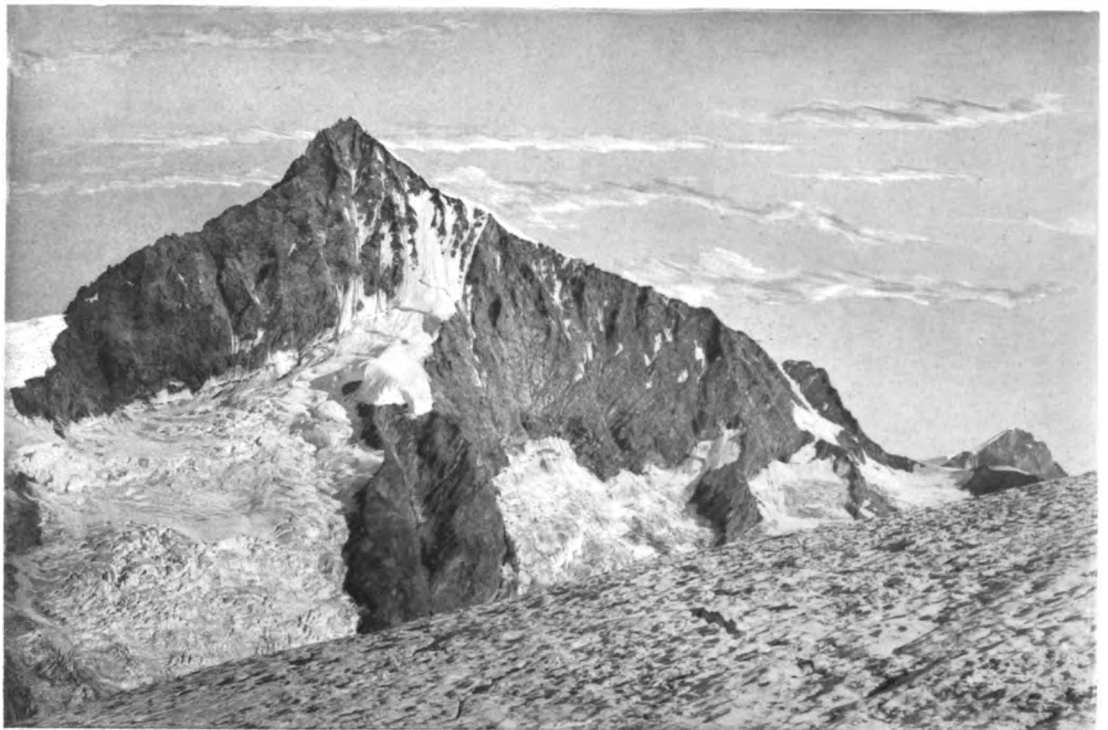

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The Weisshorn from Mattmark Glacier

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The Weisshorn from the Schallijoch.

By EDWARD A. BROOME.

(Read before the Alpine Club, May 5, 1896.)

MANY of our craft, including such high authorities as Tyndall and Whymper, have considered the Weisshorn to be the noblest peak in the Alps, and it is a mountain that has always had a peculiar fascination for me. Its very shape is most impressive and almost faultless: the massive base rising from the great glaciers, gradually narrowing away into the three-sided pyramid (of all mountain forms surely the most perfect), with the three sharp arêtes dividing the huge faces, and tapering off into the spire-like pinnacle of snow, all form a grand, harmonious picture; though it is a picture on such a large scale that it is only at a considerable distance it can be seen to the fullest advantage.

I am proud to have been the first to ascend the peak by one of these three great arêtes, viz., the south-western, and consider it to be one of the best rock-climbs I have done. 'Pride goeth before destruction' however, and my happiness, perchance, would have not been quite so complete had I foreseen this paper to-night. As I climb solely for the love of the thing, being neither an observant nor scientific mountaineer, and (low be it spoken here) even neglect the first duty of taking anything beyond the barest 'shirt-cuff' notes, I have found it somewhat difficult to put this paper together. Still, I'm too old a soldier not to know the value of discipline in a regiment like ours, and the regimental orders of my very good friend our adjutant (and secretary) had to be obeyed, and here it is; so I trust you will excuse its shortcomings. The paper shall at any rate have one merit, that of brevity.

