

IN AND OUT OF SAAS

BY G. W. MURRAY

MOST of us are agreed that our mountaineering ought to be rather more than an indiscriminate attack upon the perpendicular. That is to say, we do employ some method in our choice of objective, even if we restrict our assaults to the *Viertausender*. Such a selection seems austere but rather too exclusive. Some years ago, when the peak-baggers were at their worst and they saw the glorious sky-lines of Saas and Zermatt only as so many scenic railways, I devised a game far better suited to my dignity and middle age. According to this convention, the Saas valley, from afar, was considered a stronghold to be carried at all hazards while, once an entrance had been forced, it became a prison to be broken out of at no matter what cost of ingenuity or agility. A route, once made, was not to be repeated.

Half a dozen ways, such as the 'Col de Stalden,' the Simeli-Sirwolten route, the Rossboden Pass, the Monte Moro, the Adler and the Allalin, had already been done, and so were disqualified. Another obvious one, the Antrona, was closed to us by the Italian Government. The Zwischbergen Pass appeared unworthy of the new idea; moreover, one easy route had to be left to the future in case we found ourselves condemned by old age and the convention to reside in Saas for the rest of our natural lives.

But to find a seventh and better route professional advice and assistance became necessary, so I enlisted as our ally Oscar Supersaxo. M. Blanchet has already portrayed our Oscar—it may suffice here to say that he is not one of the modern fashionable school. Indeed, Oscar could walk straight back into the past and colloque with any of the Andereggs, Bohrens and Almers as man to man. Heroic in strength, he habitually carries a pack containing a generous supply of wine and food, a Zdarsky tent, a camera, a heavy brass telescope, a lot of spare rope, a few pitons, a hammer, the latest in guide books, and some nondescript articles that have lain at the bottom for years. Such a burden would soon flatten on his face the average 'tourist,' or the gigolo-guide of the films. Woe betide his follower, when at a difficult step Oscar discards this monster to be brought up to him later! When gasping like a fish, you rejoin him above the difficulty, Oscar may console you by quoting 'My father Ambrose, he often say to me, "Oscar, the mountains are good for the guide, but the tourist, he is a fool!"' Oscar it was who built the Solvay hut on the Matterhorn, when nobody from Zermatt would look at the job. He has a very long list of new climbs to his credit, and made a new route with M. Blanchet on the Alphubel in 1938.¹

¹ *A.J.* 50. 308.

It was in 1931, when Oscar and I were searching the newly published guide to the Pennine Alps, Vol. IV, for a mountain with an unnumbered arête, that the Saas game started. I had just selected the Gross Wannehorn for our next objective when Oscar suggested we should break out of the Saas valley into that of the Simplon by descending the eastern face of the Weissmies. This was the start; with my wife and Alfred Supersaxo, we mounted to the Weissmies hut. Before tackling the Weissmies, however, we ascended first to the notch between that mountain and the Laquinhorn, already well known to us as a breakfast place before ascending the S. ridge of the Laquinhorn or the noble N. ridge of the Weissmies. But our third visit to this place was not lucky. The steep couloir falling down to the Hohletrift Glacier seemed full of loose stones, and a reconnaissance down the rocks on its southern side came to a stop at a precipice. The ascent from below had been attempted before, so long ago as July 7, 1863, by Messrs. A. W. Moore and H. B. George, with Christian Almer and Melchior Anderegg. But after nine hours' hard labour they were obliged to return owing to the illness of Mr. George and the difficulty of the rocks from a point, according to Almer, still two hours distant from the top of the ridge.² Resolving to try it next year from below, we returned to the hut. Next day, August 27, we left at 5 A.M. and ascended the Weissmies in leisurely fashion by the usual route in company with a party that included some delightful English children on their first climb.

By 10 A.M. we were on the secondary summit of the Weissmies, about 250 m. south of the main one, and began to descend by the rocky rib which leads straight down from the survey signal to the Laquin Glacier. Its rocks presented no special difficulties but were covered with a little new snow which alternately helped and hindered us. At noon we lunched just after crossing a small snow saddle, and a little later, the only adventure of the day came when my wife slipped in crossing a small ice couloir. Alfred, in advance, was ill-placed, and had any strain come on him, the situation might have become critical. As it was I could only brake, not hold her, and her rope was tearing its way through my fingers, when Oscar, standing beside me, added his bear-like grasp to mine, and closed the incident.

