

THE SWISS EXPEDITION TO GREENLAND,
1938

BY ANDRÉ ROCH

IN 1912 a Swiss scientist and explorer, De Quervain, crossed Greenland from Godhavn, on the W., to the fjord of Sermilik, on the E. On his arrival at the E. coast, he discovered a magnificent mountain region, which he called 'Schweizerland.' He christened several summits including Mt. Forel, whose position he identified and whose altitude he estimated at 11,200 feet.¹

In 1929 Wordie, leading a Cambridge expedition, reached the summit of Petermann Peak,² situated to the N. of Scoresby Sound, with an altitude of 9650 ft. This was the highest summit which had been reached in the Arctic.

In May 1931, in the course of the magnificent expedition led by Watkins, the British Arctic Air Route Expedition,³ the ascent of Mt. Forel was attempted by Wager and Stephenson. This party climbed by a couloir on the N.W. face between the subsidiary and main peaks of Forel, and they were stopped by the dome of ice which covers the summit. From the air Watkins discovered a new range of mountains further north, which he estimated at 12,000 ft. in height.

During the year 1934 a certain rivalry was aroused by the desire to reach the highest summit in Greenland, situated in the group of the Watkins Mountains.

A British party, Lindsay, Croft and Godfrey, started from the W. coast and crossed the ice-cap in the direction of Scoresby Sound. This was the British Trans-Greenland Expedition. Arrived in sight of the mountains of the E. coast, they skirted the range towards the S. and mapped the mountainous belt to the N.E. of Schweizerland, which has been called the Crown Prince Frederick Mountains.⁴

In the same year, an Italian expedition led by S. Bonzi sailed in an Iceland fishing vessel. The explorers tried to reach the coast to the E. of the Watkins Mountains, but their ship was damaged by the ice-floes. Repairs were carried out by the crew of the *Pourquoi-Pas*, which itself was driven back by the floes.

On board the *Pourquoi-Pas* was a French party, composed of Drach, Victor, Matter, Gessain and Perez, who also were intending to try the ascent of the highest summit in Greenland. The impossibility of landing forced them to abandon this project.

¹ *Meddelelser om Grönland*, Bind LIX, 55 sqq.

² *A.ŷ.* 42. 241 sqq. *G.ŷ.* lxxv, June 1930, 481 sqq.

³ *A.ŷ.* 44. 177 sqq. *G.ŷ.* lxxix, May 1932, 353 sqq., June 1932, 466 sqq., lxxx, July 1932, 1 sqq.

⁴ *G.ŷ.* lxxxv, May 1935, 393 sqq., lxxxvi, September 1935, 235 sqq.

The Italians, Bonzi, De Gasparotto, Sommi, Martinoni and Figari, explored the coast S. of Scoresby Sound and climbed four summits, which they christened Punta Balestreri (1710 m., 5610 ft.), Punta Roma, Punta Ghilberti and the great black peak Punta degli Italiani (1910 m., 6266 ft.).⁵

In the following year, 1935, the highest of the Watkins Mountains was climbed on August 16 by members of a mainly British expedition,⁶ the party consisting of Augustine Courtauld, Lawrence Wager, H. G. Wager, J. L. Longland, Dr. Fountaine, and Ebbe Munck, a Dane. The peak was later named Gunnbjörnsfjeld by the Danish authorities, the height being fixed at 3700 m. (12,139 ft.).

Photographs of the various mountain regions of Greenland suggested that Schweizerland was certainly the district most resembling the Alps and containing the most attractive peaks.

Several attempts to explore this area had been made by the French Trans-Greenland Expedition of 1936. This expedition was led by Paul Emil Victor, and its other members were Dr. Robert Gessain, Michel Perez and Eigil Knudt. Their plan was to cross Greenland from W. to E., and after the crossing to explore Schweizerland. Bad weather delayed them on the march, and they had not the provisions, the time or the strength to make the journey through the range.⁷

In the spring of 1937 Paul Emil Victor and an Eskimo, Kristian, crossed the mountains and reached the foot of the S. face of Mt. Forel. They did not climb any peaks, and seem to have been hindered by mist.⁸

In 1938 the Akademischer Alpen Club of Zürich decided to organize an expedition to explore Schweizerland.

