, are usually available. Some of the Italian refugees employ proper chefs, dressed in their usual garb.

Then, the guardian has to make out rather complicated bills with numerous items, the tariff for some of the items being different for members or non-members.

The life and work of a guardian is strenuous, and it is common knowledge that a prolonged stay at high altitudes is detrimental to health; it is not surprising therefore that some of the guardians are irritable at times, have stomach trouble and other signs of ill-health. During my alpine career I have come across several who have had to give up the work after a few years. On the other hand, some guardians have given thirty years' service or more.

An extreme case in point is the Refuge and Observatory Santa Margherita on top of the Signal-Kuppe, one of the Monte Rosa Peaks, which is situated in Italy and lies fifty metres higher than the summit of the Matterhorn. Here guardians, whenever they can, relieve each other after five days, and the same applies to the few scientists in the Observatory. I spent one night there — an unforgettable experience, but one which I would not like to repeat, for it means a splitting headache with continuous nightmares and little sleep.

Before going to our dormitory, we admired the splendid view outside. My guide had some doubts about the weather, as he regarded the temperature as too warm, and the wind as coming from the wrong direction.

Man appoints, fate disappoints! When I awoke at 3 a.m., what I saw when I looked out of the window was neither weather nor a blue sky, but merely mist and fog. We went back to sleep, deciding to see a few hours later if there was some improvement. At 5.15, when I again looked out of the window, I was in time to see the last man of the "Albis" disappearing round a corner. The weather looked a little better, and I prevailed on my guide to follow their example. We left the Hut at 6 a.m., and after hastily climbing up the long Moraine leading up to the Gran Paradiso Glacier, we roped ourselves together, as we had to cross numerous evil-looking crevasses. The mist let the sun through occasionally, for a short time, when we had a fantastic view in a southerly direction. After a good two hours' effort, we overtook some of the parties of the Section "Albis". We now appeared to move up a rather steep ridge of hard snow, and with my Vibram (rubber) soles, which are best on rock, I had some difficulty in getting a secure foothold. I know we reached the summit at last, because we got there, exactly in 3 hours 15 minutes, which is a very good time. We were greeted by a Madonna in marble, stretching out her hand towards us in prayer. The view from this mountain is reputed to be one of the finest in the Alps, stretching as far south as the Monte Viso, about 100 kilometres, and the Adriatic Sea, while on a clear day the Dome of Milan is clearly visible. Owing to the mist I had to content myself in taking a few photographs of my guide and myself.

The actual summit of the Gran Paradiso is very small, and it is not surprising that there is an obituary underneath the Statue of the Madonna stating that a well-known Alpinist fell to his death from this spot in 1943.

Our return to the Refuge passed off without incident, and temporary breaks in the clouds gave us a glimpse of the immense view we would have enjoyed in clear weather.

We decided to pass another night in this excellent Refuge, and during the dinner there was much cheering by the members of the "Albis" when their President announced that one of them had anonymously made a gift of fifteen bottles of wine.

Our objective the next day was to cross over to the Refuge Vittorio Sella, at the foot of the Grivola mountain. This is a very strenuous undertaking, as one has to make several ascents and descents, and cross five glaciers in the process. My guide wondered whether I would have the required stamina, but, as it turned out, I withstood the strain much better than he did.

We left the hospitable Hut at 4 a.m. and with the Gran and Little Paradiso mountains constantly in view, we eventually reached

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the Col Herbetet, just over 3,400 metres high. To our surprise we found a so-called Bivouac there, a steel box of about 4×4×4 metres, with some straw and blankets, utensils for cooking, and large enough to give shelter for about 4 tourists. My guide said that if he had only known of the existence of this, we could have passed the night up here. I, on the other hand, was pleased that he did not know about this, for how much nicer it was to stay at a comfortable Refuge!

