The North-West Ridge of the Ober Gabelhorn.

By RAYMOND BICKNELL.

> And he that stands upon a slippery place
> Makes nice of no vile hold to stay him up.
>
> King John.

ASSUMING that the makers of indices have let nothing escape them, I believe that our Journal has, since its birth in 1865, contained no less than fourteen descriptions of ascents of the Ober Gabelhorn by nearly as many varying routes, and it is a remarkable fact that not one of these refers to the direct ascent of the N.W. ridge.*

In the middle of last August, I found myself most unexpectedly at Zinal, summoned by my friend Claude Elliott, that we might make an attempt on some high peak in the few days which remained to me before my return home. I arrived with the vaguest ideas as to the geography of the valley, and with no knowledge of the peaks which surround it. Elliott's announcement that we were going to have a look at the Ober Gabelhorn was therefore received without any particular enthusiasm, and before long he thought it necessary to work upon my feelings by casually letting drop the remark that the mountain had not been climbed from Zinal that year.

We had intended to meet in the Oberland, and were therefore not provided with the Climbers' guide for the district, nor had we made that study of the writings of our predecessors which so often helps towards success in guideless climbing. Our only sources of information were Abraham's 'Swiss Mountain Climbs' and Ball's 'Alpine Guide.' Anyone who consults these works as to the ascent of the Zinal side of the Ober Gabelhorn will find little to encourage him. The first advises him that he may expect 'a prodigious amount of step cutting' and an ice bulge which will give him trouble. It is assumed that if he gets up he will be glad to go down the other side. The two lines which the second devotes to the subject may leave him with the impression that he had better not try to get up.

---

* A note describing the first ascent from the Zinal side, found amongst the papers of Lord F. Douglas after his death, and printed in the *Alpine Journal*, vol. ii. p. 221, is a possible exception, but it contains no clear details as to what route was taken.



Phillis Bicknell, del. Swan Electric Engraving Co. Ltd.



E. W. Nettleton, photo. Swan Electric Engraving Co. Ltd.

The Ober Gabelhorn, from the Bouquetin.

These are the reasons why we put off the consideration of detailed plans till the next evening, when we sat outside the Mountet Hotel and looked our peak in the face. After a week of stormy weather we were blessed with a cloudless sky and a steady north wind, which gave almost certain promise of a fine morrow. It was probable, however, that there was a great quantity of fresh snow on the mountain, and in looking for a route our chief consideration was to find one which would not be exposed to avalanches. For this reason the sky-line ridges to right and left, rising from the Mont Durand and the Wellenkuppe were rejected, as neither could be reached without long journeys below steep snow slopes. Face routes were not to be thought of, and we were left with the N.W. ridge which was immediately in front of us.

Near the foot of the mountain this ridge is lost in a face of smooth granite, which rises out of the Glacier Durand, but above this it begins to take shape and soon forms a clearly marked crest running right up to the top. From the Mountet it looks immensely steep, but we took an optimistic view as to the deceptiveness of its appearance and decided that it might serve as our path. Once on the crest, we should at any rate be free from the fear of avalanches. Near the top the ice bulge was clearly to be seen, and just above it an open schrund running right across the north side of the peak; but both were so far away that it was impossible to judge their powers of obstruction.

At three o'clock the next morning we were crossing the glacier in brilliant moonlight and intense cold. The rock face looked no less smooth as we approached it, and leaving it on our left we went up the snow bay immediately to its west and at 4. 30 landed on the rocks (H). Here we turned to the left, and climbing over snow and rock patches reached the ridge above the top of the snow face (J). From this point we saw for the first time that a large party from the Mountet hut were coming up behind us, and it was some satisfaction to know that we had chosen the route used by the local guides, for though they had got on to the mountain further to the west, they were traversing across to our line of ascent.

We were now on hard ice, with occasional patches of smooth rock slabs. The ice was covered with loose powdery snow and the slabs barely protruded above its surface. We made use of the slabs wherever possible but though we got some help from them we came in for the very hardest of the ice in the intervening spaces, and we should probably have gone as

fast on the open slope to our left. Above this section the ridge is cut by a steep band of rock which runs far out along the face to the east (K.) That part of the rocks which was straight above us did not look very promising, and we considered a traverse on the ice right round the band to our left, but upon the principle of keeping as closely as possible to the ridge and avoiding all unnecessary excursions on to the face, we decided to try a direct attack first. At eight o'clock, after half an hour of vigorous work, with much scraping and cutting at the ice-covered rocks, we had reached their top. My mind was not entirely free from anxiety as to how we were going to get down them again, and my eyes wandered furtively from side to side in search of something which would serve as a hitch for a doubled rope. Our trouble had been caused by the extreme cold, rather than the difficulty of the rock face, for at the height which we had now reached the north wind and clear sky had produced an almost arctic temperature.