The E. coast of Greenland is difficult to reach on account of the ice-pack, which is drifted southward by a strong current. The expedition could not succeed unless it could reach the country sufficiently early in the summer to allow its plans to be carried out before the danger of the ice repacking forced it to leave.

From Angmagssalik, the principal Danish colony on the E. coast, we had to convey ourselves and our equipment by motor-boat to the head of Sermilik fjord. We then had to find a way into the interior by ascending the glaciers, and cross the whole range to the foot of Mt. Forel (3360 m., 11,023 ft.), the ascent of which was the main object of our expedition.

The distance from the head of the Sermilik fjord to the foot of Forel is about 150 kilometres. We left the coast at 8.0 P.M. on July 22 with eight Eskimos, eight sledges and fifty-five dogs. There were seven members of our party: Perez, who was making his third visit to this district, and Dr. Wyss-Dunant of Geneva formed the ice-cap party; Dr. Piderman, our expedition doctor from Canton Grisons,

⁵ *Polar Record*, No. 10, July 1935, 93-95.

⁶ *A. J.* 48. 40 *sqq.* *G. J.* lxxxviii, September 1936, 133 *sqq.*

⁷ *Polar Record*, January 1937, 26-28.

⁸ *Polar Record*, January 1938, 22, 23.

INLANDSIS



MAP OF THE MOUNTAIN REGION TO N. OF ANGMAGSSALIK CALLED 'SCHWEIZERLAND' BY DE QUERVAIN, 1912.

Otto Coninx, Carl Baumann, Robert Landolt of Zürich and André Roch, leader of the expedition, made up the climbing party.

In summer it is light during the short northern night. Our whole party marched at night in order to take advantage of the cool temperatures and frozen snow.

At an early stage, in the course of our second march, we struck an unexpected obstacle. The col which we meant to cross was found to be impassable with dog-sledges. We explored the surroundings, and resigned ourselves to climbing, on the left, a steep slope of 1000 ft., which led up to a glacier plateau by which we should be able to continue without further difficulties. In order to get the eight sledges up, we had to rig a pulley on to some skis planted firmly in the slope, and so hoist the loads one by one. This manœuvre had to be repeated three times; the final stage was the steepest and the most exhausting.

During the heat of the day, we camped at the foot of the slope. When it became cooler, we resumed the tiring work of hoisting. In the course of these operations, one of the aluminium sledges broke its tackle and slid away down the slope. We watched it with our hearts in our mouths. It landed full on an outcrop of rock, which sent it flying into the air; turning over and over, it buried itself in the frozen slope. By a miracle the sledge was intact and nothing was broken. At sunrise all the loads were at the top, and there was still time to continue the march for some kilometres before it became too hot.

On the next day we encountered a further difficulty—a traverse across a slope cut by a stone-chute and followed by a steep descent. On the way down this, one of the drivers who was braking from behind let his sledge get out of control. It was with anxiety that we watched the dog-team flying downwards towards an immense sérac-chute. The sledge descended with gathering pace, and in order to avoid being crushed the dogs drew over towards the slope and succeeded, to our profound relief, in avoiding the danger zone. That night we covered 45 kilometres.

The Eskimos now wanted to leave us, and we had only done half the distance to Mt. Forel. We had not anticipated the delay on the Col des Poulies where we had lost two marches, and this meant that we had not sufficient food for the dogs. We therefore made a large depot of provisions and equipment, and continued with our two aluminium sledges. Seven of the Eskimos went back unladen with their teams. We kept fourteen dogs and the Eskimo Larsai.

Our two sledges were overloaded. They weighed 350 kilogrammes each, and unluckily we now struck an area of lower elevation which was terribly crevassed. Still lower down, we joined the great Midgaard Glacier, where the ice was bare and progress became almost impossible. The dogs' paws were cut and bleeding, and we had to improvise boots for them out of a sack. The torrents which flowed in the ice gave us great difficulty, and we had to follow along their banks, often for a great distance, before we could find a place to cross. Sometimes we even had to transport the loads one by one across streams and

moraines. After three days of this tribulation we at length reached a belt of snow where we could make more rapid progress. The weather, however, became worse and a blanket of fresh snow covered everything. This slowed down our march still further. Eventually, on August 1, we pitched camp at the foot of Mt. Forel. We had been marching for nine days at an average of nineteen kilometres per day.

