

CLIMBS FROM THE FRÜNDEN HUT

BY W. D. MACPHERSON

KANDERSTEG, ever since the opening of the Lötschberg railway, has been a popular summer holiday resort, but I doubt whether a committee of expert mountaineers would include it in a list of the six best climbing centres in Switzerland. Yet Kandersteg possesses, within easy reach, a greater variety of climbs than any other place of which I know in Switzerland, and, though the statement may be challenged, it can offer climbs as interesting as any at Grindelwald or Zermatt. It is not perhaps a place for head-hunters¹ and those who perform on pitons, but that is one of its attractions, for such persons are out of place in a true mountaineering centre. For the mountaineer who realizes the importance of choosing his climb to suit both his party and his weather—and there can be no more important consideration, because real enjoyment of climbing and of the mountains can be achieved only if one is climbing within one's powers and in suitable conditions—Kandersteg makes ideal headquarters. Moreover it is easily accessible from London. You can leave London at tea-time on Friday afternoon and start for your hut before lunch-time the next day. For the enthusiast, if finance permits, a week-end climb in Switzerland is thus a practical possibility.

It might have been argued until recently that the Kandersteg huts were single purpose huts serving one climb only, and that the most attractive mountains—the Blümlisalp group overlooking the Oeschinensee—were either inaccessible or could be reached only by a long and tedious walk to the Blümlisalp hut. Both these criticisms disappeared when the Fründen hut was opened in September 1936. This new hut is situated 3000 ft. above the Oeschinensee on its southern side, on the mound of a moraine between the Fründenhorn and Doldenhorn. I cannot think of any spot in Switzerland that had greater need for a hut, or of any situation that is more attractive. Certainly the hut has opened up a large number of interesting climbs which previously were seldom or never attempted. And the hut falls in that class which is all too rare: one in which you must put on the rope in the early morning before you leave and where interest in the climb starts at once. Those who like a loosening trudge over stones or up a moraine will be disappointed at the Fründen hut.

An attractive feature is the path leading to the hut, which starts from the Oeschinensee hotel and was constructed by Kandersteg guides during a period of two months in 1936. The situation of the hut, 8405 ft. up on a mountain side rising almost vertically from the Oeschinensee, might be compared to that of the Bietschhorn hut in

¹ Persons who climb mountains over a certain height only.

the adjoining Lötschental. Both lie on a steep mountain side facing N. at about the same height above their valleys. But whereas the most enthusiastic mountaineer will admit that the climb to the Bietschhorn hut on a really hot afternoon can be tedious, if not painful, the walk to the Fründen hut is a real pleasure. The difference lies in the gradient of the paths, the Kandersteg guides having wisely acted on the principle that an even and easy gradient is the most important consideration, no matter if it lengthens the walk by many hundred metres.

On the way up to the Fründen hut, and still more on the way down, the lovely view of the Oeschinensee is always with you; you are climbing near the glacier which falls so strikingly from the Oeschinenhorn and you can enjoy to the full the wonderful scenery which the Blümlisalp group presents. Perhaps it is these views and surroundings, rather than the gradient, that make the path so attractive.

The hut itself is a typical modern S.A.C. hut built out of local stone, very compact and comfortable, and with accommodation for forty. It possesses spring beds in place of straw—perhaps the most important innovation in hut life since mountaineering commenced. Moreover you are welcomed by Fritz Ogi Father and his wife, who act as guardians during the summer months and whose help and advice can be invaluable. Herr Ogi is the father of five famous guiding sons, and himself the son of the Fritz Ogi who did so many of the first ascents in the Kandersteg district.

The various expeditions that can be done from the hut will now be described, more or less in order of difficulty. But I shall try to avoid giving any standard of difficulty, partly because all climbs differ to such an extent that no two can be placed in the same category, partly because the standard of climbers themselves is so variable that what is difficult for one is easy for another. The extraordinary difference which exists between mountaineers in standard and style of climbing has often surprised me. It would perhaps be true to say that guides have a certain style and technique in common, but it certainly cannot be said of amateurs. The explanation, I suppose, is that the sport is very individualistic and there is no standard or system to copy.

The climbs which are now described can be identified on the photograph facing p. 100 by the numbers which appear against them.

