they had been placed on a slope of ice inclined at several degrees to their disadvantage. Mallory and I were kindly allowed a further period for feasting, and then we all started off for the Col de Collon just as the threatened snowstorm descended on us. We reached the primitive but hospitable inn at Prarayé in the best of spirits, but sadly bedraggled garments. However, the landlady ransacked her wardrobes to such good purpose that three beautifully fitting skirts, cut in the latest Valpelline fashion, were found for the ladies, while a male member of the party excited the envy of his less favoured companions by appearing in the curé's best corduroys.*

The Direct Ascent of the Altels from the Balmhorn Hut.

By J. E. JAMES.

ON the afternoon of August 23, 1906, W. F. Reeve, my brother, W. W. James, and I left Kandersteg for the Balmhorn Hut. With us were the two guides Fritz Ogi and Peter Künzi, both of Kandersteg. Our intention in the first place was to discover, if possible, a second climb for which the hut could be used; namely, the direct ascent of the Altels and the descent to the hut by the north-eastern arête of the Balmhorn. If this were not considered feasible we should have to fall back on the only climb so far made from the hut, the traverse of the Balmhorn and the Altels, ascending by the north-eastern arête of the former and descending by the western arête of the latter to the road leading from Kandersteg to the Gemmi Pass.

Accordingly, when we stopped for some minutes at the sign of the brass bowl, which is the 'barber's pole' in Switzerland, Peter did not wait for us, but went on to survey the possible routes and to find out the condition of the rocks. The possibility of attempting the new climb gave us food for much thought on the way, and we looked with interested eyes on the cliffs far above us and slightly to our right hand, up which we might be journeying on the morrow. Certainly, if the comparative difficulties of the path to the hut and the climb beyond the hut were proportionate to those of paths to and climbs beyond other huts in Switzerland, so far as our experience went, the course proposed would not be an

* We are indebted to Mr. G. P. Abraham, of Keswick, for permission to reproduce the accompanying illustration.—Editor *A. J.*

Digitized by Google

easy one. For if any non-climber staying at Kandersteg wishes to make a 'sensational' excursion (I use the word in its lay sense), I do not think he can do better than follow the path to the Balmhorn Hut, but on no account let him go without a guide.

Peter's report was absolutely non-committal. He had reached the first real difficulty on what appeared to him the only possible route, but, owing to the failing light, could not say whether or not he considered it insurmountable. It was hard; of that he was satisfied. The condition of the rocks was not unfavourable.

The Balmhorn or Wild Elsigen Hut is not, like so many of the Swiss huts, a kind of caravanserai, crowded nightly by parties arriving from all directions. We were the only occupants.

Our decision to attack the new route, even although we might not be successful in the complete ascent, was undoubtedly influenced by the very natural desire to tread upon ground never before in all probability touched by any human being. This sentiment has no doubt been felt by most climbers of long experience, but it was fresh to us, and had an undiminished influence over our imaginations. It became alive directly we reached Wildelsigen; for this alp appears quite inaccessible. The grasses, I believe, are never cropped by cattle or sheep, or even goats, and have never been cut. The chamois have there an undisturbed pasturage.

Shortly after 2 A.M. we left the hut, the sky being cloudless and the stars brilliant. The air was perfectly still. Every sign promised a beautiful day, and it turned out that the promise was fulfilled. A better day could not have been chosen. For about twenty minutes we followed the path which leads to the hut, crossing the narrow tree-trunk bridge placed over the main stream running from the Balmhorn glacier. Our two guides carried lanterns, and at the bridge showed all the light possible, for the wood was coated with ice formed by the spray from the downrushing stream, and the crossing was not free from danger.

Although the path is only slightly marked on the rock débris and by no means easy to follow even in daylight, the guides seemed to experience no difficulty, and some twenty minutes or so steady walking brought us across the last stream fed by the glacier.

We had descended slightly below the level of the hut; but not much, for our course had lain round the bowl-shaped alp, from the hut standing on its eastern edge to the spot

Digitized by Google

where the path begins to drop down over its western edge. Here we turned sharply to the left up the loose moraine, going alternately straight and obliquely to our right. Owing to the darkness I cannot be sure of the exact direction followed, but from the character of the ground I should imagine almost any route could be taken, so long as the right point for attacking the cliffs was reached; and as to this point I don't think there could be any doubt, as I hope to show later.

