

Mountain supreme - yet conquered [continued]

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MOUNTAIN SUPREME — YET CONQUERED

by W. Stettbacher

(Continued)

Awakened at 2 o'clock in the morning, we were served, as a special favour, with an omelette, in addition to the usual breakfast consisting of bread and butter, jam and tea or coffee. A few minutes later, we started on our adventure, with the good wishes of the hut-keeper. The first hour after leaving a refuge is always a dreary business. First of all, you do not feel quite up to the mark yet, after a night at a hut, and secondly, it is usually almost dark, and notwithstanding the use of a torch or a lantern, one must proceed with extreme care. We first scrambled up some wet grass slopes, intersected with rock, and gradually, we had to make our way through the debris of rock now starting to pile up. The sky appeared to be clear, with stars glimmering faintly, and we were still hoping for a fine day. We soon reached the terminal moraine at the lower end of the Weingarten Glacier. Moraines are an accumulation of boulders and finer debris, brought down by a glacier and lying on its surface. They may be unstable and dangerous, with loose blocks poised on the ice which is often coated with a poorly adherent layer of sand and gritty stones. They have been dumped like council rubbish on the ice, and are a nuisance to the climber. Once on the Weingarten Glacier proper, we made rapid progress towards the "rib" which leads up the rock face and towards the Mischabel ridge, which, in turn, stretches up to the summit of the Taeschhorn. Before tackling this rib, we roped ourselves together, and fixed the crampons to our mountaineering boots. We again made ground fairly quickly, or at least so it seemed, proceeding in zig-zag fashion. Steep, glassy slopes of hard snow and ice descended this rib of rock, and I began to wonder how we would get down here safely later in the day when the rib would be furrowed by water and possibly falling stones. We relentlessly pushed on until we reached the ridge at a height of about 4,000 metres. The weather started to deteriorate somewhat, but we soon forgot any atmospheric warnings in the exhilaration of getting nearer the top. Cornices now stood in our way and became our problem.

A cornice is an overhanging mass of snow or ice above a sharp slope or at the side of a ridge. A snow ridge may be bounded by a cornice on either, or more seldom, on both sides. Cornices tend to form away from the prevailing wind. They may break down in thawing weather and are a potential danger.

The important thing to remember is that if the cornice does break away, the line of fracture may be quite far back. That could be some distance behind the overhanging edge. The safe procedure is always to anchor one member of the party in an absolutely secure position, while the other or others are moving; if someone falls through the cornice, it may be necessary for the next person on the rope to jump down the other side of the ridge in order to save him.

Once or twice we had to get off the ridge, traverse below it a few yards on the other side, over appalling precipices. We were relieved on reaching the base of the final rock pyramid of the Taeschhorn, at a height of approx. 4,300 metres. While the rocks were covered with light snow, it was now pure rock climbing, not very difficult.

The summit was ours at last! This season, it was very small indeed, but it was one of the loveliest cones of

ice that was ever piled up on a mountain top, too dangerous to stand on. After the customary handshake, we contented ourselves in driving our axes into the highest point.

Having finally conquered this most stubborn of mountains, I should have felt elated and triumphant. Yet, on this occasion, my usual enthusiasm seemed to be lacking! Did I have a premonition of things to come? My first shock came after my guide's disclosure that from the time we started to climb the "rib", we needed 5½ hours to reach the top. My guide's earlier estimate was that we should require about two hours. The only conclusion I could draw from this, was that conditions must have been exceptionally difficult.

Our second worry was a visible deterioration in the weather. When the mountains sulk or storm, their moods can result in very unforgettable moments. Their ordinary tempers of snow, rain or gale are part of the climber's work, but when they choose to sulk with mists and fog, the stoutest mountaineer will be in dire trouble. Some famous climbers like Winthrop Young have asserted that the Taeschhorn is apt to produce a variation of thunderstorms which surpass, in sheer frightfulness, every other mountain or war experience.

A broad head of mist was now stealing continuously out of the valley towards the mountain top, and the snow contours around us began to grow indistinct. Soon the mist was about us, and over us. I had just been in time to photograph the immense panorama from all angles.

