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DANGEROUS CLIMBING IN THE MONT BLANC REGION

By W. STETTBACHER

(Continued.)

Our first objective was the AIGUILLE DU TOUR, 3,542 m., which, over the normal route, is not a difficult climb. There is some interesting climbing on steep rock over the last 150 yards, and we chose one of the more difficult routes. Numerous other caravans of tourists were scaling this *aiguille*, some coming from the French refuge Albert Premier, while others, including my guide and myself, started from the Swiss side. Some cloud and mist began to form around us, but we nevertheless had a fair view from the summit, and a good number of photographs were taken by me. My guide, while snapping me, accidentally dropped my camera which fell about three yards on some rock, but it miraculously suffered no damage at all.

While the descent presented no undue difficulty, I was reminded a week later that the greatest care must be taken at all times, for two Britons from the North of England had just fallen to their death during the descent from this *aiguille*.

The progress in the technique has devalued mountains which were formerly famous, but it is curious to note that the traverse of the Aiguille des Chardonnets, prototype of the great classical and mixed climb; snow, ice and rock, is still in great favour among alpinists. The beauty of its cornices of snow, the magnificent view from its summit, the loftiness and sharpness of its ridge leading to the summit, and the steep descent down the northern wall, continue to attract numerous climbing parties.

Our objective for the following day was the Aiguille des Chardonnets (3,824 m.). The sky was overcast and the outlook not too promising. We were therefore pleasantly surprised to see that the sky was clear and the stars shining brilliantly when we got up at 2.30 a.m. After the usual breakfast consisting of soup (or herb tea) and bread and butter with jam, my guide and I, at about 3 a.m. clambered down the loose moraines and hard snow below the Refuge to the Plateau du Trient, a huge glacier. For the first hour, we followed the same route as the day before, namely up to the Col du Tour, which lies below the Aiguille du Tour. We were preceded by at least eight other parties. Our impetus carried us up and over the high point of the Pass; thence we dropped about a 100 yards to the other glacier down below. There we were joined by another eight parties which started from the French Refuge Albert 1er, and we all made for the high point of the Col Fenêtre du Tour, 3,336 metres high. From there, we had to make our way up a steep snow and ice slope. Many steps had already been cut during previous days by other parties, but where fresh steps were necessary, they were made with the swish of the ice-axe by preceding parties. At about six a.m. we had reached a small platform covered with snow, a so-called "Frühstücksplatz", where the climbers make a halt in order to take some refreshment.

Here we were standing at the point where the ridge proper begins, the so-called Forbes ridge leading to the summit of the Aiguille des Chardonnets. It is a thrilling moment when we realise that we are really at grips with our climb and that everything depends on snatching a confident hold.

One of the chief delights of climbing along high ridges is the continuous suggestion of change and progress.

Our attention is confined between the steadily contracting edges of the wall upon which we are climbing. The summit above us, false or true, suggests to the mind a finite effort, soon to be rounded off. Our purpose, in fact seems limited to the overcoming of an interruption to our freedom of sight and progress. But the crest of a great ridge stretching before our feet is an emblem of a happy infinity. Its narrow procession of obstacles serves only to keep us physically concentrated and stimulated.

Our first obstacle was a turret (gendarme) about four yards high which had to be conquered by frontal assault, through a chimney, which appeared to be completely smooth rock.

We allowed the first party of two to precede us. It took the second of this party several minutes to overcome this obstacle.

Then it was our turn. I watched my guide closely, so as to imitate each of his movements. I wiggled my chest up on the first part of the chimney, and then swung up my legs. At last I found another fingerhold on the smooth rock wall above. A few seconds and I was up the chimney, panting a little, and sitting astride of the sharp snowy neck that joined the head of our tower to the backbone of our main ridge.

We immediately overtook the first party, and after turning the base of one unassailable tower, by means of a dangerous "Quergang", we could only regain our Arrête by creeping up a wall of loose rock mixed with ice.

Turret after turret, and spire beyond spire, as we advanced, revealed itself as a disconnected defence upon the narrow and continuous-looking crest of our ridge. Between the towers, the unexpected gaps were often spanned by malignant either-way cornices, which wavered high above the rock edge they concealed, and left to us only the choice of swarming beetle-fashion along their shapely but frail convex backs.

Up a last broken column of rock, partly covered with snow, we pelted direct for the summit, and broke through the final snow-crest sooner than we had expected.

The summit was at last ours. Conditions were so favourable that we did not need our crampons, which is quite unusual. My guide complimented me for once on the elegant technique adopted during the rock climbing.

After a belated and customary handshake, we set about to restore our forces by eating some salami, and dried fruit, besides drinking numerous cups of herb tea. Thereupon, I took a number of photos showing myself and my guide standing on the summit, and of the grandiose panorama. I would have liked to use a second film I had on me, but the exposed position and the difficulties lying ahead, did not permit me to remove the used film and to put a new one in its place. Just as we made preparations for the descent, fixing the crampons on to our mountaineering boots, which, as subsequent events showed, were a sheer necessity, the second party arrived.

To my question, whether the descent would be difficult, my guide replied: "Difficult, no; dangerous yes".

Little did I realise that as we would descend the solid-looking and steep rock flues of the northern wall, earthenware and plates would be thrown after us with the open-handedness of an angry kitchenmaid.

(To be continued.)

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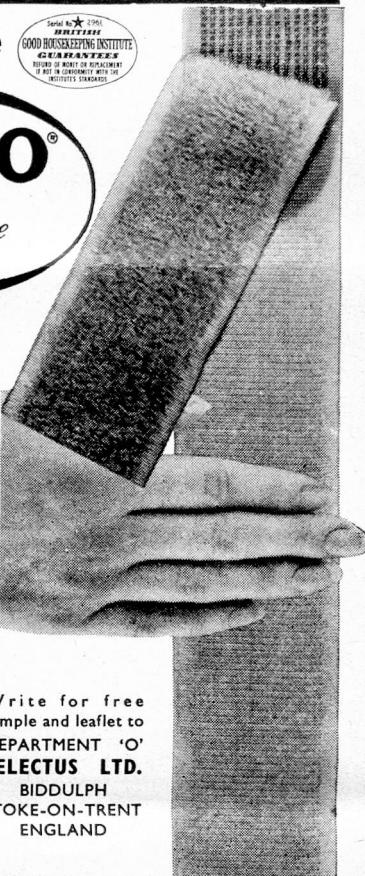
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