As I remember it, our way was sometimes up very loose and powdery débris, at other times up loose rocks varying in size, and occasionally over very sparse dry grass. The whole ascent of the moraine was varied by the necessity of dropping frequently into deep water-worn but perfectly dry channels in its surface, which showed that we were not following the line of greatest ascent.*

I was particularly struck with the difference between the actual character of this part of the route and the impression I had formed of it from the distant view on the previous day; but probably the darkness is sufficient to account for this. I might add that the two patches of grass (at the foot of the cliffs) which are distinct features in the view from the hut have to be reached, and in a general way sufficiently serve as objects of attainment.

At about half-past three, or perhaps a little later, we reached the foot of the cliffs up which the real climb lay. Here we sat down on the grass, which I have just referred to, covering the moraine or cliff débris, and ate our second breakfast, and waited for the dawn.

We were at the bottom of the cliffs forming the E. face of the N. arête of the Altels which show so prominently† in a westerly direction from the hut. From the hut can be seen a deep gully, almost better described as a chasm, in these cliffs. We were at the entrance to the chasm; but now it was quite unrecognisable, and incapable of being definitely marked off on, or even distinguished from, the face of the cliffs. From a distance the sides had appeared to run together at an appreciable, if not an acute, angle, but the near view showed that the true shape was widely obtuse with a narrow and shallow water-worn depression at the angle,

---

* The alp and superadjacent moraine are fanshaped. Our destination was not the handle of the fan, but a point lying in a diagonal direction across the ribs.

† Shown on the illustrations in the Swiss Jahrbuch, vol. xxxix. pp. 351, 353.

Digitized by Google

forming the true gully. The slope of the sides and of the gully appeared almost vertical.

The whole face was quite dry.

The actual position we were in was on the highest mound at the bottom of the cliff which forms the left-hand side of the angle (looking up). Between this mound and the gully was a sheer face of rock about 450 ft. wide, increasing in steepness until it reached the buttress I shall mention later.

The nature of the face between the buttress and the gully could not be seen.*

At about 4 o'clock, when there was sufficient daylight to permit an advance without the aid of the two candles, we put on the rope; Peter leading, followed by Reeve, Fritz, my brother and myself, in this order. Two lengths of rope of 100 feet were joined, roughly providing a little over 40 feet between each two climbers.

The first task was to traverse into the shallow gully (situated at the angle) to the foot of a long chimney, which could be seen quite plainly.

This point to be attained was several feet higher than the place on which we had roped, so that an ascending traverse had to be made. Peter led, and we were soon all on the face of the precipice. Luckily it was not such a true precipice that no foothold could be secured upon it. I think it overhung above and below us in places, but we found a possible path on the rough surface. The rock was not hard, compact, and smooth, but inclined to break away in small fragments or cubes, having weathered in a somewhat similar manner to the well-known Crib Goch ridge on Snowdon. It was accordingly essential to test well the firmness of every protuberance before trusting one's weight to it.

The steepest and most difficult part of the traverse was across a slightly hollowed portion of the face, just before reaching a small buttress situated about 80 ft. from the gully. On arriving at the buttress it was necessary to ascend to its top, which sloped at too great an angle to afford any safe anchorage. Beyond this the nature of the face was the same until the gully was reached, and here at the foot of the chimney was a good platform with a firm upright rock standing on its edge.

Looking from the roping place, we had inclined to an attempt on the chimney in the gully; but when Peter reached the

* Distances have been calculated from the length of rope used for the climb.

Digitized by Google

platform he had no need to hesitate. The cliff forming the opposite side of the angle to the one we had traversed promised a series of narrow sloping ledges covered with grass. One of these ledges led from the platform, and this Peter followed. After going some 100 or 150 ft. along it he turned sharply up to the left, climbing the rocks to the ledge above.