(1) For the novice a glacier and snow walk to the Fründenjoch (1½ hours) is an excellent introduction to the Alps; and if possible the return to Kandersteg should be made by descending the other side over easy rocks to the Kanderfirn and thence back by Selden and the Gasterntal. I can think of no better or more attractive first expedition to gain experience of Swiss hut and mountain conditions.

As the Fründenjoch itself is approached the precipitous head of the Bietschhorn unexpectedly appears, filling the gap and seemingly but a stone's throw away. The Bietschhorn, rising in solitary state out of the secluded Lötschental, is surely one of the unique mountains of the

world. In the course of his climbing career every member of the Alpine Club must have spent many hours gazing from Swiss summits at the panorama of mountains around him, and after the first survey there is usually for each of us one mountain on which the eye rests longest. In my case it is often the Bietschhorn with its sheer and spectacular rock ridges, and I reflect with relief that I am not that day traversing it. I have heard more than one mountaineer criticize rock climbs in the Kandersteg district on the grounds that they are too short. To such I have recommended the Bietschhorn by its W. ridge both up and down, but the suggestion was not accepted.

(2) A rather longer and more ambitious trip is to the Oeschinenjoch ($2\frac{1}{2}$ hours), involving a little rock work as well as a more difficult glacier and a descent from the Oeschinenjoch to the Kanderfirn which, though not as easy as from the Fründenjoch, is quite practicable for experienced mountaineers. The return to Kandersteg should if possible be made this way so as to visit the Gasterntal. I remember once taking part in a discussion the object of which was to choose the most beautiful valley in Switzerland. Though of course no agreement on a question such as this could ever be reached, the Gasterntal on this occasion had very ardent supporters. It is indeed a valley with a silent grandeur which it is hard to equal. On a still night in the Gasterntal the sound of the waterfalls and of running water is a memory that cannot easily be forgotten.

(3) The Fründenhorn by the easy and usual route can be climbed from the hut in 3 hours. There is no particular difficulty so long as the final climb up a fairly steep arête is on snow and not ice. The climb should be interesting to beginners because it combines glacier, rock and snow, and the view from the summit is particularly fine. Unfortunately, the rock is not too good and there are occasional falls of small stones. Unsatisfactory rock is a complaint that can be levelled against several of the climbs around Kandersteg, but I should not describe the rock as dangerous. I think personally that perfect rock and handholds—as in the Chamonix district—are apt to remove a certain amount of interest from climbing, and undoubtedly create a confidence that can prove dangerous in other districts. No one of course advocates really bad or dangerous rock, but so long as it is reasonably safe I do claim that rock which is not too perfect is better as a training ground for all climbers. I have little sympathy with those who will climb only if the handholds are as firm as iron. Why go to the mountains at all if your wants can be satisfied by the iron ladders attached to industrial chimneys?

There are many who consider the view from the Balmhorn, owing to its situation half-way between the great peaks of the Oberland and the Valais, to be as fine as any in the Alps. A similar view is obtained from the Fründenhorn, a near neighbour of the Balmhorn, and climbed, it can be said, with very much less effort.

(4) A rather longer and more advanced, but more interesting, climb is the Oeschinenhorn (4 hours), but the view from this peak is not so



Photo, Oskar Hari, Kandersteg.]

PEAKS ABOVE FRÜNDEN HUT.

[To face p. 100.]