After crossing several more glaciers, and reaching alpine pastures and rocky terrain, my guide excitedly pointed to a certain spot where there were scores of chamois. They must also have noticed us, for we heard some shrill whistles, and saw large numbers in full flight over rocks towards higher regions. One of them, however, ran in our direction, passed us within three or four yards, but having gone on another hundred yards, it apparently realised its mistake, and again ran past us, in the direction of the other chamois.

To reach the lower regions of the Col de Lauzon we had to climb over another ridge of rocks, when we came face to face with hundreds of bouquetins. They seemed to sense immediately that we had no hostile intentions, and only moved a little way away from us when I tried to get some close-up snaps. The Col de Lauzon is 3,250 metres high, and it needed another 1½ hours' effort to reach its highest point. After another hour or so we at last reached our destination, the Refuge Vittorio Sella (2,600 metres high). This is composed of two very long one-storey hunting lodges, constructed by King Emmanuel in 1861, but subsequently handed over to the Italian Alpine Club as a gift. Being old, it is not surprising that the place is rather damp, and not so comfortable as Huts of later construction, but the cooking was again very good, with a proper chef being in charge.

These climbers from Geneva had arrived at the Hut a few minutes before us. They alleged they had attempted to climb the Grivola, but were thwarted by the bad weather and difficult snow conditions. This sounded rather peculiar to us, since the day had been glorious, and the Grivola free of cloud the whole day!

The following morning, shortly after 3 o'clock, after a somewhat unpleasant night in the damp and cold dormitory, we left the Refuge, in the hope of being the first party this summer to set foot on the summit of the Grivola, nearly 4,000 metres high. Stars were brilliantly glittering in the sky, and we were justified in hoping that the weather would be good enough at least for this climb. Our first objective was the Colle Nero, 3,400 metres, which we reached in just under two hours, by following at first a steep path over alpine pastures in zig-zag fashion, and later by climbing at a steep couloir, partly over ice, partly over rock. On reaching the Col, the immense buttress of rock which constitutes the Grivola came fully into view, about a mile across the Glacier Traio, immense, abrupt, appearing almost inaccessible, and rising about 800 metres above the glacier. My guide, no doubt seeing that my morale was a little shaken, assured me that just as in real life, difficulties are not necessarily as great as one might at first imagine.

We now had to cross the glacier, losing about 100 metres in height in doing so. It was still only 5 o'clock in the morning, but the snow was already soft, making progress slow — not a pleasant prospect for our return later in the day.

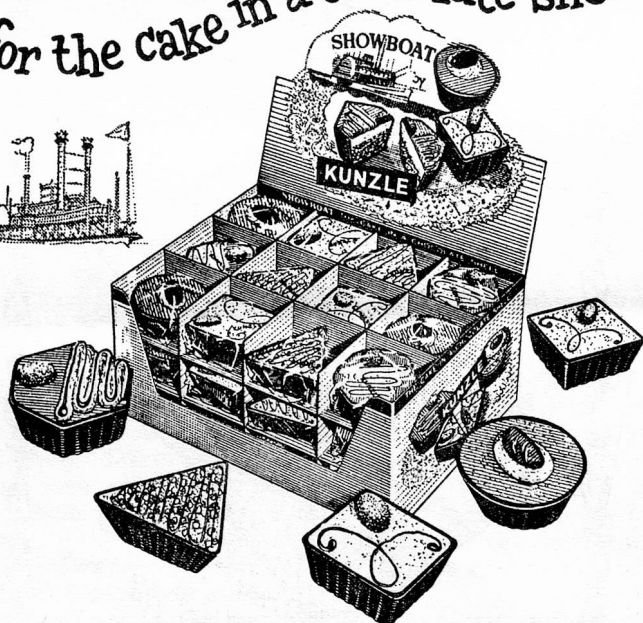
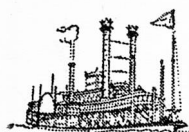
On reaching the wall of rock, where the real ascent begins, we noticed a good many stones embedded in the glacier, an indication that this spot was threatened by stone-fall.

