

DISQUIETING ASPECTS OF MODERN MOUNTAINEERING

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Translated

READERS of the JOURNAL will, I think, have learnt with uneasy feelings that an Italian party had abandoned one of its members, exhausted on the Matterhorn, at a height of more than 4000 metres.¹

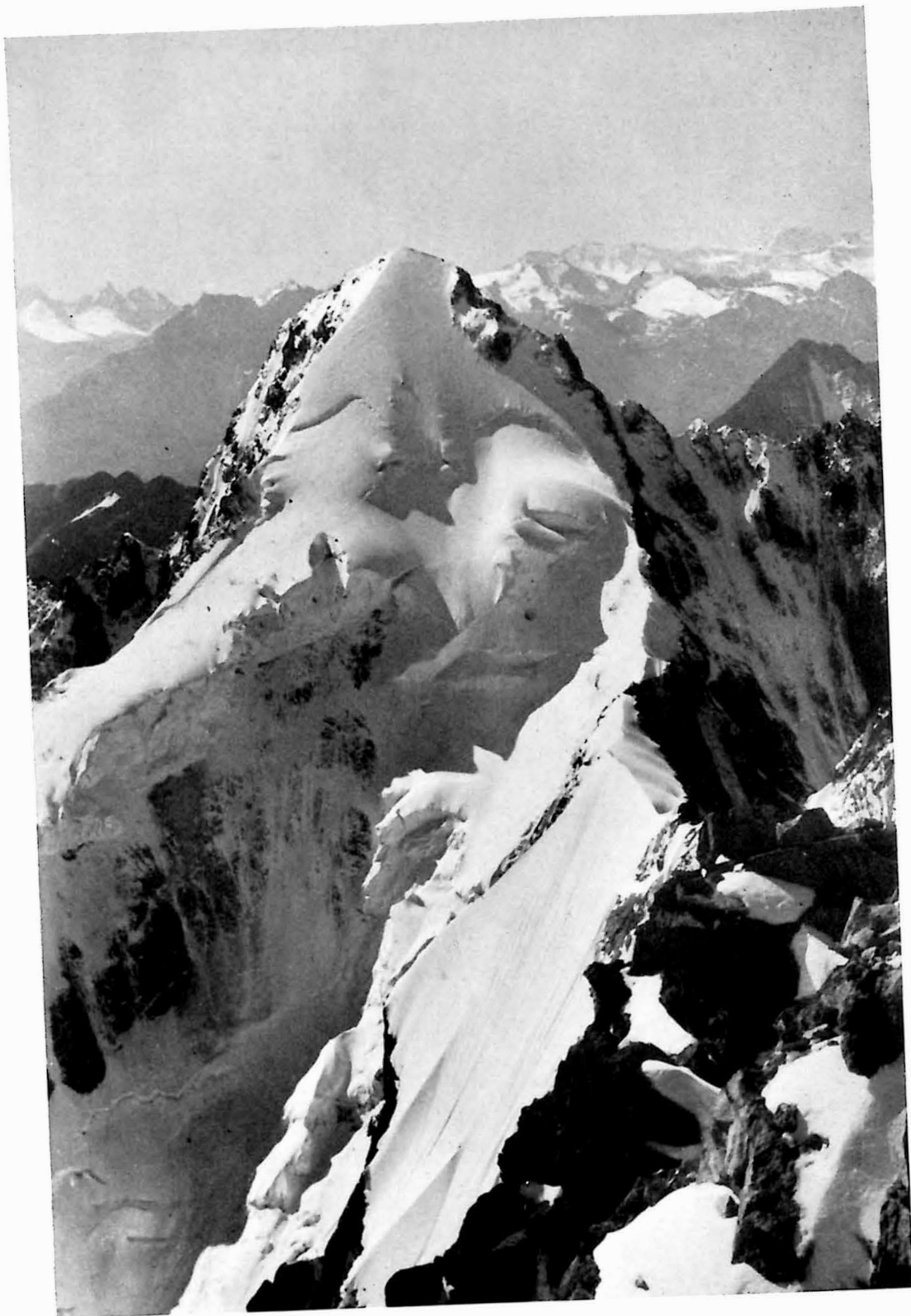
Unfortunately, the above is but one episode among many ; the result of a curious evolution deserving of study, one which true mountaineers of the old-fashioned style will appreciate. Accordingly, let all such consider the following :

Giovanni Bobba, many years ago, was climbing with a friend one of the great Pennines. Having attained a very considerable height in the neighbourhood of a spacious tower, the friend feeling tired, begged his companion to leave him there and complete the expedition alone. Smiling, Bobba remarked, 'My dear fellow, what is there to show that I should find you still here on my return? Not a bit of it, we have started together—we remain together.' The party then turned back.

Here is another episode, this time with a party of 'X' nationality. The scene is likewise on a great peak and again at about 4000 metres. Conditions were, however, changed and far different was the sequel. One of the party was exhausted and the place where he stopped—there was no choice—was a minute and precarious ledge. However, the sick man's companions' one aim and object was to complete the expedition. He was left accordingly alone for many long hours. A lucky chance, almost a miracle, enabled him to be retrieved there on the return and to be brought down without damage beyond an alarming loss of moral, but fortunately without far-reaching consequences. Guido Rey, who knew the locality, was extremely disturbed. He said, 'No one should indulge in high mountaineering unless he be of the very highest moral integrity, and possess at the same time a complete sense of his responsibilities. To abandon an exhausted companion in such a place is to commit the most serious and dreadful of Alpine crimes.'

