

# Climbing, a pleasure for the bold

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# CLIMBING, A PLEASURE FOR THE BOLD

*Gilbert Chapuis is a young bank employee from Vevey, currently working as cashier in one of the Swiss banks of London. He is also one of the most active members of the "Club des Jeunes" of the Swiss Church and in a recent club evening has related some of his staggering adventures as a passionate rock-climber. Here is his story of a typical mountaineering weekend spent in overcoming the north face of the "Aiguille d'Argentiere", a 3,900 metre peak some five miles south of the Forclaz Pass, with three other addicts of the beetling heights.*

Leaving Vevey late in the morning, one Saturday in September of last year, we arrived in Champex, passing through Martigny, at about three in the afternoon. There we left our car, making sure that the material we were taking with us was complete. We started-off for the Saleina alpine hut, which we reached after a three-hour climb.

We left the hut to have a look at the wall. It stood there, 950 metres high, waiting for us some three miles away. It was shaped like a gigantic triangle with jagged sides. Its surface was scarred by long runnels climbing upwards. A look through the binoculars would reveal the real nature of its surface, the best comparison being a glacier standing on edge. North faces never see the sun, even in mid-summer. Every night of the year, temperatures range between minus twenty and thirty degrees, and this has permitted the growth of a layer of ice almost as old and hard as the rock-substratum itself. But like every glacier, the face has its seracs, ice pinnacles jutting out horizontally. These are dreaded by all alpinists. Not only are they very difficult to overcome—their overhang requiring all the powers of artificial-climbing techniques — but particularly unsafe. As temperatures soften during the day, or as they get over-loaded with new coatings of ice, they break and crash down with the crack of thunder. If a roped party has the misfortune of being in their trajectory, it will be whiffed away like chaff. A climber is happy if he can find a crenel in a serac through which he can grope through, but in most cases, he has to pass over them.

We had the intention of attacking the wall through its centre: we would climb from the base of the triangle to its top angle. The weather was ideal and forecasts were good. We returned to the hut more determined and impatient than ever to start on our ascension. There we met three guides, among them Michel Vaucher, well known for his première of

the Wimper Pillar. Discussing the ascent with us, one of the three strongly urged us to give it up. "*Ca descend*", he was saying, implying that ice-blocks, detached by the heat of the last weeks, were raining down the wall and making its ascent especially dangerous. But we were left undeterred and went to bed at seven. Before doing so, we spread out and made a final check of our equipment. We were taking with us 20 snaplinks, 40 rock and ice pitons, 20 ice-screws, two 30-metre and one 60-metre rope, ice-axes, hammers and crampons (naturally!), necessities for an emergency bivouac, ample protection against the cold and cross-belts designed to prevent us from crushing our ribs in case we slipped. In all, each man was to carry 20 kilos of equipment.

At one o'clock, we were up. We had the mountaineer's breakfast: hot tea, bread, cheese and tablets made from sesame grain of extremely high calorific value. It is essential for the climber not to eat heavy and rich foods before he sets out for his climb. Such foods would inevitably be rejected during the efforts which he must accomplish.

The night was icy-cold, the sky beautifully limpid and starry. We advanced in silence on a snow that was as hard and jagged as stone towards the face. It was looming ever larger. By three o'clock, we were at its foot. For thirteen hours from now, it was no longer to exist. We were to be part of it.

We emptied our rucksacs and girdled ourselves with pitons and ice-screws. We strapped on our crampons, adjusted our cross-belts, linked ourselves into two roped pairs, slung our hammers, ice-axes and stirrups over our shoulders and groped our way up the black and endless ice wall.

This was not rock-climbing, it was ice-climbing. We cannot see the rock because it is hidden by a varying thickness of massive ice. It is with this ice that we must grapple. Our crampons are studded both on the sole and the front, where they are guarded by a bristling spike that we jam into the ice. We let our whole weight rest on this spike, so that we are really climbing a vertical wall on tiptoe. To avoid toppling backwards, we are buckled to the ice-screw that we have planted in the wall for that purpose. Sometimes the ice is so hard that we cannot retrieve it, but it is normally loosened again for further use. The rope to which we are secured may not run loose against the rock: it is held to it by snaplinks to pitons. The latter must carry the brunt of an eventual fall, and, needless to say, must be well hammered-in.

Climbing in the darkness, we were oblivious of the existence of the actual wall we were overcoming and of the hazy void below. Our busy minds were not concerned with anything that lay further

afield than the next foothold. We were meticulous artisans with nothing else but our work to concentrate on.