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As we all know, the Weisshorn was first ascended by the late Professor Tyndall in 1861 up the great east snow-arête. His description in the 'Hours of Exercise' and Leslie Stephen's beautiful paper in the first volume of the Journal fully describe this route and are most fascinating reading. This ascent has been the one usually followed, and as probably most of our members have made it, I need not at present further enlarge thereon. Other notable ascents were Mr. Kitson's in 1871 by the north arête, which I should imagine from his paper and my own observations to have been a long, tedious affair, mostly snow and ice, and with an immense deal of step-cutting; and three different routes up the western face, taken respectively by Mr. Passingham in 1879, Mr. Percy Farrar in 1883, and Mr. Cornish in 1889. All these are undoubtedly very long, extremely difficult, and very dangerous from falling stones. I was much impressed with these points in Mr. Cornish's paper, when I heard it in 1890, and believe no further ascents from that side have since been made. One other route remains to be noticed, and this was the one taken from the Schalliberg Glacier and up the south-eastern face by Messrs. Davidson, Hoare, and Hartley in 1877, and graphically described in the latter gentleman's paper read here (or rather in St. Martin's Place) in 1878. To this I propose, with your permission, to recur later on.

I myself had a very difficult climb up Tyndall's arête on a most unpleasant day in 1889, and came to the conclusion that this ascent, like most others, was easy or difficult, short or long, enjoyable or unpleasant, according to the state of the weather and the mountain. I believe mine was the first ascent of that season; the snow slopes were in bad order, the rocks below the ridge glazed, and those on it were all covered with fresh snow. There was also a bitterly cold, strong north wind, which from a distance made the snow blowing off the summit look quite like a volcano in full blast, and this rendered progress difficult, besides making my two guides and myself resemble exaggerated editions of Father Christmas. I remember also that it was impossible, when at length we had surmounted the difficulties, to remain more than a few seconds on the top. I recollect too, that my 'form' was severely criticised by friends at the Riffelalp telescope, through which I was being watched all day; but as a set-off against this, I gladly recall that my kind backers, who had accepted longish odds against my ultimate success, had the best of it! But the whole thing had left an undeservedly unpleasing impression of my favourite mountain on my mind,

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and I felt that when next I went up I must have a better time, make more satisfactory arrangements with the weather office, and *cross* the peak, if possible by a new route. To my mind a mountaineering walk is in this respect much like a good English country scramble; and though both are delightful, there is not quite the same fun in going and returning from either the same way!

The problem therefore that had to be solved was how to cross the Weisshorn, making a new ascent if possible; and the only new ascent that remained was by the south-eastern arête from the Schallijoch. True, on looking the matter up, I discovered that such authorities as Tyndall, Leslie Stephen, Hartley, and Kitson, twenty years ago, and in later days Cornish and others, who had carefully prospected the peak all round, had condemned this ridge (I quote Mr. Hartley) as 'absolutely impossible, or at all events would have taken the best part of a week to circumvent'; but I reflected that 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread,' and sometimes not altogether without success!

I had been having a week or two's good climbing from Saas-Fee, which, by the way, deserves to be much better patronised by our 'centrists' than it is; and wishing to cross the Dom, as well as try the Weisshorn, came round to Zermatt to find another first-rate guide to accompany my old friend Josef Marie Biner. Ambrose Imboden, of St. Nicholas, was at liberty, and I cannot speak too highly of the enterprise and companionable qualities of both men.

The ascent of the Dom by the eastern face is not however to be recommended; always considered dangerous, it proved far more so even than I had anticipated. Some of the couloirs which seam the face must be crossed, and they all appeared to be raked without cessation by stones of all sizes, both by day and night. During the whole climb our eyes and ears were always on the alert and aloft, our feet had to take care of themselves, and our rapidity in ticklish places was great; still with all precautions we had some near shaves, and once my new rope was cut in two by a sharp stone! I will only add that I should feel really unhappy if I knew that any friend of mine thought of undertaking this Balaclava affair—unless indeed I happened to be quite sure that the said friend had previously executed his will in my favour!