By 3.30 P.M. the rocks had become so glacier-worn and smooth that we left them and traversed northwards across the face of the glacier which sweeps down from the summit of the Weissmies. (The rocks we left had, however, been traversed by Signor Allegra in 1901, and M. Kurz, in his guide book, calls our variation across the glacier *pas recommandable*.) In another hour we were down on the Laquin Glacier, and unroped. While eating yet another meal, Oscar remarked, 'Now there are seven routes on the Weissmies, and I have been first man on four of them. I call it my mountain!' At 7.50 P.M., rather to its surprise, we entered the Hôtel de la Poste at Simplon by the back door.

² A.J. I. 135.

Four days later we climbed the Gross Wannehorn by our new ridge, the Herbrigsgrat, and so ended a good season of twelve expeditions. Next year the weather allowed us only one climb, not at Saas ; but in 1933, on August 4, we reassembled at Binn, and began with the Ofenhorn for a training walk. On its summit, Oscar forgot his brass telescope, and his pack, to our secret delight, was correspondingly lightened. Next day we passed to Berisal, bagging the Hüllehorn en route, and boarding the postwagon, slept again at Simplon Dorf. At 3 P.M. on August 6, a perfect Sunday afternoon, we left the hotel for a bivouac, having loaded a porter with borrowed blankets and cooking utensils. It was hot and the path to the Laquintal was steep, but the shadows soon came to our relief, and at 6.30 we halted for the evening. Some day a hut will be built in the Laquintal, and the Weissmies, Laquinhorn and Fletschhorn will be climbed regularly from the Simplon side. At present it is safe to say that of all the thousands who admire these mountains from the Simplon motor-road, not more than five or six people a year make their closer acquaintance. Such is the modern climber's detestation of a bivouac.

We found the boulders which compose the usual *gîte* so fouled by animals that we preferred to sleep out on the grass without head cover. Immediately after supper we retired to our couches and enjoyed the rising of an immense moon over range upon range of shadowy Italy. After midnight a heavy dew fell, and although we were at an altitude of only 2170 m. everyone got rather chilled. At 3 A.M. we breakfasted with chattering teeth and got under way half an hour later in the moonlight. The walking soon warmed us up, and about 7 we began to mount the great avalanche cone of snow and ice below the couloir of the Laquinjoch. We climbed up this as far as we could go, to about 3080 m., and halted on the rocks to the south for a second breakfast. As Alfred was getting water from the couloir, a stone or two sang over his head. He hastily rejoined us, and this was the only rockfall of the day.

Up the rib to the south we scrambled for two-thirds of its height (say 800 ft.) but were then obliged to traverse into the couloir and found it extremely steep. Alfred led magnificently up wellnigh overhanging steps with tiny stances. Every ledge was crowded with loose stones and there was a steady rain of small objects on the last man's head (mine), but during two hours nothing was dislodged that mattered.

One step really seemed to overhang, and after the leading pair had surmounted it, they unroped and let all their rope down to bring up, first the sacks and axes, secondly Oscar, and thirdly myself. Progress was very slow, not more than 200 ft. per hour. About 10 A.M. some boots became visible in the zenith, and we realised a party was breakfasting in the notch. We rather excitedly shouted to them to go away, but with perfect equanimity they settled down to watch us. For nearly an hour we could see them quite close above us. The rocks on our right now began to grow easy, and I yelled to our leader to get out of the couloir, but Alfred was determined to make a direct finish and did.

At long last, between 11 and 12, we emerged on the notch, received congratulations and settled down to lunch. M. Kurz says of our effort, *Ce n'est pas un exemple à suivre*. But really we were in little danger except from our own clumsiness. Including the six old routes mentioned in my second paragraph, we had now completed eight ways in or out of Saas, and a ninth had to be found immediately. Oscar's choice was obvious and appalling.

The guides of Saas have a barbarous idea that any *Herr* with aspirations out of the common should pay his footing by undertaking the ascent of the Dom by the face. Their *Herrschaft* have put up a stout resistance to this theory, nor has the Dom always been willing, so that the guides have not succeeded in bringing the time, the place and the loved ones all together more than about twenty times. According to Oscar it had not been done for six years, and also according to Oscar, it was high time it was repeated lest a good old custom die out.