Thus we ascended some distance, in a zigzag course, to the highest grass ledge, along which we turned to the left, back towards the gully. Further ascent of the cliff was impossible; the only way of progress being up a smooth and nasty-looking pitch in a branch of the gully, which several feet below our grass ledge had divided into two smaller gullies. Before attempting this pitch we sat down on the ledge and ate our third breakfast, and left a bottle to indicate to the next climbers the former presence of humanity.

By this time the sun was well above the Doldenhorn and shone from the clear sky with a genial warmth upon the cliffs, making the ledge a most comfortable resting-place. The view was magnificent, but the precipitous cliffs dropping to the Gastern Thal were the most striking feature. The line of cliffs on the opposite side of the gully could be clearly seen, and it was fascinating to attempt to trace upon the face the ledges above, upon which it might be possible to discover a path to the top.

As I have said, the grass ledge ended several feet above the point of separation of the two smaller gullies into which the main gully divided. One of these small gullies passed the end of our ledge and formed, some few feet higher, a deep shelf or niche affording splendid anchorage. But above the niche this gully did not hold out any promise of a practicable route to the top.

The other branch was nearly 50 ft. from the niche, and separated from it by a boldly projecting rock. This branch once reached seemed to offer a way out, up the smooth-looking pitch to which I have already referred. To overcome the difficulty of the traverse and the pitch the order on the rope was altered: Fritz leading and Peter going second; then came Reeve, my brother and myself. Peter fixed himself firmly in the niche while Fritz was traversing into the gully. The jutting corner of rock made the traverse extremely awkward, and it took Fritz a long time to reach the gully. In fact, the traverse at this point and the subsequent ascent of the pitch were by far the greatest difficulties we met with on the climb. Fortunately the rocks were much sounder than below.

Digitized by Google

When Fritz was in the gully (and none too firmly stationed) Peter made the traverse to him. To enable Fritz and Peter to make the traverse Reeve and my brother had to give more rope, shortening the distance between themselves and between my brother and myself. When our turns came to move this shortening proved a considerable inconvenience, and it would be advisable for any other party to allow more space between the climbers or to carry a sufficient length of spare rope.

Reeve having fixed himself firmly in the niche, Fritz climbed the pitch with some assistance from Peter. Above the pitch Fritz cleared away a large quantity of loose stones, but the continuation of the slope was too steep and insufficiently rough, or sound, to provide a good anchorage. However, without a slip, Reeve joined Peter in the gully, my brother occupied the niche, and Peter joined Fritz above. Fritz and Peter went forward to the full length of the rope, and my brother and I followed Reeve across the traverse and up the pitch.

This was the last serious difficulty to be passed before reaching the N. ridge of the Altels. After it was passed the only possible route was to continue straight up for about 40 ft. and then turn abruptly to the left along a sloping ledge covered with loose débris, keeping close under the cliff. Great care was necessary, but no particularly difficult place had to be overcome.

After a long traverse in this direction, which must have placed us high over the roping place, some 1,000 ft. or so almost directly below, we turned up to the right, over rocks which gradually sloped at a less and less steep angle, until we reached the summit of the ridge and looked down to the glacier on the other side, between the N. ridge of the Altels and the ridge running from the Tatlishorn to the Ober Tatlishorn.

On our left hand the Altels ridge sloped upwards to the S. On our right hand it descended for a short distance to a notch at the termination of the gully, and then rose up to a small peak slightly higher than the spot upon which we were standing. This notch is a distinctive feature on the edge of the cliffs when looked at from the hut.

We reached the ridge at 10 o'clock, six hours after we had put on the rope.