The Weisshorn expedition is quite another matter, and one that can be strongly recommended to lovers of a maximum of hard work combined with a minimum of danger. From the Dom summit we thought we were able to trace our route

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pretty clearly, and the rock-arête looked blacker and freer from snow and ice than I had ever before seen it. To mountaineers 'old friends with new faces' are always welcome, but mountains, like ladies, are doubly welcome, and indeed ever so much nicer, when the objectionable powder and paint on their 'faces' and 'cols' have disappeared!

We started from the Randa Inn at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning, September 1st; personally I would have preferred 8 o'clock, but religious considerations had very properly to be taken into account. Mounting the slopes of the Schalliberg was about the hottest business the oldest inhabitant could remember. I pitied the two poor porters who were toiling under the burden of our couvertures, casseroles, canteen, and comestibles; and was glad to rest, and of course admire the view, whenever—which was not often—a little shade, such as a bank or stumpy fir-tree, could be found. We kept much to the left of the usual route to the old Weisshorn Club-hutte, and above the left bank of first the Schallibach stream, and later the Hohlicht Glacier, and took the opportunity afforded by the shadow of the last sign of civilisation, in the shape of a low wall, to stop for an hour between one and two o'clock.

Hence we struck up the moraine on the eastern bank of the Schalliberg Glacier, intending to cross the ice and find a gite somewhere under the Schallihorn rocks. Unfortunately however this was not found feasible; the ice was too steeply inclined, and to get on it would have involved much cutting, added to which the stones were rolling off too freely to be quite pleasant. We therefore thought it might be quicker, and certainly would be wiser, to descend again down the moraine for perhaps 800 to 1,000 feet, traverse under the various snouts of the Schalliberg Glacier, and then work our way up its right, or west, bank. (Future parties should avoid this mistake and consequent loss of time, estimated at a couple of hours, and go direct from the Hohlicht châlet to the foot of the glacier.) From this point we toiled up the moraine again for a few hundred feet, and crossed to that rock-rib descending from the Schallihorn which divides the two glaciers.

By this time one's thoughts turned longingly to a nice comfortable bivouac, and some distance up the rib I was delighted to hit on the very spot: a smooth little grass-patch (about the highest visible) protected from N. and E., sheltered by a big overhanging rock, close to water, and overlooking the whole length of the fine Hohlicht Glacier, with the pretty peaks of the Mettelhorn and Plattenhorn as a background.

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This proved an ideal gîte, and reminded me strongly of the one poor Emil Rey invented and introduced to his patrons at the foot of his favourite Aiguille Noir de Pétéret. We soon made ourselves at home, and while Biner and I, so to speak, 'laid the cloth' and did the cooking, Imboden prospected a little; and then, after the usual meal and tobacco, we all turned in early 'far from the madding crowd' and noisy hotels, and passed a very comfortable night, with little or no wind, and the stars twinkling brightly overhead, in pleasant contrast to the new-fangled electric lights below.

Next morning I insisted on an early start, for no one quite knew what difficulties were before us, but as it turned out afterwards, needn't have been in such a hurry. By three o'clock we had eaten the usual apology for breakfast, settled with the porters, and were under weigh by lantern light. We ascended immediately, *viâ* a horrible shale-slope, and crossed the rib under which we had slept, at, I believe, the point marked 3222 in the map, and so on to the right bank of the Schalliberg Glacier in about 20 min. from the start. Here we roped, and went steadily on by the melancholy gleams of the lanterns (I always like two on these occasions, the strength of the language being in inverse ratio to that of the light), closely hugging the Schallihorn rocks, and finding all plain sailing till half an hour or so before daybreak, when it evidently became necessary to leave the rocks and take to the ice.

The upper part of the glacier is steep, much crevassed, and was described by Mr. Hornby, in his note on the pass, as 'almost a continuous icefall'; it looked much too complicated to negociate with artificial light; so there was nothing for it but to sit down on a cold rock, shiver, wait for daylight, and wish we had lingered longer in 'the arms of Morpheus.' When day broke, however, the route was simple enough, and I took the lead for a bit, and we zig-zagged through the schrunds and upper névé, reaching the beautiful snow-col of the Schallijoch at 6.45.