The sky was clear and, without further delay, we divided into two groups with the object of exploring Mt. Forel and, if possible, reaching its summit. It is an enormous mountain, and is crowned with a dome of ice which on all sides guards the approach to the top. A party consisting of Coninx, Landolt and Wyss was to visit the N. face of the mountain and to explore the route attempted by Wager and Stephenson in 1931. Meanwhile Piderman, Baumann and I were to climb directly from the S.

We did not know the exact position of our camp in relation to the summit which we hoped to reach. Mt. Forel being hidden from us, we climbed a very steep glacier which descended between two impressive rocky buttresses. We emerged on a dome of ice, from which an arête led up to the summit of Mt. Forel. From that point our route was clearly marked out. This S. arête of the mountain is certainly the best way of reaching the summit; it is of ice, sharp at first, broken later by a rocky drop down which we fixed a rope for reascent. Beyond this point the route continued along the arête—a classic high latitude climb. We were forced to turn on the left a little wall of rock which barred the way, and scale a very difficult short chimney. The ice dome of the summit was in a genial mood at this point, and we were able to advance on crampons without even the trouble of cutting steps.

Mist surrounded us. The summit was flat as a football field. We crossed the whole plateau in order to look down the N. face and see if our companions might emerge from that side. Unhappily they had not had our good fortune. They had mistaken their glacier and looked for Mt. Forel further E. than its true position.

On our return journey, only the ascent of the gendarme where we had placed the *rappel* gave us any difficulty. We avoided this obstacle by a détour on the E. face and so reached the top of the gendarme, from which point we followed our tracks back to the camp.

Perez had spent the day in going with the Eskimo Larsai to pick up the loads which we had left at the foot of the climb the previous day. On their return to camp Perez saw a bear. One of the dog-teams was immediately released to go in pursuit. Normally, to see a bear in Greenland is to catch it. The dogs surround and corner it until the Eskimos come up and kill it. Unfortunately, in the absence of the other members of the party our pair of hunters was not able to lay hands on Dr. Wyss' revolver, and Larsai seized a rope and pitons with which to strangle the bear. Eventually, however, the weapon was discovered at the bottom of a box. At this point Coninx, Landolt and Wyss arrived back tired from their expedition. Fatigue immediately gave place to excitement, and the whole party rushed in pursuit of the



Photo, A. Roch.]

COL DES POULIES. HOISTING SLEDGING BY ROPE AND PULLEY.



Photo, A. Roch.]

