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Autor: Stettbacher, W.

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DANGEROUS CLIMBING IN THE MONT BLANC REGION

By W. STETTBACHER

(Concluded.)

Doctors, when asked by a patient suffering from an incurable disease, instead of telling the truth, will sometimes assure them that everything will be alright. In the same way, when guides are asked by tourists about the degree of difficulty of the coming descent, they usually give a reassuring reply, although they are fully aware of the difficulties and dangers that lie ahead. I am not so sure about the doctor, but I am positive that a guide is right in minimising the difficulties. If I had been made conscious of the dangers of this climb, I would never have undertaken it at all.

The first 200 yards, apart from the dangers presented by snow fall, were not particularly difficult, rock alternating with hard snow. But all of a sudden, our way was barred by an apparently unscalable precipice. To my consternation, my guide told me that we would have to descend over this precipice, down a steep *coulloir*, at an angle of at least seventy degrees, filled with nasty black ice. I enquired if it was not possible to by-pass this *coulloir*? My guide then remembered having found some years back a detour nearby, but try as he might, he was unable to find this other route this time.

We returned to the precipice, and my guide set about to clear a protruding rock from ice, which is evidently being used as an "Abseilstelle". He placed around it his reserve rope about fifty yards long. It was intended that I should descend on this rope, while, as an extra-special security, I was, of course, attached to my guide by another rope. It was not a promising take-off, a little like swinging off the tower of Pisa on the leaning side.

Just as these preparations were complete, the second party arrived. Realising the danger of this passage, and having no reserve rope, they asked my guide for permission to use his. This meant that we had to let them descend first. This naturally delayed us, but in cases like these, when life is at stake, it is the duty of all of us to help one another.

Once they were safely down, it was my turn. I resolutely gripped the reserve rope with both hands, placed it between my legs, letting myself down gradually with my crampons continuously making contact with the black ice or rock. From some remarks shouted by my guide, I gathered that my technique here was far from elegant and not exactly according to the book, but I never faltered, and was at no time in difficulty. Nevertheless, I was greatly relieved when I set foot on the comparatively safe rocks below. All the time, I was threatened by falling icicles and rock.

My guide followed, but his task was infinitely more dangerous as nobody could secure him from above. Of course, I anchored my ice-axe deep into the ice, placing around it the rope connecting us, and while I could probably have held my guide in case of a fall, this might not have prevented his suffering severe if not fatal injury.

On reaching me, my guide tried to pull down the reserve rope, but it had jammed and for five minutes squeaked and cracked in mockery, while we strove for its recovery. It was only with the aid of some climbers above us that we eventually succeeded in dislodging the rope. We only escaped from our anxiety at the point where the rocks ended, above a "wild and stormy steep" of ice and hard snow. I estimated that this wall of ice

had an inclination of about sixty degrees, but, fortunately, for us, large steps had been cut into the ice by climbers of previous days. After about a quarter of an hour, I was surprised to arrive at the end of this wall, being confronted by an enormous "Bergschlund". How do I get over this, I asked my guide. You must jump, he replied. The effect of this reply on me was dramatic! It was a *coup de théâtre*, preparatory to the great "sensation leap" which was about to be executed by me.

Some unseen cause, some cliff or obstruction in the rocks below had caused our wall of ice to split into two positions, and the huge fissure which had thus been formed, extended right across over a distance of at least 400 yards. We, on the slope above, were separated from the slope below by a mighty crevasse. No running up and down to look for an easier place to cross could be done on an ice slope of 60°; the chasm had to be passed then and there.

A downward jump of eight to ten feet, and a forward leap of also seven to eight feet had to be made at the same time. That is not much, you may say. It was not the quantity, but it was the quality of the jump which gave to it its particular flavour. You had to hit a narrow ridge of ice. If that was passed, it seemed as if you might roll down for ever and ever. If it was not attained, you dropped into the crevasse below, which, although partly choked by icicles and snow that had fallen from above, was still gaping in many places, ready to receive an erratic body.

Without hesitation, I jumped, and to my surprise, the timing was right, and everything passed off without incident. My guide would of course have checked me if anything had gone wrong. I was then ordered to descend another forty yards until I could get a secure foothold. A few minutes later, I saw a flying body, coming down as if taking a header into the water, with arms and legs all abroad, and within a second or two, the same body hurtled past me, rolling round and round at a fantastic speed, and finally disappeared from view, as the ice wall got steeper and steeper.

Some five minutes later, his companion descended very fast. At it transpired later, the victim of this accident, a German tourist, had a miraculous escape! He was saved because there were no protruding rocks, and because his fall was in the end broken by soft snow lying on the glacier below. He was able to descend to the nearest Refuge, assisted by his companion, but traces of blood in the snow showed that he must have suffered some external injuries.

The next thing I saw, was my guide jumping over the crevasse. He had taken the precaution of removing his crampons, but during the jump, he lost them, and also his ice-axe. By one of those lucky chances, one of the crampons, and also the ice axe, got embedded in protruding ice, and I was able to retrieve them, to fix them on the reserve rope lowered by the guide. Without these objects, my guide could not possibly have reached me unassisted.

My guide later admitted that his judgment was at fault, and that we should never have jumped at all. He had tried to dissuade the German tourist from doing so, but he had either misunderstood or purposely ignored his advice. The remaining parties, which by this time had

reached the "Bergschrund", decided to join forces and to descend individually on a fixed double rope.

Once we were clear of this obstacle, our difficulties were at an end, and we now returned to the Refuge over the same route as we had come. The going was now rather slow and strenuous, as the sun had softened the snow, which made us for long stretches sink in up to the knees. We finally got back to the Refuge just after 1 o'clock and in time for lunch. We were easily the first party to be back, and thus another memorable climb had come to an end.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The Editor,
The Swiss Observer,
23 Leonard Street,
London E.C.2.

Dear Madam,

Now that the Susten Pass lies open to tourist traffic, I like to recall an occasion, before that time, of passing a night in the Steinengletcher Hotel, which I approached on foot from Gadmen. I left the following morning with a vivid impression of the wonder and immensity of the alps, stopping half way down the pass in order to dry my wet clothes and get some food.

I remember being told by the kind woman who took me in and cooked an excellent omelette for my lunch, that most of the men of the family had gone off to the States, there being so little opportunity to earn a livelihood at home.

Engineering has brought benefits to all, but the days of the scythe and horse-sleigh had their special relish, and I solace my spare moments by memories of remote valley and pass, glacier and fall, to view which there were then few facilities beyond one's feet.

Yours faithfully,

E. F. IRVINE.

Escot,
Friston,
Saxmundham,
Suffolk.
July 2nd, 1964.

SKI-ING AT THERMAL SPAS

There was a time when the French Riviera proudly advertised a spring ski-ing tour combined with swimming under palm trees on the same day. A version of this original recreation is offered today by several Swiss mountain resorts with thermal Springs. After a strenuous excursion, the tourist can experience the pleasure of a hot bath, invigorating to body and mind, in Leukerbad (Valais) or St. Moritz and Bad Ragaz, only to mention a few such resorts. Due to the recently inaugurated aerial cableway of the Corvatsch, which makes ski-ing possible all the year round, the thermal springs of St. Moritz have gained in importance as an enjoyable counterpart to ski-ing. The Corvatsch cableway leads to the snowfields of the Piz Corvatsch, 11,339 feet, one of the most famous peaks in the Engadin region.

[S.N.T.O.]

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