This is a fine pass for a view, and from where we sat and demolished our breakfast we could form a very good idea of the Weisshorn glaciers on both sides of the col; though naturally the view that interested us most was our own ridge overhead. We had now got up 12,300 feet; but the arête, apparently entirely composed of formidable gendarmes and big rock-towers, stretched away to the summit 2,500 feet higher, and looked a sufficiently 'large order.' We could, however, see our way as far as the first three of the gen-

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darmes, and were also pretty sure that (unlike my last Weisshorn experience) we had nothing to fear from the weather, always the first consideration on long ridges; so at 7.15, having taken in sufficient fuel to get the steam up, we made a start.

The two first of the towers offered no special difficulties, and if my memory serves me, both were turned on the right: the third also was easy enough, and was climbed over, and then the fun began. The fourth proved to be a really good upstanding affair; perpendicular sides, slabby, and what holds there were, placed by some oversight of nature the wrong way up. It had to be surmounted however, circumventing the thing seemed quite an impossibility, so tackling it up the right-hand corner, we climbed on to the top and right over. The fifth in order looked very difficult also, but a somewhat awkward traverse round to the right, or eastern, side fortunately saved the necessity of attempting it, or wasting time, besides leaving us a little more wind in reserve for the sixth. This we fondly hoped to turn too, but after commencing the traverse, found it must be climbed after all, and this could only be done by means of a nasty sinuous upward crack winding right up the tooth, which was the nearest thing I ever came across in real life to Willink's well-known fancy-picture 'Crack Climbers' in the Badminton series, and I hereby apologise to him for having till that moment doubted the veracity of his fertile pencil!

The next gendarme, the seventh I think, also had to be surmounted, and again touched a chord of memory. Though certainly neither as long nor as sensational as the never-to-be-forgotten ascent from the Brêche Zsigmondy on the Meije traverse, it reminded two of us strongly of the scramble up that slab from which you seem to see La Grave right under your feet. After this one it was impossible to keep count of their individualities, and I think they must have been easier; but every tooth had its own little peculiarities, and looking up at each in turn, one couldn't help thinking of Dent's paragraph, 'Such towers look very inoffensive from a distance, but a jagged, splintered crest of rock often presents very great difficulties in detail, and a single uncompromising pinnacle, though small, may bar all progress.'

This arête is *all* towers, there cannot be less than about two and a half dozen, and most of them must be climbed over; those that can be turned, for some reason or other, are always passed round on the right, and I do not remember traversing to the left (or W.) of a single one. The beauty of

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the climb, however, is that you practically never leave the ridge. After clambering over one tower you generally find a nice pretty little knife-edge snow-col to cross; and then 'da capo,' at it you go again over another similar tower, but with the little variety about each that gives charm. As everyone knows, it is very difficult to remember all the details of a rock-climb; but we worked steadily upwards, occasionally varying the monotony of climbing the rocks by climbing up over each other, getting on, if anything, faster than expected, and wondering greatly that some of the numerous rock-lovers frequenting Zermatt had not forestalled us. The difficulties were fairly continuous, but the perfect condition of the mountain and almost entire absence of 'verglas' on the slabs were much in our favour; and only once (besides on the Meije bit named above) do I recall the necessity for using what the guide, who fancied his English-as-she-is-spoke, re-christened the *abominable* muscles, in addition to the more frequently used ones of the arms and legs.

After 4 hrs. of continuous work success seemed certain, and I began again to count; but this time, not how many towers were passed, but how many remained. And when a huge, conspicuous light red rock, the biggest on the ridge, and the sixth from the summit was reached, a short and well-earned halt (not entirely unconnected with champagne) was allowed. The aforesaid big obstacle looked so decidedly uncompromising that with one consent we agreed to shirk it, and again traverse just under it to the right, and in doing this I am satisfied we chose the best route; but after passing it and crossing the large couloir beyond, we made, I think, the sole mistake of the day.