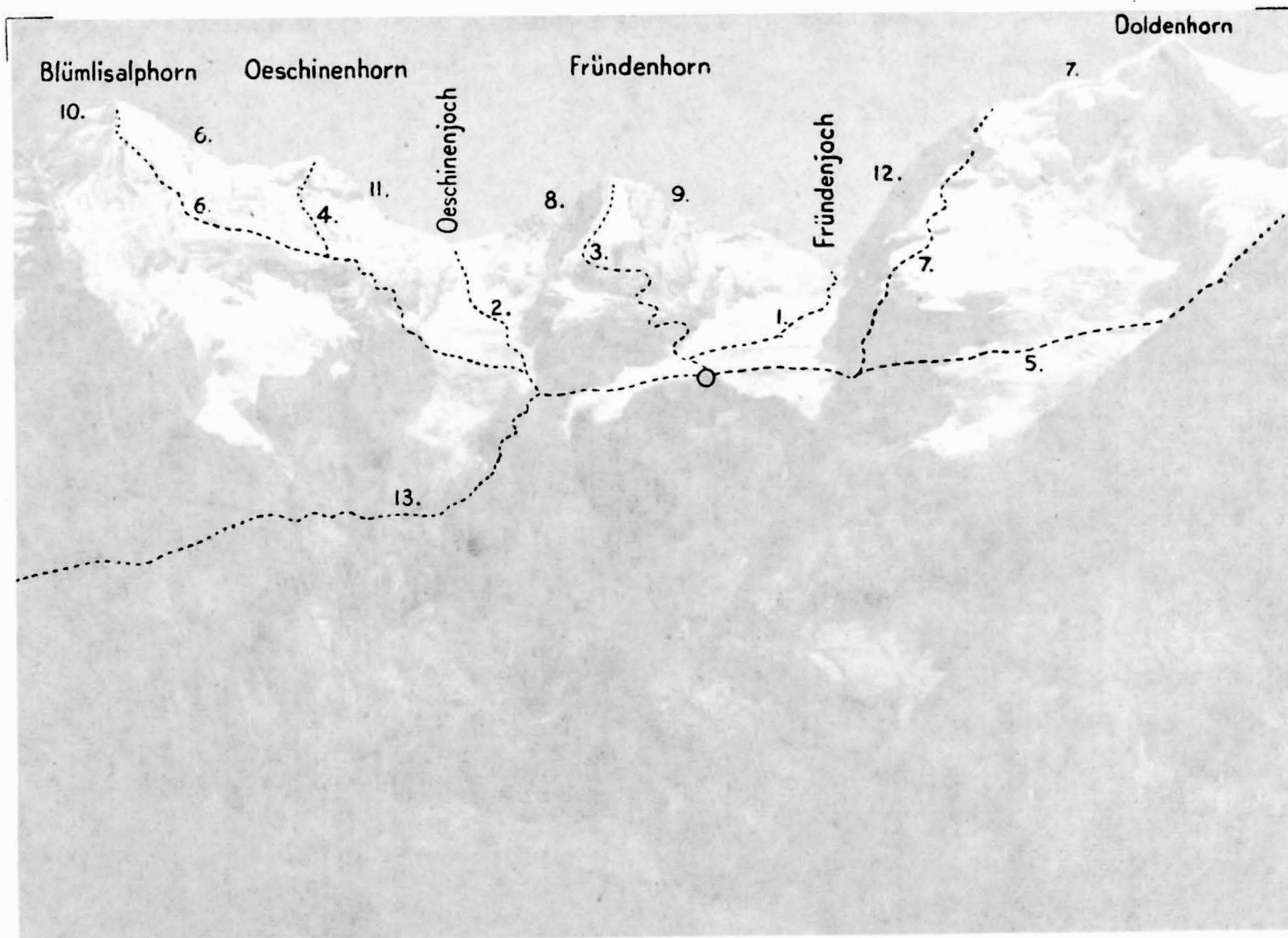