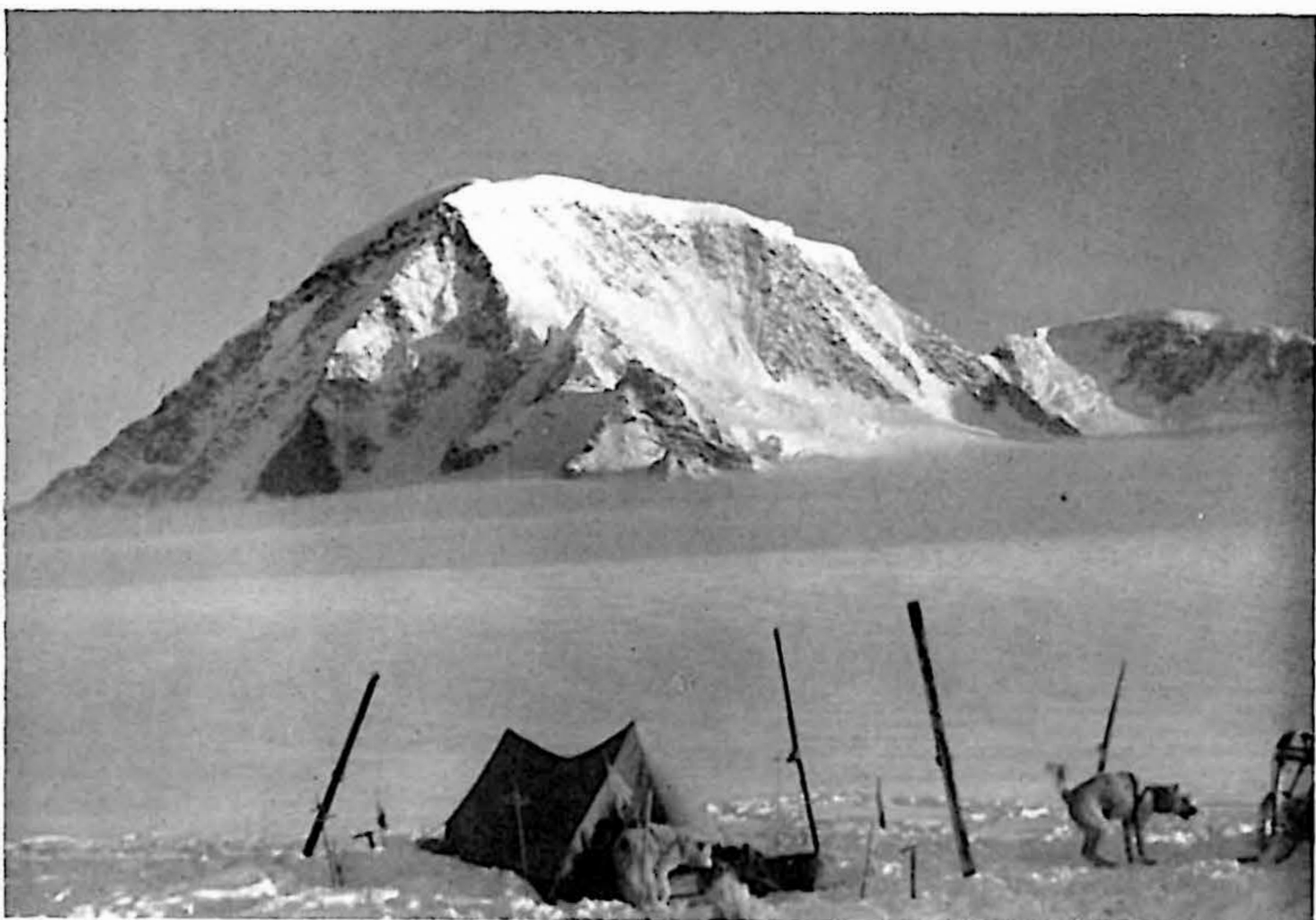
CAMP AT FOOT OF SÖLVERBJOERG.

[To face p. 108.]



Photo, Carl Baumann.]

MT. FOREL FROM E. THE S. ARÊTE, FOLLOWED ON THE ASCENT,
IS ON THE LEFT.



Photo, M. Perez.]

MT. FOREL FROM THE N. TO RIGHT, COL WAGER AND PETIT FOREL.



Photo, R. Landolt.]

PLATEAU TO S. OF MT. FOREL.



Photo, M. Pere..]

PTE. DU HARPON (2940 M.) FROM W. ON EXTREME RIGHT,
DE QUERVAINSBJOERG (2600 M.).



Photo, A. Roch.]

RÖDEHORN, TOUPILAK AND (IN BACKGROUND, LEFT) RYTTERKNOEGTEN, FROM SÖLVERBJOERG.



Photo, R. Landolt.]

S. FACE OF LAUPERSBJOERG (2580 M.) FROM PETERSBJOERG.
The route leads to the large square snowfield and thence to the arête.



Photo, A. Roch.]

RÖDEHORN (2140 M.) FROM N.



Photo, Karl Baumann.]

RYTTERKNOEGTEN (2020 M.) FROM FAULHORN.
The W. arête, followed on first ascent, descends from
left of summit to the double peak, then to right.

[To face p. 109.]

bear with cameras and cinema apparatus. The hunt lasted more than three hours. The bear was eventually brought to bay on a rocky buttress of Mt. Forel at a height of 2700 m. Every chamber of the revolver was emptied into the creature's beautiful white fur, and it fell headlong to the bottom of a 300-ft. wall.

Meanwhile our party had descended Mt. Forel and arrived in time to witness the triumphal return of the hunters. Next day the bear was cut up, and an extra chop on the menu made a fine windfall for both dogs and men. One of the dogs had been wounded in the fight and eventually died of internal injuries, howling desperately.