We were now making rapid progress, the nature of the rock and of the climbing reminding me of the Matterhorn over the normal route. Here, my guide found a pair of crampons which a climber must have lost in previous years, and which I used during a subsequent climb. Just below the ridge leading towards the summit, I found it difficult to negotiate a smooth rock about two yards high, several attempts being unsuccessful. My guide shouted "Right leg up". My left leg went up, and I quickly overcame this obstacle, only to be met with an outburst of temper on the part of my guide, who shouted angrily, "If I say, 'right leg up,' you must do as I command; I am a guide of 20 years' experience, and my instructions must be strictly carried out at all times!"

We at last reached the ridge, and now rapidly advanced towards the summit, turret after turret, and spire beyond spire. We shook hands on setting foot on the summit, and were rewarded by an immense view, difficult to surpass. As usual, I registered this panorama with a number of successful snaps. The summit was again so small that it was quite a risky business to stand on it.

My guide reminded me that the route down was long and threatened by stonefall. He would have preferred one of the more difficult but safer routes, on which there are numerous fixed ropes, but we were the first to climb the Grivola this summer and nothing was known of the conditions prevailing on those routes. We therefore descended as we came; everything passed off without

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incident until we were near the end of the wall of rock, when a boulder the size of a man's head came hurtling down from high above, missing my guide by about two yards. Smaller stones were whistling in my direction, but I ducked in time. My guide, who was now quite desperate, thought that our only salvation was to take some risk, to jump over the rocks as quickly as we could, just like the chamois, taking a short breather whenever rocks offered some cover. After many mighty jumps, we were at last able to get clear and set foot on the glacier, sprint about forty yards, and reach safety at last. My immediate reaction was to burst out laughing, but my guide had again one of his outbursts of temper, he was shocked that I could laugh when, a little while before, he had been in the grip of such tension that his inside nearly burst. He also asked me to remember that he had at home a wife and four children.

He now had to tackle the problem of crossing the glacier in the reverse direction, which meant a steady climb in deep and soft snow, with our sinking in up to the knees.

On reaching the Colle Nero the dangers and difficulties were over; a short distance away from us we saw a man and his two small boys descending from a small peak, without being roped together, and obviously inexperienced, and it was a miracle that they were not involved in an accident.

On our way down to the Refuge V. Sella we were met by hundreds of bouquetins. A very tall young priest, who frock nearly touched the ground, and who was "armed" with a Leica, tried to get some close-up snaps. He was very quick and almost as easy moving over the steep terrain of grass and rocks as the animals themselves, but they never gave him a chance, and he had to give up.

During the last stage of our descent, black clouds gathered in the sky, and the storm broke loose just as we reached the Refuge.

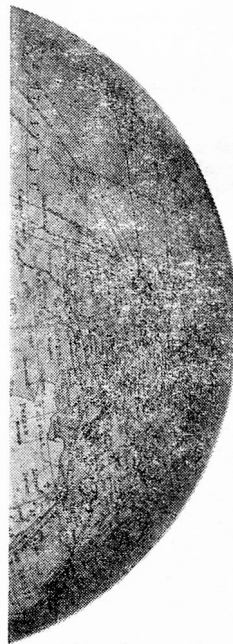
In the afternoon, having refreshed ourselves, and while it was still raining, we started on our descent to Cogne, in the valley of the same name.

Towards 6 p.m., after a long and tiring descent we arrived at the important alpine resort of Cogne, which has developed enormously since the war, and its numerous hotels and private residences are spread about in the enchanted meadows of Sant'Orso like a handful of newly minted coins. My guide, feeling rather tired, would have liked to enter the first hotel which happened to be one of the biggest and most expensive ones, but, as I had to foot the bill, I preferred to call on the local tourist office near by, which secured two rooms for us in a cheaper tourist hotel. It was newly constructed, with every modern comfort, and my guide was the first to admit that we could not have stayed at a more comfortable place. The owner turned out to be a well-known former guide, for which reason alone he was very sympathetic towards us.