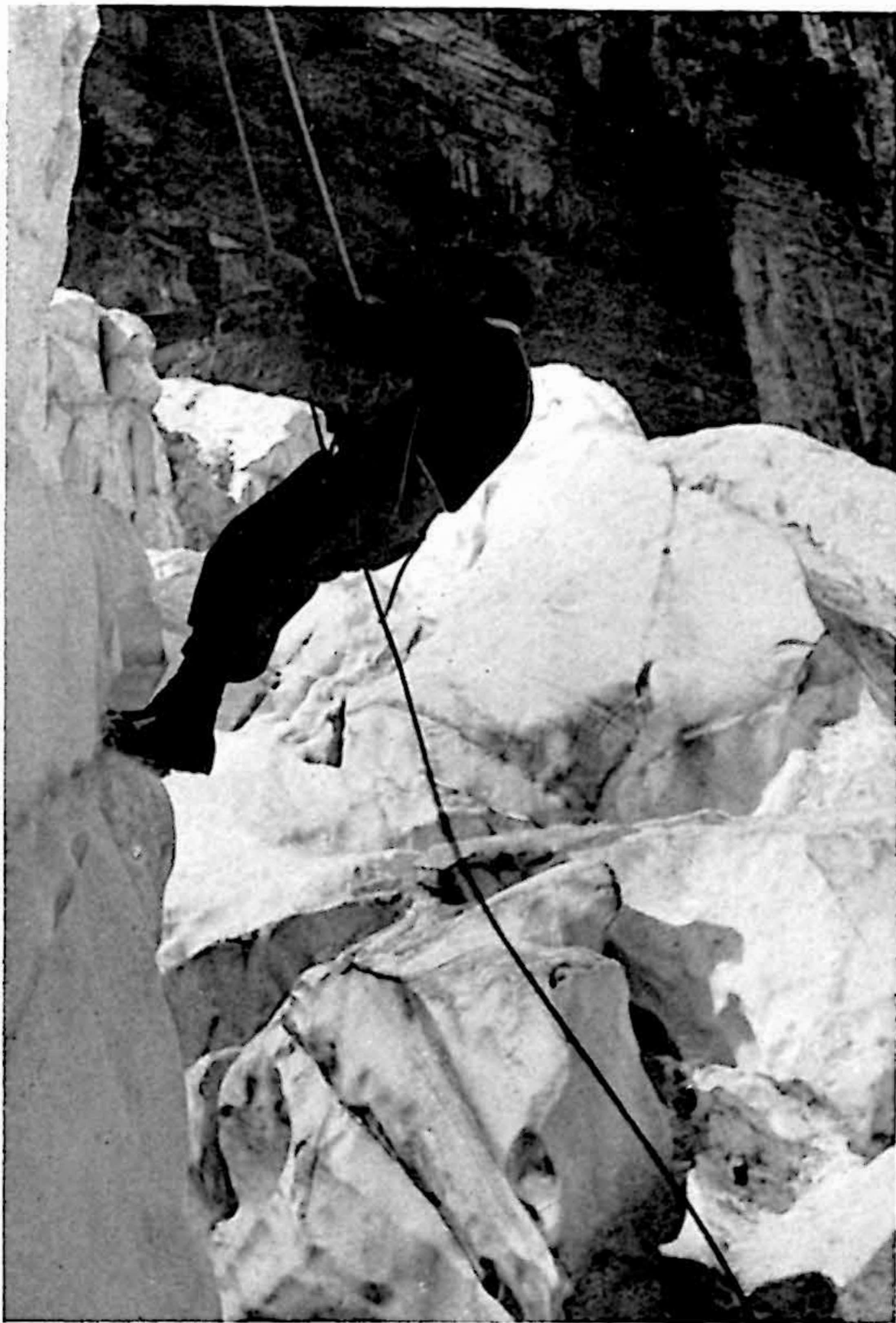