What should have been done now was to follow this couloir, the big one, up to its head and finish the climb on the arête, over the last five remaining pinnacles. What we did do, was to continue the traverse some distance further at about the same, or possibly rather lower level, missing two more of the gendarmes (or three in all), then work back to the ridge by a further smaller couloir, and the ribs on its right and left, thus leaving only the three last teeth to climb over to the summit. This slight error probably made little or no difference in time, but it introduced I think the one and only little element of risk in the whole expedition. The first couloir close beyond the big red tower was crossed at a point too near the summit ridge for stones to do much harm, and we should have ascended it; but after traversing some distance further along the face, we naturally struck the next

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couloir much further from the ridge, and as in addition to this it was the steeper and narrower of the two, more stones came down. Indeed, in scaling the couloir, which by the way was not easy, we had to dodge a few, and in consequence none of us fancied quite the same route up. I have therefore thought it best to record this little deviation from the strict paths of virtue for the sake of future parties. As the poet says,

> 'Be warned in time by others' harm,
> And you shall do full well!'

But we *didn't* come to any harm, and regaining the ridge none the worse, clambered over two more gendarmes that both took a bit of doing, up an interesting chimney, then over the very last tower, and stood, with glances of gratitude gleaming through our goggles, on the grand and glittering summit at 12.45, just 5½ hrs. from the col, including the one short halt, and without having left the ridge for more than half an hour in all.

Of all mountain tops that I know, that of the Weisshorn is, I think, the most beautiful. (When I had thus far written, I found I had all unconsciously stolen, almost verbatim, a sentence from the author whose Alpine writings I admire perhaps more than any other—I mean Leslie Stephen—so shall ask you to excuse me if I quote from him another paragraph or two, as up to a certain point they exactly convey my thoughts, and are in *his* graphic language.) 'It is none of the great round domes of snow where you might erect a tent to sleep in. It is formed by three of those firm and delicate edges which can only be modelled in the mountain snow, uniting to meet in a mathematical point. The three faces of the solid angle correspond to the three sides of the mountain. Curiously enough, a crevasse crossed the névé within a few inches of the top. I flattened down the little cone with my foot, and felt in its highest degree the exquisite pleasure of standing in the thin, clear, and most exhilarating mountain air, with all the Alpine world lying at my feet, from the Monte Viso to the Jura, and from the Bernina to Mont Blanc. It was warm, and absolutely calm, and only one deficiency occurred to my imagination—need I mention a glass of British beer?' But no, Mr. Stephen; here we must part company! Our aspirations besoared beyond British beer, and it was only after some time that rebel nature re-asserted itself, with the result that the rucksacks (which had all along been quite innocent of beer) were considerably lightened.

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One or two of my own reflections on the summit may interest you; but first, perhaps, I ought to apologise for not having had any special excitement, accidents, or hairbreadth escapes to offer—this I know being a lamentable oversight in a paper of this kind. My excuse for this must be twofold. First, there were none; and second, the Weisshorn has always had a remarkable immunity from casualties, and, indeed, as far as I know, has only been responsible for one death—that of the Bavarian climber, Herr Winkler, in 1888, who started to climb it *alone* up the western face from Zinal, and, as might have been expected, has never since even been traced—one more victim of that craze which has done to death so many of his countrymen. I think I may venture to prophesy that, as long as climbers keep to the arêtes, avoid the faces, and, of course climb together, a further freedom from accidents may be anticipated.

Our time may be considered fairly good; but for this, as mentioned above, we had to thank the almost perfect condition of the rocks and the absence of wind. If the former had been glazed, the ascent must have taken much longer, if indeed it could have been done at all. Another great pull in climbing the Weisshorn is, that owing to the entire absence of fixed ropes, rods, or any kind of artificial aid, it is still such a good natural climb. I suppose we could hardly have expected to find any on our new route, but the eastern ridge is equally free from these bannister-like abominations, and no wag can fairly stick up such a warning as I am credibly informed was placarded this year on the top of the Matterhorn—

'Notice.—This Hill is Dangerous for Bicycles'!