Looking down from this point we were interested to see that the party below us had chosen the other course, and were already traversing the face some distance to our east.

Here was the end of all rocks, and there was nothing above us but ice and snow. We put on crampons and for a time walked upwards with much satisfaction to ourselves. But the slope became steeper and the covering of snow thicker, and satisfaction gave place to a conviction that this was no place for implements whose use we had not mastered, and that for us the only safe progress was by step cutting. Elliott kept his on for the rest of the day and thought that they were useful, though he showed no great inclination to do without steps. As for me, I preferred to rely upon methods which I understood, and my crampons returned to my rucksack. Just above us was the hardest piece of the day's work. The snow was about nine inches deep and made no pretence to being attached in any way to the hard ice below. It was necessary to make a large clearing for each step, and any effort to save time in the direction of insufficient preliminary sweeping merely resulted in the total disappearance of the step before it was half finished. Little enough was said at the time, but afterwards we confessed to each other that this was the one part of the day when our spirits were depressed by the expectation of failure, for it was clear that if there should be no improvement higher up we had about three days' work between us and the top. An hour later our spirits were soaring to undue heights, for on a steep and narrow ridge (L),

which had appeared from the Mountet to be the crisis of the climb and its possible end, we found ourselves kicking secure steps in ideal snow. Our tongues were unloosed and there was talk of being on the top at eleven o'clock.

Then we met with an unpleasant surprise. Invisible from below, its presence wholly unsuspected till this moment, there lay before us an almost horizontal section of the ridge. It must be a narrow place at the best, but now, by some freak of the north wind, its crest from end to end was piled up into an extraordinary snow wall, some eighteen inches thick, with almost vertical sides from three to four feet high. The whole structure was so frail that it offered no sort of foothold, and every inch of it had to be removed before we could pass along the ridge. This was most readily done by thrusting one knee forward into the snow and then with leg and arms splitting the wall and pushing it over to right and left. At first the sight and sound of great slices of snow sliding and hissing down the steep slopes on both sides at once was somewhat disconcerting to the nerves, but it was soon realized that a perfectly firm footing could be trampled in sound snow beneath, and slow but steady progress was made. Still it was a place in which we did not care to move together and we went one at a time, the other sitting astride the ridge with the rope passing round his axe. We derived some consolation for the delay in the thought that had the ridge been corniced it would have turned us back, for we should not have ventured on the slope on either side, where the deep snow covering seemed ready to go down at any moment. In the heat of the fight, while we were kicking and trampling the ridge into subjection, something had been said about it being 400 yards long. Looking back upon it dispassionately from above, when it had been reduced to a smooth path ready for our return, we agreed that 200 yards would do it justice. For all that we had been more than an hour in getting across.

During the crossing we had ample opportunities of observing the ice bulge (M), which was just ahead of us. It was a very respectable bulge, some twenty feet high, and bulging in a thoroughly uncompromising manner. We were, however, able to regard it with complete indifference, for if the ridge on which we stood was giving us trouble, it was at least doing something to help us in that it was so built up with snow that it formed a gracefully curving path straight to the top of the obstruction in front of us. A short and gentle slope, the one entirely easy piece on the upper part of the mountain, led up

to the schrund, which we had seen the evening before. It was almost full of drifted snow, and could do nothing more than delay us for five minutes while we beat down the soft bank which formed its upper side.

Success was now assured and only a matter of time, for though the final slope was both steep and hard, the wind had swept it bare, and with no further possibility of avalanches we were able to leave the ridge, which was here for the first time heavily corniced, and cut our way up the face to our right.* The top was an almost level snow ridge running at right angles to the direction from which we approached it. It looked innocent enough, but there were obvious possibilities of a cornice on the other side, and it was therefore a relief to see one minute patch of rock protruding through the snow. At one o'clock we were standing on this patch, just ten hours after leaving the Mountet. During that time the total of our halts had not amounted to more than half an hour.

Our suspicious attitude towards the highest point was fully justified. Some 30 yards to our east, with its top perhaps 10 feet above us, an enormous cornice hung far out over the south face.

For the sudden appearance of a great view the ascent of this side of the Gabelhorn would be difficult to equal. As we had climbed up there had slowly appeared on our left the Dom and the Täschhorn, and on our right the Dent d'Hérens. Of all that lies between these we saw nothing till we put our heads over the very top and were able to look across at the marvellous view of the Matterhorn at close quarters, backed up by the whole of the Monte Rosa group.