Photo Oskar Havi, Kandersteg.

PEAKS ABOVE FRÜNDEHUT.

[To face p. 100.]



Photo, R. D. Perkins.]

ROPING DOWN ON SÉRACS NEAR FRÜNDEH HUT.

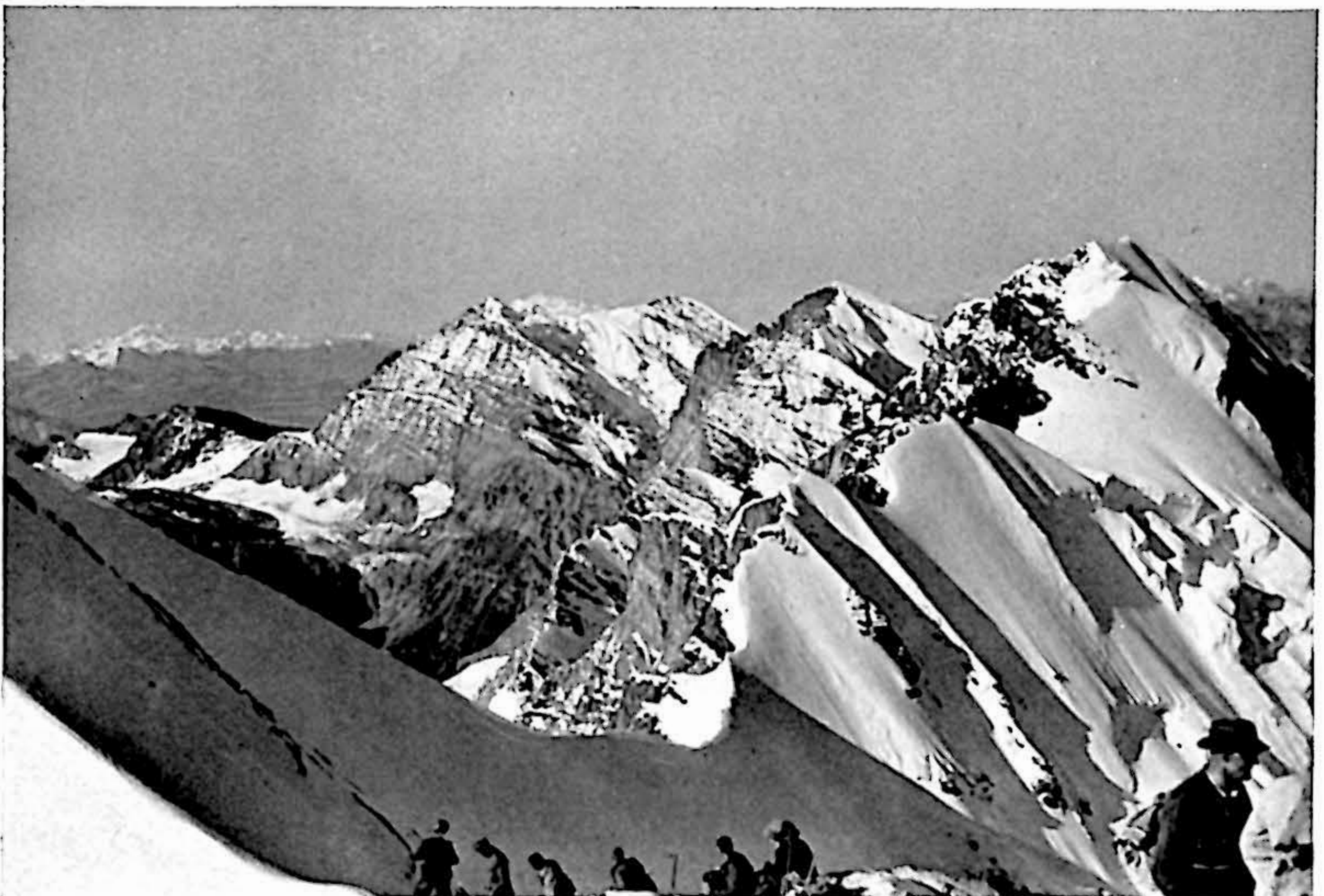


Photo supplied by W. D. Macpherson.]

LOOKING S.W. FROM WEISSE FRAU.

good as that from the Fründenhorn and it is better visited during the traverse of the Blümlisalphorn mentioned in paragraph 6.

(5) The Doldenhorn by the usual route from the Doldenhorn hut must be one of the most tedious climbs in the Alps. To my mind it has nothing to recommend it, which is a strong statement for an enthusiastic mountaineer. But the Doldenhorn can now be climbed from the Fründen hut in approximately the same time (6 hours) as that taken by the usual route, and the climb is far more enjoyable. The route lies across the Galletgrat and the glacier on the N. face, the normal path being joined where the snow slopes commence for the final ascent to the summit. The descent can be made by the usual route to the Doldenhorn hut, and in this way not only is a traverse effected but the descent to Kandersteg is much quicker.

All the expeditions so far mentioned present no difficulties to anyone who possesses a modicum of experience. I come now to more interesting climbs.

(6) An attractive and useful training expedition is to climb the Blümlisalphorn by means of its falling glacier and its N.W. ridge ($4\frac{1}{2}$ hours) and then descend by its W. rock ridge and the Oeschinenhorn ($4\frac{1}{2}$ hours). The climb presents no real difficulty and can be undertaken by any party with a little experience. At the same time, to find a route through the Blümlisalp Glacier is not always easy. It varies from day to day and is not altogether free from avalanche dangers. On the last occasion I was there it was necessary to descend 20 ft. down one side of a very broad crevasse, cross a precarious bridge and ascend the other side—the kind of performance which is enjoyed more by the guides than by the amateur members of the party! The building of the Fründen hut made practicable the ascent of the Blümlisalphorn by this glacier route, which is much preferable to the old route from the Blümlisalp hut.² An account of the climb by approximately the route described appeared in *Die Alpen*, March 1938.