From the exposed height of our great pyramid, surging above other ranges except the Dom, we looked out on white peaks and glaciers all round, with enormous cloud formations reaching high into the sky in the east. We seemed to be very much removed from the earth, and certainly alone.

We now had to decide quickly about our route down. In good weather and conditions, this grand climb could have been completed by a traverse towards the Dom, *via* the Domjoch. But these conditions were sadly lacking, so this route had to be ruled out. We also came to the conclusion that a return the same way we had come, would be too risky. We therefore chose what is normally supposed to be the easiest Taeschhorn route, but also the longest, in the direction of the Dom hut. Had I known at that time what the well-known alpinist Walter Schmid wrote in his book "Glückliche Tage auf hohen Bergen", I would not have chanced it. He wrote as follows:

"Mein Führer hielt den Abstieg nach der Domhütte wegen der schlechten Sicht als viel zu riskant. Selbst bei hellem Wetter ist das Durchschlüpfen durch den wild zerklüfteten Gletscher kein Kinderspiel. Sich bei Schnee im Nebel in ein solches Spaltenlabyrinth hereinzu-manoeuvrieren, wenn es nicht unbedingt sein muss, wäre günstigenfalls ein Beweis purer Dummheit, vielleicht aber auch ein Abenteuer, das im Bauch des Gletschers oder auf einem Friedhof seinen Abschluss fände".

Rightly or wrongly, we now braced ourselves for the descent down to the Dom hut. We left the summit over a razor-sharp edge plunging down at an angle of at least 50 degrees, with even steeper slopes of rock, snow or ice on either side. The ridge itself was mostly covered with snow-ice, either well frozen to the rock or in part covering blank ice. Careful climbing and strict security measures, with the use of rock belays, were essential. Many times, we had to descend a yard or two from the ridge and traverse the flank of it.

About 600 feet (in height) below the Taeschhorn, we left the ridge, in order to descend a *coulöir* which was the only way down towards the Kien Glacier. This *coulöir*

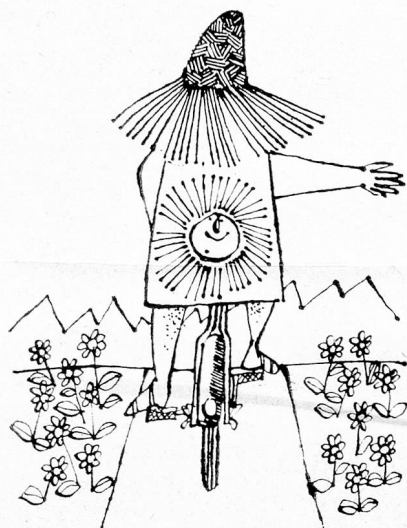
plunges down very steeply, and 20 to 30 centimetres of soft snow was adhering to the ice normally covering it. The snow was fortunately just hard enough to allow us to use this route with all precautions. Carefully and strongly, I, being in the lead, kicked steps downward either in a direct line or in zig-zag fashion. Soft snow was continuously clogging up the inside area of the spikes of our crampons, which can result in overbalance and fall. When the inclination of the slope became a little less, the mist increased, and visibility was almost nil. It was now obvious that one hindrance would succeed another, and that much time would be consumed in seeking a way out. I seemed to make continuous blunders. Round my boots, the snow surface seemed to be as plain as daylight. As I lifted my eyes and explored the terrain ahead, I seemed to see alright. But I had hardly taken one or

two steps when I stumbled. I was quite uncertain whether I was going downward, upward or on the level. I nearly always seemed to my eyes to go upward, while, on the contrary, it was steeply downwards. It is also well-known that most men's inclination in fog is to turn to the left, and this was indeed my own inclination.

My guide now had to give me directions continuously, by shouting: Stop; wait; attention; right; left. I suggested that it might be better to stop, in the hope that the mist might lift at least temporarily. In such a contingency, text books always advise that it is much safer to stop. My guide, normally so placid and so cheerful, did not see it that way; on the contrary, he became rather heated and shouted: "Go on, go on, I have not the slightest intention of staying here all night, at such a great height!" So we went on, I could see next to nothing.

(To be concluded)

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