Before going to bed, we had a look at this resort, which boasts a wrought iron fountain in the shape of an archaic cross, and nearby, there are some iron oxide mines.

The next morning, the first local bus service took us down to the Aosta valley, near St. Pierre Villeneuve, along the Grande Eyvie, a tumultuous stream, which descends through Aymaville and not far from the Sarre Castle joins the Dora river in the Aosta valley, with the three Castles of Arvier, La Salle and Morgez, all holiday resorts.

After a good lunch at St. Pierre Villeneuve, we took another bus to the well-known and fashionable alpine resort of Courmayeur, 1,224 metres high, that can now celebrate a century of mountain climbing activity. The registers of its numerous hotels preserve memories of monarchs, eminent prelates and artists. This district has produced some famous guides, who are aristocratic in every sense of the word. These guides hold their festival each year on 15th August; their mountain equipment is blessed, they sing the old melodies; they are the custodians and the philosophers of the Alps, and of sound character. Opposite this resort and the river Dora lies the village of Dolonne. This river is full of the grey waters of the glaciers, the "forge of Mont Blanc" being always open. There the Grivel family manufacture ice-axes and crampons of the purest steel, specimens of which were used by Tensing, Hillary and Lambert for their mountain climbing in the Himalayas. After a walk of about an hour, up the beautiful Val Ferret, during which time our eyes were constantly turned towards the Mont Blanc, towering at least 3,600 metres above us, we reached the village of Entreves. At the end of this village, one of the most fantastic cable railways in the whole of the Alps took us up 2,000 metres in less than fifteen minutes to the Colle del Gigante, 3,347 metres high. No wonder that many people, unaccustomed to great heights, get splitting headaches or sometimes even faint on arrival at the top. On a big platform, within five minutes' climb, stands the recently constructed modern Hotel Torino. It has a large dining room, cocktail bar, smoking rooms, a room for tourists who bring their own food, besides numerous



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spick-and-span dormitories, and also individual rooms with bath and lavatory. The hotel is excellently managed, and the wants of each individual are splendidly catered for.

We had a very good dinner, prepared by a proper chef, and, given the necessary cash, one could dine and wine here as well as anywhere else.

Our objective the next morning was the Aiguille de Rochefort. We were awakened at 3 a.m., and served with a cafe comple of the highest standard. Fully rested and in excellent condition, we left the hotel at 3.30 a.m., walking on the hard snow from the Col de Geant towards the buttress of rock of the Dent du Geant, skirting the Aiguille Marbré. Before reaching a broad ridge of ice and rock leading directly up to the Dent du Geant we had to scale a deep wall of hard snow about 100 metres high, at an angle of sixty degrees. We found it advisable to put on our crampons, which, with their ten sharp points of steel, give a good grip on hard snow or blank ice. This staircase of ice and snow was quite a severe test, and we were glad when it was behind us.

We now noticed nine parties of two, roped together, closely behind us. They were from the Alpine School of Chamonix, each party consisting of a guide and his pupil. All these learners found the going tough, except a girl of about twenty in the last party. A student from Grenoble, she made progress with the greatest of ease, and I could not help feeling a little envious, since she had many years of climbing in front of her, while my climbing career, if not yet coming to a close, was much more advanced. Little did I think at that time that a few days later her young and promising life would come to an abrupt and untimely end. While ski-ing with this Alpine School, unroped, she fell into a crevasse fifty yards deep, and died instantly. Her guide had not complied with the strict rule that climbers should always be roped together when crossing a glacier. It appears that it has become fashionable among a section of skiers not to do so, and this accident was the inevitable result.

These parties intended to climb the Aiguille de Rochefort, like ourselves, and we let them pass. A good many steps would have to be cut on the icy ridge leading towards the summit, and our motto was "let others do the hard work"!