(7) A fine climb which has been opened up by the Fründen hut is that of the Doldenhorn by the Galletgrat ($6\frac{1}{2}$ hours), the descent being made by one of the easier routes. This is a climb which should satisfy the most experienced of snow and ice experts and should not be undertaken without at least one strong step-cutter. The ridge is named after M. Gallet, who first ascended it in 1899.³ Near the top of the Galletgrat itself is a very steep and rather sensational ice couloir about 300 ft. in height. As much as 3 hours can be spent in cutting steps up this couloir, and so hard and steep is the ice that it is not a job for the average amateur iceman. A good idea of the couloir can be gained from a picture appearing in *A. J.* 43, facing p. 39, which though taken on the Kleintriftje of the Breithorn looks almost exactly like the entrance to the Galletgrat couloir. It is unfortunately liable to falling stones and varies very much in condition. Once the couloir has been ascended, the route to the summit runs along an interesting snow and

² For W. face of Blümlisalphorn, see *A. J.* 50. 138.

³ *Berner Alpen*, Band II, p. 74; *A. J.* 46. 194.

ice arête which on one side is very steep and reminiscent of the Ober Gabelhorn.

(8) The Fründenhorn can be climbed by its E. and W. ridges as well as by the usual route, and these two ridges provide first-class rock climbs. The E. ridge is the easier and is a really attractive ridge to descend ($2\frac{1}{2}$ hours). There are four places where roping down is necessary or desirable; but none are really difficult, and they provide excellent practice for those who enjoy this form of gymnastics. An ascent of the Fründenhorn by the usual route and descent by the E. ridge with return from the Oeschinenjoch is a very good expedition for any competent party. The E. ridge is not so easy on the ascent, but it is a perfectly practicable climb with the aid of *Kletterschuhe*, and it should be attempted, and accomplished with ease, before the W. ridge is tackled.

(9) The W. ridge of the Fründenhorn can be climbed from the Fründenjoch in 4 hours, but this is a difficult rock climb and *Kletterschuhe* are essential. The climb was first done by the late Hans Lauper and M. Liniger in 1921,⁴ since when it has only been repeated a few times. I know of only one guide who has led the whole ridge. There are several vertical walls which have to be climbed with great care by the leader, and one amusing traverse over a large round stone which projects into space and has another rock overhanging it only a foot or so above. I do not think a fat man could possibly overcome the obstacle. The climb is very enjoyable for a party in good training, but at least three are desirable as there are places where, if one slipped, two would be required to hold him. Rucksacks should be light, as they have to be taken up on the rope in several places. A feature is that the climbers are usually out of sight of one another in the difficult places, as these cannot be tackled by a straight route. This is doubtless the reason why the ridge has never, so far as I know, been descended. In 1918 the late Hans Lauper was unsuccessful in such an attempt.⁵ A difficulty on the descent would be to find satisfactory belays, for the rock is far from perfect, but on the principle that where a rucksack can be pulled up it should be possible to rope down, the descent should be possible.

A good party should make the descent by the E. ridge. Though I cannot claim great experience, I can think of no comparatively short rock climb in the Zermatt or Grindelwald districts so full of interest as a traverse of the Fründenhorn from Fründenjoch to Oeschinenjoch.

(10) Another very fine snow and ice expedition is a traverse of the Oeschinenhorn, Blümlisalphorn, Weisse Frau and Morgenhorn from Fründen hut to Blümlisalp hut (10 hours). The snow and ice ridge between the Blümlisalphorn and the Morgenhorn is as fine as any in the Alps; but it can be a long expedition and requires good conditions and weather before it should be attempted.

All the climbs so far mentioned can be described as guide climbs—that is to say, they are climbs on which a guide can be expected to hold

⁴ A. J. 34. 167.

⁵ *Die Alpen*, Jahrg. IX, Heft 8, 1933, p. 294.

his client in an emergency. For the more enterprising there remain two ridges, the W. ridge of the Oeschinenhorn (11), and the E. ridge of the Doldenhorn (12), both of which have been climbed, but which I do not think can be described as climbs where a guide could be expected with certainty to hold a falling amateur.