For the next few days the weather deteriorated, a blanket of fresh snow again covered the mountains, and mist hung between the peaks. In spite of this on August 4 we managed to climb two more 3000-m. summits, Perfect and Fruebjoerg. At this stage Perez and Dr. Wyss started for an exploration of the glacier plateau which lies beyond the mountains, their object being to discover the highest part of it. Meanwhile the rest of us, with the Eskimo Larsai, retraced our steps with the intention of climbing some of the most charming peaks of the range. Bad weather hampered us in our crossing of Femstjernen, a glacier plateau of vast extent shaped like a five-pointed star. Later we camped at the foot of a magnificent mountain which we christened Laupersbjoerg⁹ (2580 m., 6752 ft.) after the celebrated Swiss mountaineer, the late Hans Lauper.¹⁰

At last, after a black period during which we almost gave up hope of ever seeing the sun again, we were favoured by a spell of exceptionally fine weather. On August 12 the clouds slowly dispersed, and we seized the opportunity to reconnoitre the coveted peak. The most practicable route seemed to lie up the S. face and S.E. arête. That day, in two separate parties, we climbed two subsidiary summits, which we called Petersbjoerg and Araignée.

On the following day, August 13, we left camp at 1 A.M. to attempt the Laupersbjoerg. It was a long and exacting climb. A southerly buttress composed of gigantic blocks of red granite led to the foot of an immense snow slope reaching up to the E. arête. We followed this steep, airy ridge to the top. The air was so still that we stayed for four hours sitting on the summit. We had to wait for the snow in the couloir to freeze again, as there was a danger that it might avalanche while it was melting. We did not get back to camp until late in the evening. After a few hours' sleep, we decamped and started on our next march.

The steady reduction of our rations indicated that it was high time to be making our way back to the provision boxes of which we had made a depot on the outward journey. A particularly grinding march

⁹ The names of peaks given in this paper, with the exceptions of Rytterknoegten, De Quervainsbjoerg and Mt. Forel, are not yet accepted by the Survey Office of Denmark. The map of 'Schweizerland' here given is drawn from that of the Survey Office of Denmark.

¹⁰ See *A.J.* 48. 336, and portrait facing p. 333.

took us back to the Col des Esquimaux, from which we were easily able to reach the depot.

On August 19 and 20 we climbed two more charming peaks from this camp : the Rödehorn (2140 m., 7020 ft.), a most amusing climb on ice and rock, and the Silverbjoerg (2000 m., 6560 ft.), from which we ran down on skis in an unbroken 'schuss' of five kilometres.

Perez and Wyss now rejoined us. Their exploration of the ice-cap had been completely successful. They had discovered a plateau of an altitude of 3380 m. (10,090 ft.), and climbed the nunatak Gautier (3200 m.). Being now all reunited, we resumed our return journey with the two sledges.

We pitched camp at the foot of Rytterknoegten (2020 m., 6630 ft.), with its bold peak. Next day the sky was completely clear ; we divided into three groups and reconnoitred our aiguille. On the following day, August 24, in perfect weather we made our final attack on this magnificent mountain. We followed the W. arête, which was very long but appeared to present no insuperable obstacles. We left our nailed boots at the foot of the rocks and in *Kletterschuhe* climbed as fast as possible along the tremendous western backbone of our aiguille. After eight hours' continuous climbing on magnificent gneiss, we reached the summit.

We looked out upon a vista of immense glaciers. In the distance sparkled the icebergs at the head of the fjords. The ice-pack stretched away to the southern horizon, while to the N. was the outline of Mt. Forel.

With the accomplishment of this climb, we resumed our journey towards the coast, which we reached after the most exhausting day's march of the whole expedition. From the coast we were able to climb two more peaks, which we named Punta Helvetia (1400 m., 4592 ft.) and Bellavista (1450 m., 4756 ft.).

The unrelieved strain and exertion of the past weeks had had no effect upon the spirit of the members of the expedition, and the results, whether from the scientific or from the mountaineering point of view, might be considered excellent.

The Danish Government vessel *Gertrude Rask* which was to take us off was not able to force its way through the ice-pack off Angmagsalik. For ten days the members of the expedition lived on the resources of the country : seal meat, salmon, ptarmigan, mussels, bilberries, dandelions and sorrel. Eventually the *Gertrude Rask* came alongside, and after two days of desperate and delicate work she emerged again from the pack and plunged across the open sea in the direction of Europe.

[Our warm thanks are due to Mr. A. D. M. Cox for his translation of this article.—EDITOR.]