The loose rock and the ice on the broad ridge leading up to the Dent du Geant required great care. One of my crampons came off, but, fortunately, I caught it just as it was about to career thousands of feet downwards. From time to time, our eyes looked up to the final bastion of the Dent du Geant, a real giant's tooth. It looked as though this "dental operation" would not be possible, but about a dozen thick ropes fixed on to the vertical slabs, facilitated the ascent. (I had done this climb nine years earlier.) We saw some climbers high up, moving like tiny creatures on the tower of Babylon.

On reaching the spot where the difficult passages on the Dent du Geant begin, our way parted, and we had to follow an ice ridge sharp as a razor, in parts only six or eight inches wide, and rising at angles varying up to sixty degrees. The chief obstacles were cornices which left us no choice but to swarm beetle fashion along their shapely but frail convex backs. A false step by one of us would have had catastrophic consequences. On the side of the Glacier du Geant there is a sheer drop of thousands of feet over walls of ice and snow, while on the side of the Val Ferret, the ice ridge appears to be struck on an enormous buttress of rock. In case of a fall, one would land almost in the Val Ferret. During one of the difficult passages, one of my crampons again fell off, but luck was again with me, and I caught it just in time. The wind was now

howling over the ridge, doing all sorts of funny tricks with the rope connecting us. The extreme cold forced me to rub my hands with snow, to get the warmth back again into my fingers. There were repeated hold ups by the parties in front of us, an indication of the difficulties ahead. At about 8.30 a.m. we set foot on the summit, and shook hands, as is customary on such occasions. I had done yet another "Viertausender", although this Aiguille is only one Metre above the 4,000 metres zone. The weather was just wonderful, and the view and visibility extensive; in the South, we saw clearly the Gran Paradiso and the Grivola which we had climbed a few days before.

The other parties left in another direction, but my guide had to be down in the Val Ferret shortly after midday, as he had to catch the coach to Switzerland via Aosta, where he had an engagement with other climbers. We therefore started to descend the way we came. I was rather worried about this, with this fearful ridge, only a few inches wide in parts, sloping down steeply, but as it so often happens, my fears were unfounded, and my guide could have held me in case of a slip. He, on the other hand, being the last man down, could not take the slightest risk, had to take every precaution, and therefore took much longer than I. Each time before he started moving, I rammed my ice axe into the ice, placed the rope around the handle protruding about an inch or so, and my guide could thus have been securely held in the event of a fall. Of course, only one of us was moving at a time.

We got safely back to the Hotel Torino, had some light refreshments, taking the first cable lift down to Entreves. There, our ways parted, as I intended to go on foot direct over the Col de Ferret to Ferret in Switzerland, about 25 kilometres away and requiring another climb from 1,400 metres to 2,500 metres up.

Having handed over practically all my belongings to my guide, for him to deposit them at Orsieres, I was able to move at full speed and to get back to Ferret and Orsieres in record time. A good hour below the summit of the Col Ferret, I passed the debris of the former large Refuge Elena, which had been totally destroyed a few months earlier by an avalanche.

Mountains are a good adventure. They change little enough in their attributes and charm for us to consider them permanent. It is to their changelessness that they owe their power of "renewing our youth" whenever we are again among them. The same atmosphere, the same appearance, always produce the same feeling in us.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

Our next issue (Christmas Number) will be published on Friday, December 16th 1960 (one issue only). We take this opportunity of thanking the following subscribers for their kind and helpful donations over and above their subscription: J. Clement, H. Mock, H. Trepp (Geneva), T. Schurch, Miss J. Gatehouse, W. Tschuy, A. Spagnapani (New Orleans, U.S.A.), G. Huber, W. Roch, W. & M. Meier, Ch. J. Gysin, F. Zogg, Dr. W. R. Schweizer, Mrs. H. A. Clarke, R. Marchand, A. Strittmatter, Ch. Ruegg, S. Brenni, H. P. Holliger, W. Stettbacher, Paul Bessire, C. B. Adam, W. R. Renfer, E. Goodbehere, P. Odermatt, L. Jobin, J. Eusebio, C. Baerlocher.

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