Here then are three stages of 'modern' progression. Guido Rey and Giovanni Bobba, perfect representatives of the mountaineers of all time, but devoid of what is called 'modernity.' The party keeps together—all return in safety. Next, one man left alone, a hazardous return—nevertheless, no accident. Lastly, the drama of 1934,

¹ *A. J.* 47. 339-44.



Photo, E. Gos]

MONT DOLENT, N. FACE.

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mentioned above, a man abandoned, a tragic return with frost-bitten survivors—all results of a hopeless decision.

Further threatening episodes are occurring. Last summer five climbers of 'Y' nationality started for the Z'mutt ridge of the Matterhorn from the Staffel Alp. Three of the party were experienced climbers; the others were not. The experts tied up together, the novices doing the same. At a comparatively low altitude above the Tiefenmatten Glacier, on the slabs which have to be scaled to attain the snowy portion of the arête, the last-named fell and vanished. The other three 'considered' that it was merely an 'intentional glissade'(?). They continued on their way accordingly, arrived serenely on the summit, descended to the Hörnli and afterwards to the Staffel Alp. Here, by pure chance, they met a guide and related to him that perhaps an accident had occurred after all on the Tiefenmatten Glacier. A small affair like that did not trouble them: they allowed the search-party to make all the arrangements without troubling themselves in the matter. According to Zermatt reports, both the novices were killed on the spot. It is to be hoped that such was the case.

But a still worse case was to follow. About the middle of the same August, 1935, another party composed of three persons of 'Y' nationality and one of 'Z,' started for this same Z'mutt ridge. As everyone knows, after the great Z'mutt couloir come vertical or overhanging steps in the ridge; these, at a height of about 4200 m., have to be turned to the right on the Tiefenmatten face followed by an upward climb, the arête being subsequently re-attained by a traverse back to the left at about 4350 m. During the short return traverse to the W., abruptly sloping ledges are encountered requiring great attention and care. At this stage, *i.e.* at 4200 m., the three 'Y' members explained suddenly to 'Z' that since he appeared less expert than themselves, his presence in the party was becoming a source of worry—they would, in fact, be better without him. Needless to say no question arose of *descending*, merely of compulsorily unroping the fourth, and then of 'Y' party continuing. This accordingly was done. Those persons knowing the route will realize at once that on the terrain described a climber left suddenly alone and with the sole comfort of the encouraging remarks I have described, is just as likely to be killed in the descent as in the ascent. It was growing late and this fact urged 'Z' to try and follow his gallant comrades. He was killed—his late companions in attaining the summit had sunk to a depth of degradation which shall be nameless.

In inverse ratio to these 'modern' methods for which further qualification is redundant, it is good to experience a breath of pure, fresh air in a note emanating from Bobba and Guido Rey.

The tale comes from Switzerland. On a Saturday of last September,² there came, in charge of one of them, a party of six from Lausanne; two young ladies, two snow experts and two rock-climbers. They started for the Dufour hut with the intention of climbing Mont Dolent

on the following day by the N.W. face. Roped in two parties, they left the hut on Sunday at 02.00. Towards 08.00, the leader noting the unequal powers of the two parties, roped them all up together. The mountain's N.W. face is steep (*cf.* the illustration) and I do not know whether at this moment a descent would have been still feasible. Be that as it may, the party proceeded and the weather, uncertain at first, soon changed. By 17.00 it was definitely bad. The party painfully attained the crest of the ridge high up, towards 18.00, and at once descended towards Pré-de-Bar. At 20.00 a bivouac became obligatory. The night was stormy and the bivouac proved trying. On the following morning, Monday, the leader was extremely hard put to it to restart the party; one member even insisting on being left behind, the situation became desperate. Nothing, however, could daunt the leader's determination, his boundless energy or high moral. His efforts were successful and the rest of the story is quickly told. After a long and difficult descent followed by a second bivouac on the Pré-de-Bar Glacier, the descent was effected duly on Tuesday afternoon *via* the Petit Ferret. Some of the party were frost-bitten, but everyone returned in safety—a result due to the splendid devotion of a great-hearted mountaineer.

It is superfluous to point out that the two properly-handled cases, Bobba and Lausanne, do not counterpoise the four negative cases cited here. The reader will grasp that this is not the real question; he knows that this article neither assumes to be one dealing with statistics, nor one to point out the law of averages, but my wish is merely to show the 'modern' tendency. The examples given are meant simply as specimens for subsequent reflection.

Formerly, the idea of sound and good comradeship, that complete sense of duty described by Guido Rey, were all articles of faith to mountaineers. To-day, alas, it is certain that cases of complete want of heart are becoming common, to say nothing of reckless disregard of the lives of others. And from such neglect of first principles it is but a step to absolute violence and deadly feud.

Moreover, if it concerns the honour of Mountaineering and of Alpine Societies to gibbet such acts as, for example, those perpetrated last August on the Z'mutt ridge, it behoves us equally to react against apparently less serious deeds, even minor defaults, where the evil *seems* of little importance and the consequences might appear even negligible. True, extreme cases are infrequent, but the lesser are, for those reading between the lines, *too* numerous, and it is this growing frequency which becomes ominous. What gives rise to still greater uneasiness, is *not* that these repellent episodes should more or less escape notice, but that such should exist at all. There is always the baleful possibility that they may break forth suddenly in a measure and intensity defying all prevention—in other words become a premium on every Alpine disaster.