While still aloft, where the hour spent seemed all too short, I should like to redeem my promise of referring more particularly to the one previous ascent of this side of the mountain—I mean, of course, Messrs. Davidson, Hoare, and Hartley's route up the south-eastern face, finishing by the arête. This is the more desirable as, owing doubtless to a misprint, or little mistake somewhere, the illustration in the November number of the Journal, though it shows my track all along the ridge correctly enough, cannot have got theirs quite right, but makes it strike the south-western arête too low down—*i.e.*, too much to the S.W. When on the peak, I studied the point very carefully, and having previously read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested the note of the climb,* also

* *Alpine Journal*, vol. viii. p. 340.

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Mr. Hartley's interesting paper of February 5, 1878, I found no difficulty in tracing the whole of their ascent.

Their original intention was to climb from the Schallijoch; but having abandoned this, they determined to go right up the south-eastern face from the glacier, and the only moderately safe route they could see up that face was by a ridge to the left (ascending) of the great couloir which descends right down to the glacier from near the summit of the mountain. This couloir had to be crossed at its foot more than once, and both it and the ridge on its left (up which they went) are unmistakable. They had a lively time of it, being exposed the whole way to stones which came down the couloir in volleys, bounded from side to side, and frequently ricochetted on and off their path. (This great couloir is the same big one to which I alluded in describing my own route, and up which, just for the last few yards, I thought I should have done better to have gone and followed in their footsteps.) At its head they struck the arête, and then towers became the order of the day; Mr. Hartley names that they turned three with much difficulty—some on the Zinal, some on the Schalliberg side—and then had to climb an apparently unsurmountable one, the last on the ridge, and within a few feet of the summit; scrambling over which, with many objurgations, and much damage to skin and knickerbockers, they found themselves on the top. This accordingly makes just four towers they had to go over after reaching the arête, though I think it may possibly have been five; for we counted the big red one to be the sixth from the top, and the head of the big couloir being between that and the next, the latter would naturally be the fifth.

Anyhow, their description, which I have quoted, is so exact that the number of towers on the summit-ridge and the position of the couloir locate the route exactly; it can also be followed on any good photograph. I should not have gone over the ground so carefully but for the little printer's error above mentioned, and for the desirability of showing that the 1878 climb was more on the face and less on the ridge than shown on the recent sketch. The expedition must have been an exceedingly fine one, and probably much more difficult than mine, but unfortunately at the same time so dangerous that no one has attempted to repeat it; while I hope and believe that mine will be frequently followed, and give as great delight to others as it did to me.

After this long digression you might think I was going to treat you in the tragic way attributed to Mark Twain's wicked telescope man, who took his travellers safely up to the top of

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Mont Blanc, but then, owing to some dispute as to the terms for the return journey, 'left them there to rot.' This, however, being neither desirable nor feasible, I will hasten to bring you down in much quicker time than ours. Leaving at 1.45, we soon found that we should have all our own work to do, for there were no traces of any recent party, and no bucket-like steps ready cut. The upper snow arête was, however, soft enough to dispense with these; and though below the well-known single gendarme the ridge took longer, there was much hard ice, and the axes had to be freely used, my men knew every inch of the way, and the whole descent seemed a great contrast both to the other side and to my former experience of this one. Still I hate hurrying down-hill after a big climb, and being also somewhat tired, suppose that with frequent rests and many pipes, we were nearly four hours getting down to where the Club-hutte used to be, and about two more down the endless dusty zig-zag paths to Randa. Some way down the slopes, in taking a short cut, I almost trod upon a large and very fat marmot (and naturally indulged in the pleasures of the chase), and later on, when it was getting dusk, we watched with interest a thunderstorm playing and producing some weird effects over the distant Oberland peaks, and wondered if we should get home dry; but these were the only little incidents I recall before reaching the inn at 7.45.

By way of conclusion, I can only say that, in my humble opinion, this is the finest route on the Weisshorn, and it must certainly be the best way to cross the peak. There is no climbing half so enjoyable as that on good sound rock-ridges; and this particular expedition, especially taking into consideration the length of the arêtes on both sides, is equal to any ridge-climb in the Alps, and is well worthy to rank with such splendid ones as the crossing of the Scerscen, Bernina, and Pizzo Bianco; or the Meije traverse from La Bérarde to La Grave.

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