The sun rose above the Alps. We could not see it, only the golden sky. Soon it was light enough for us to see two points down below moving towards the wall. Two rock-climbers were about to undertake the same ascent as we had. We lost sight of them until, an hour later, they had reached our level. They had climbed along our tracks and were progressing surprisingly fast. They overtook us, but a hundred metres higher, we caught up with them again. They were having difficulties with the softening ice. The fast warming atmosphere was producing a brittle outer layer into which no piton could be firmly secured. It just burst as they were knocked into it and this made the going much slower and difficult. The two men, badly shaken by these worsening conditions, had decided to give up the ascent, a wise decision, because the point of no return lies very low on a north face. In most cases, the best escape is through the summit, since it is safer to soldier-on than to risk climbing down such a wall of ice. They offered us their surplus equipment. Having all the material we could expect to need, we declined the offer. The two climbers started on their way down by traversing the wall towards a ridge which was more tractable.

Making good progress, we had climbed well over 400 metres by the middle of the morning. Pausing to contemplate the ground that had been covered, we amused ourselves by throwing pieces of rock in the void and following their endless rebounds. Their noise broke the absolute silence of the mountain. We could not help having the uncomfortable feeling of being like pictures hanging on a wall: we were safe to the extent that the pitons and the pieces of rope on which our lives were suspended were secure. But a picture may hang on a wall everlastingly, a security denied to us. We *had* to continue climbing, we were five hundred metres of vertical ice away from safety, and had to reckon with an unavoidable and growing tiredness. The string on which a picture's safety depends never tires. Not so with the human "pictures" who voluntarily hang on the walls of the Alps: they will be snapping strings after a limited effort and it is essential for any rock-climber to size-up his capabilities.

Indeed, the most important lesson which this unique sport can bring, is of that knowing oneself. In many ways, it is akin to Yoga. There is no competition with anybody else: the only elements to vanquish are the body and the rock. A sport which is pure both by nature and necessity. As any mistake can be deadly, it is up to the climber to forestall all of

them by knowing precisely what he can and cannot do. Absolute honesty with oneself is indispensable. Where, in other circumstances, eagerness and sporting ambition would prompt one to have another tug at the line, in rock-climbing these drives are suppressed by a lucid awareness of one's emerging limitations. It is fatal to go one step too far. This forces upon the climber an honest and salutary appreciation of what he can do. When he envisages a particular ascent, he will have to *know* that he can make it, even though he might be the first ever to attempt it. This knowledge cannot be dissociated from knowledge of one's capabilities.

Rock-climbing brings with it an immense feeling of solitude. Even though the climber may be having a partner, whilst he is climbing, he is alone in his struggle with the rock, the ice and their tricks. When he is twisting his hands to engage them in a minute chink which will be his only hold to life, he is alone and the partner who watches him anxiously ten metres below cannot exist. But he does, and this leads to the tremendous solidarity which rock-climbing fosters among its adepts. No other sport has such a highly uniting effect because none other calls for such mutual responsibility. Every climber is responsible for his comrades, a second overwhelming reason why he may not cheat. Every new and difficult ascension must be undertaken by climbers who have already climbed together, know each other, like and trust each other well. I knew my partners in this particular ascent—we had already done a few "four thousands" together—and I had no doubts concerning their trustworthiness and excellence as mountaineers. I would have refused a climb like this with anyone with whom I had not climbed before.

After moral honesty and the sense of responsibilities, the first quality which all members of a team trying a new and difficult ascent must possess is endurance, physical and moral. A brilliant climber may be worn out at the first third of the ascent; technique is useless without endurance. A moment can come when the leader is not sure whether he is able to accomplish the next move. Hesitation starts burdening his movements and, as he waits, he tires. The tiring process is surprisingly rapid. The coldness of the air and his prolonged tension make him start trembling and he is positively paralysed, unable to continue as leader. He will retreat to the nearest piton, hook his stirrup onto it and take a rest. Perhaps his exhaustion will make him slip and fall back some ten to twenty yards. He dangles at the end of his rope and may be too shocked to recover immediately, in which case he might well be a burden to the party for the rest of the ascent. The others accept the situation and are ready to risk their lives in saving him. But since the stakes are so high, they will make sure from the outset that such mishaps are really unexpected.