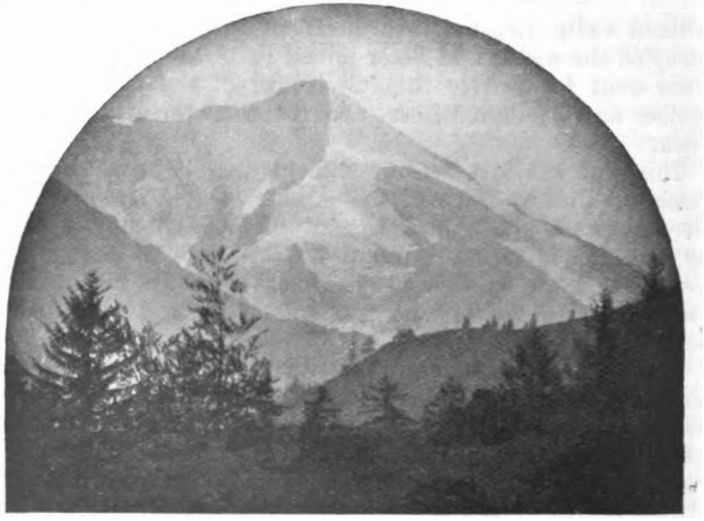
It is difficult to indicate on the Swiss Government Map (scale 1·26 inches to the mile) with any accuracy the place at which we reached the ridge: but I think it would be slightly to the north of the point on the ridge that rises between the black

Digitized by Google

figures 2966 marked as the height of the Ober Tatlishorn and the blue figures 2400 marked on the Balmhorn glacier.

After a fourth breakfast we altered the order on the rope, to Fritz, Reeve, Peter, my brother and myself, and struck up the ridge, following it for about an hour and a half without much difficulty.

Then, to avoid going over the summit of the peak to which the ridge rises (called by our guides, I believe, the Klein Altels), we continued on its W. side, following a line of almost equal altitude and crossing patches of snow, until we reached the edge of the glacier below the N.W. side of the Klein Altels. This point is considerably above the main surface of the glacier,



THE ALTELS FROM THE NORTH-WEST.

being connected with it by a long and steep slope of snow. We followed the edge of the snow below the face, which here rises up very abruptly, until we reached a very plainly marked couloir. The opening of the couloir is very sharply defined (approached from the direction in which we came it is indiscernible until actually reached), and Fritz, Reeve, and Peter disappeared to the left round the sharp corner, leaving my brother and me on the snow, close under the rocks, waiting for the transmission along the rope of a sign that we could advance. We were not left unentertained, for large and small rocks and showers of stones came bounding out of the couloir with terrific noise, and shot down to the glacier below. We

Digitized by Google

shouted to our companions to know what they were doing, but did not receive any reply. So, as it was quite impossible to face the cannonade, we had to wait until the work of demolition was accomplished.

When at last all was quiet and we felt the welcome pull on the rope, we passed the corner and entered the couloir.

Fritz, Reeve, and Peter were above the first pitch, which was about 20 ft. high and almost perpendicular. It was formed of loose rocks, all of which seemed ready to fall away as soon as an appreciable weight was placed upon them. But the clearance effected by the first three of the party had uncovered a few fixed points, and my brother and I climbed the pitch without much difficulty. I think the position of this couloir is near the 'n' of the words 'Ober Tatlishorn' on the Swiss Map.

Immediately above, we traversed along the right-hand side of the couloir, and then turned up to the left. A short rock climb of about thirty minutes brought us to the upper glacier, above the icefall which lies between the Klein Altels and the Ober Tatlishorn. At this point, or possibly slightly above it, the climb ceased, I believe, to be a first ascent, as I understood from Fritz that the Altels had previously been ascended from the Gastern Thal by a party of climbers who had followed the whole length of the glacier.*

It was 1 o'clock when we reached this point.

After a short lunch and rest, we crossed the glacier to its long and steep rise to the summit. The upper part of the ridge was all ice, and Fritz and Peter alternately took the first position to cut steps, keeping as near as possible to the top of the ridge. It was impossible to make a fast ascent up the ice, and it was not until about 4.30 that we arrived at the summit. The lateness of the hour made it inadvisable to descend over the Balmhorn as originally planned.

The time for the total ascent was about twelve hours; but I think any other party of climbers can consider this a very full allowance, as it is impossible to claim that our pace was more than slow. Of course, with five persons on the rope a long time was spent over each difficulty.

But our object was attained, and having eaten and smoked, rested and enjoyed the glorious prospect, we turned downwards with cheerful talk, and left the summit of the Altels to its lonely contemplation of the sky.

---

* See *Climbers' Guide to the Bernese Oberland*, vol. i. p. 7.

Digitized by Google