The E. ridge of the Doldenhorn has always looked to me very nearly an unjustifiable climb—by which I mean it cannot be attempted with safety without the use of pitons. Two parties commenced the climb during 1938, but both returned unsuccessful. A variation of the climb is possible, however, by climbing the N.E. face of the Doldenhorn, the E. ridge itself being reached a little before its junction with the Galletgrat, but after its vertical and dangerous slabs on the lower part of the ridge have been passed. This route was accomplished in 1936 by Herr Haidegger and Frl. Lüthi and looks to me a practicable climb, though there are doubtless a good many falling stones.⁶

The W. ridge of the Oeschinenhorn appears to have been climbed once only, by the late Herr Stösser and E. Kast in August 1932,⁷ though I believe it was twice attempted by the famous Müller brothers (Abraham and Gottfried), who had to turn back on one occasion owing to illness in the party and on the other owing to weather. I cannot find that it has been attempted by any other party, which is an unusual statement to make of any Swiss ridge. I have examined the ridge carefully on many occasions through glasses, and except for one step which is clearly very difficult it appears a justifiable climb. Herr Stösser was unfortunately killed on the Morgenhorn not long after his success on this ridge,⁸ and thus was ended the life of a very enterprising though, according to English standards, rather 'desperate' mountaineer.

There remain several other possible climbs or variations of routes which have occasionally been attempted or still remain to be done. There is not space to mention them all here, but I have in mind particularly routes up the Blümlisalp Rothorn on its W. side (not yet, I think, attempted) and the ascent of the Doldenhorn direct by its N. face glacier.⁹ An interesting trip also is a traverse from the Fründen hut to the Ober Schafschnur (13), which affords a direct route from the Fründen to the Blümlisalp hut. *Kletterschuhe* are desirable, but the trip is one which can be done in weather sufficiently bad to prevent more ambitious expeditions.

One of the pleasant features about the ridges in the neighbourhood of the Fründen hut is the absence of fixed ropes. Whenever I come upon a fixed rope in the course of a climb I am struck with a feeling of nausea and a desire to turn back. Not only does a rope spoil the physical enjoyment of climbing, but it is usually a sickly sight quite out of place with its surroundings. I can never see any justification for such aids on the mountains themselves. If the climb is too difficult or dangerous without a fixed rope, then it should not be attempted by

⁶ *A. J.* 48. 354.

⁸ *A. J.* 47. 377.

⁷ *Berner Alpen*, Band II, p. 85; *A. J.* 45. 152.

⁹ *A. J.* 46. 388.

that route at all ; if the rope is placed there to make the climb possible for weaker parties who could not otherwise attempt it, then such parties should keep to the climbs which they can tackle with safety without such aids.

I have mentioned so far only climbs from the Fründen hut. But the hut can also be used as a convenient stopping place by those who are satisfied with spending their holidays roaming from hut to hut. A route from the Blümlisalp hut has already been mentioned, and there is an easier route with an occasional path lower down the mountain side. This path also skirts the Oeschinensee high up above the waters and affords magnificent views for those with good heads.

From the Fründen hut the trip can be continued next day over the Fründenjoch to the Mutthorn hut (6 hours), or over the Kanderfirn to the Lötschental. A walk from the Kiental to the Lötschental by this route would be a very attractive expedition for pass enthusiasts, who I believe may gain more enjoyment from the mountains than many an expert climber.

Finally, the Fründen hut possesses an asset which deserves special mention, for it is always available to lessen the disappointment caused when weather interferes with climbing plans. Within ten yards of the hut door there is a rock face of about 100 m. on which rock climbing and roping down can be practised. The face is sufficiently difficult to tire the muscles of most people after only half an hour's exercise. Within ten minutes also of the hut can be found large séracs and crevasses on which step-cutting can be practised and ice legs acquired. It has always interested me to see how poorly the amateur climber—and particularly the British—compares with the professionals on ice. The discrepancy is even greater than it is on rock, and it is very noticeable how the performance of the amateur deteriorates the nearer he is to a crevasse. It is due, of course, only to the strange conditions, and experience soon puts matters right. It is well worth while, therefore, for all climbers to spend a day or two gaining such experience both on nursery ice and rocks. A day spent in this way teaches much more than can be learnt during the stress and strain of a climb, and it will make the climber muscle-fit, so that on the long climbs themselves he will always, like the professional, be climbing within himself.

It will be seen that the Fründen hut offers enough climbs to occupy the normal mountaineer for the whole of his season—a statement that can be applied to very few huts in Switzerland. And it is a place which can provide enjoyment for all except perhaps the piton experts. Huts, however, were not really built for those to whom mountains are but a means for testing their skill, endurance and obstinacy. For the true climber the mountains are a necessity from which one can part each year only with the thought that they will still be there unchanged when another year has passed.