Continuing our ascent, we reached a pillar which was almost free of ice. We deliberated for some time whether we should unstrap our crampons and continue the ascent as ordinary rock-climbing, but decided to keep them on. In fact, the pillar was surfaced with a thin and treacherous glaze of frost which we bravely confronted straddling the rock awkwardly, not knowing whether we should cover that particular stretch using ice- or ordinary rock-climbing techniques.

Each of us found a suitable resting-ledge, and we stopped for lunch, eating "ovosports", sesame tablets and oranges. The position was not particularly comfortable. We were hampered by so many pitons and screws, straps and ropes, clothing sacs and other implements that we could hardly make a movement of relaxation. Performing our simplest natural needs proved a highly acrobatic and unbalanced feat.

We started-off again and, nine hours after having begun, were not far from the summit. We had originally reckoned with a nine-hour climb, but the most difficult was still to come and took far longer than expected. It was an ice mirror which spanned the last hundred metres of the ascent on which we spent not far from four hours. Imagine a beautifully sleek brow, ice which is of a deep, rich blue tinge and as hard as steel. As we edged our way up this mirror, all it would acknowledge of our passage were the two small dents left by the spikes that we had kicked into it furiously. The perfect polish of the surface was a sinister invitation to glide on it! We thought that St. Moritz could do with ice like this for its bobsleigh track. Reaching the end of the ordeal, we had two strong emotions. First, a huge slab of ice, the size of a truck, slid past us some forty metres away with a terrifying whistle and a wind which was like that of an express train. Secondly, a member of our party made a slip out of exhaustion and fell some five metres, fortunately the situation was promptly back under control.

After fourteen hours of climbing, we were on the summit. None of us had brought a camera, so these glorious moments were not immortalised on celluloid. But the epic ended in a classical way: we linked hands in a communion only known to rock-climbers, eat cherries dipped in kirsch (our tradition!), contemplated the beauty of the scenery that lay around us and admired the feat we had just achieved. This was not the end, by any means, and we were mountaineers too well seasoned to know that relaxing on our newly acquired laurels could lead to a sudden catastrophe. After half an hour's exhilaration, we started on the way down along the ridge. It was by no means short and easy. We made good use of our 60 metre rope for the purpose of roping down. But what we set out for, the ascent, was over. A contract which we had each made individually with ourselves had been honoured.

(Continued from page 15)

Franz Walter Luethold (92), former president of the Court of Justice and Cantonal Council of Obwald.

Wilhelm Backhaus, pianist of international repute, (85). Wilhelm Backhaus had resided in Switzerland since 1933. His repertoire covered the works of all the great composers, from Bach to Richard Strauss, but, in his later days he confined it to the 32 piano sonatas and the 5 piano concertos of Beethoven.

Ernest Dessaux, the prefect of the district of Morges, who was drowned near Toulon. He was 67. He had presided over the Communal Council of Morges from 1929 to 1933 and was a member of the radical fraction of the Great Council of Vaud.

The Rev. Charles Freundler (75), in Thierrens. He has played an important role in the life of Swiss protestantism. From 1948 to 1964 he was head of the French-speaking section of the Secretariat for Protestant Assistance to Churches and Refugees. He is co-founder of the Federation of Reformed Churches and has been pastor of the French-speaking Swiss Church in London.

Max Grünfeld, economist and prominent financial expert, (82). He has been for decades the economic correspondent of the "National-Zeitung" and the influential leader-writer of the "Finanz-Revue".

Dr. Hans Tribolet (85), historian and author. Well known under the pseudonym "Hans Rych", Dr. Tribolet was for many years vice-director of Radio Bern. He has composed numerous radio-dramas and was principal editor of the historiographical lexicon of Switzerland.

(A.T.S.)

## PROTECTION OF THE "SWISS-MADE" BRAND

According to an editorial in "Informations-FH", the organ of the federation of watch industries, the fame of Swiss watches was constantly inspiring imitations and falsified statements of origin of watches sold around the world. In South-East Asia, one can buy "Swiss watches" whose movements are produced in Russia, whose cases and dials come from Hongkong and whose figures and watch-glasses are manufactured in Japan.

This was a growing problem and it was estimated that 100,000 faked Swiss watches were sold in the Middle-East in a month and 10,000 in Europe. Swiss watch industry was sparing no efforts in fighting against these new parasites, many of which could be arrested and tried. The editorialist ended by underlining the need for a far better protection of the "Swiss-made" brand.