We allowed ourselves only ten minutes' rest, for there was every prospect of a slow and troublesome return journey on the lower slopes and a very strong reason for wishing to be back at Zinal that night. In spite of eight hours of cloudless sky and brilliant sunshine the temperature was still so low on this shaded side that, if the head of an ice axe was withdrawn from the snow and touched with the bare hand, the skin stuck to the iron. Consequently our steps remained in good con-

---

* See *Alpine Journal*, vol. xxiv. p. 367, for a photograph described as the N.W. face with the Wellenkuppe ridge to the left and the N.W. ridge to the right. The upper part of the narrow snow ridge is at the right-hand edge of the picture, immediately below the ice bulge, above which the face on which our climb was finished is just visible beyond the corniced ridge.

dition and we made rapid progress at first. The narrow ridge no longer had any terrors for us, and we walked down it, slowly, it is true, but moving together. Then, after spending twenty minutes over a meal, we went on down the steepest part of the ice slope. Here our steps were completely filled up with snow, but they were still good and needed nothing more than careful clearing. Yet it was not a place for hurried movement. Has any mountaineer ever come down a steep ice staircase, which he himself has made on the upward journey, without secretly wishing that he had cut the steps just a little nearer together; or has he quite lived down the ever-recurring feeling of disappointment at the obstinate way in which even the most sharply pointed axe refuses to take any satisfactory hold upon the ice at his side ?

At the level of the rock-band the sun had begun to take effect, and as we climbed down the warm rocks we were able to laugh at the fears which they had inspired in the morning. Then we entered upon the region of slab patches and thinly covered ice. Here the sun had got a thorough hold. Hardly a sign of our steps remained, and not one could be used before it was carefully re-cut. Cutting downwards for any length of time cannot but be uncomfortable work, even for the toughest of guides. To the amateur, who is called upon for such an effort at rare intervals, it is something much worse. We made constant efforts to avoid it, but without any great success. We worked both to right and to left in search of better going. Sometimes we found a streak of thicker snow, where it was possible to descend for a few feet with face turned to the slope and toes kicking steps; the one of us moving down while the other watched the rope. Often, when we came within reach of an island of slabs, we took to it eagerly; yet I doubt whether we left one of these islands without a feeling of relief at getting on to the ice again. Once we traversed out to the east in the hope of finding better snow where the slope was entirely free from rocks, but before many minutes we were glad to be cutting a way back to our original line. The downward view was the strongest of inducements to leave nothing to chance and we found few places where it seemed wise to move without cutting through the wet snow into the ice below. Our difficulties did not come to an end till 6 o'clock, when we had reached the easy rocks. The descent from the foot of the rock-band, a distance of about 1000 feet, had needed three hours of steady work. The last memory of the climb is of ease and luxury, for after leaving the rocks for the snow bay

we were able to glissade down to the bergschrund with perfect confidence in stopping before we reached it.

On arriving at the Mountet soon after seven we heard that some of the party whom we had seen in the morning had met with an accident. They had been climbing on two ropes, four on the one and three on the other. A few minutes after we had lost sight of them, while they were still traversing along the face under the rock-band (K), some snow had fallen upon the party of three, a guide and two amateurs, and dislodging them from their steps, had swept them down the slope. For a time they had been able to retain their axes, and twice they had almost stopped, but as the pace increased their axes had been jerked from their hands, and they could do nothing more to save themselves. At the foot of the great ice slope down which they fell, they had gone over two vertical ice walls, the one about twenty feet and the other about forty feet high. Then, by a wonderful piece of good fortune, they had fallen on to a gently sloping shelf of soft snow (N), where they had stopped just above another ice wall fully a hundred feet high. One of the party was able to free himself from the snow and dig out his partially buried companions. Looking across from the Mountet, I thought that the total distance through which they had descended was at the very least 1500 feet, and it was almost impossible to believe that any human beings could have survived such a fall. The two amateurs escaped with surprisingly slight injuries. One of them was able to walk down to Zinal that same evening, and the other did so the next day. The guide did not come off so lightly, but his worst injuries were two broken ribs. They owed their escape to their own coolness in making good use of their axes to check their fall, to the covering of soft dry snow through which they passed, and to the fact that there were no rocks protruding through the ice.

All this had been hidden from us, for at the time we had been on the opposite side of the ridge and we had assumed that the whole party had given up the climb and turned back. We were greatly distressed to think that we had gone on in ignorance that our friends were so badly in need of help, but were glad to be assured that we could not have reached them so soon as a strong party who had seen the accident from the Mountet and immediately hurried to their assistance.