Certainly some worthy exit had to be contrived to match our entry by the Laquinjoch, so, having engaged two porters to carry blankets, we set out the very next day (August 8) at 11 A.M. for the bivouac. We had a great send-off from the Hôtel du Glacier, and while Fräulein Maria Supersaxo was loading the porters with comforts and kissing my wife, I slipped into her sister's shop and flabbergasted that dame by buying the largest cowbell she had got. In spite of its weight, I packed it into my rucksack.

More libations had to be poured at the 'Gletschergrotto,' and a hearty lunch was eaten on the lower slopes of the Lange Fluh. Then we donned crampons and took to the glacier. None of the party wanted to get overheated, and our procession wound very slowly through the icefall to the bivouac place, which we did not reach till 6 P.M.

I at once set about improving the rather poor accommodation by replacing all the large stones of the floor by small ones. A substantial supper of hot soup, wine, chicken and ham was then eaten and we put on all our garments for the night. At 8.30 another old Saas custom was observed, and we burnt a ghastly Bengal light which was at once answered from the village. The night was pleasantly warm (a bad omen for the coming day), but I don't think anyone slept very much, and at 2.30 A.M., half an hour late on schedule, we started. The first hour was spent on easy rocks, and Oscar delighted me and annoyed the younger members by refusing to hurry. About 3.30 we had snow, and to our disgust found it soft. Then came more rocks, steep and easy, where Alfred and my wife got ahead of us. They soon regretted it. Up above there was a crack and a crashing, smashing noise which rapidly drew nearer. The air filled with flying stones, big and small, screaming as they fell. Like ostriches, Alfred and my wife crouched to avoid the blast. A block as big as a suitcase just missed Alfred's head and landed not three feet from my wife. This salvo was small but very well aimed for they were in the middle of it. All passed in a flash, leaving them shaken but unhurt, and missing Oscar and myself

by a wide margin. We found them sheltering in some rocks to the right of our course, and rather in two minds about going on with the expedition. But to go back was almost as dangerous as to go on; at any rate Oscar and I agreed in saying so.

Hitherto we had ascended directly upwards from the bivouac, but in another hour we should be able to bear to the right across a great ice couloir to the comparative safety of a rib. Nothing was to be gained by delay, so Oscar and I stepped out over the top as jauntily as we could, and our courage was rewarded. No more shots were fired, and we cut across the ice couloir with a deliberation that pained the rope behind us. In the middle of the couloir the thirsty Oscar halted for a good long drink before deliberately cutting our way out up the other side. This so exasperated the pair behind that when their turn came they shot across like comets. We had not been long across when another heavy fall took place, but we were now out of the line of fire. The younger couple resumed the lead and we plodded on. Some sort of screaming conversation now took place between Alfred and a party on the Südlenz-Nadelhorn ridge, but I doubt if either party understood the other. One more stonefall alarmed our leaders, but again the rearguard escaped. I remember making very heavy weather of a crawl under some eaves of ice, and then we began a straight-forward very steep climb on rather rotten rocks. As last man, I can truthfully say those above were very considerate.

For about another hour and a half we continued our upward plod, and then, rather unexpectedly as far as I was concerned, I found the leaders halted below a wall of ice. Scrambling up some loose scree to join them, I found Alfred had traversed to the right and was hewing a tunnel. It was the final cornice of the Dom. Soon a great wedge fell out, and he disappeared inside. Oscar followed, but stuck, and his sack had to be discarded. He shouted to us to put on crampons. My wife went next, pushing the sack before her. She pushed so well that from its open mouth an aluminium flask of absinthe leapt out and rolled glittering down towards Randa. Just as this tragedy occurred I passed the cornice. A few minutes' walk to the left brought us to the signal, and almost immediately an English guideless party arrived from the Festi hut. B. R. Goodfellow, Peter Bicknell and his brother were among them. Such a meeting was welcome and remarkable. I think eight years and fifty expeditions had passed since I had last met A.C. members on the summit of a mountain. Moreover, it hasn't happened again.

I now unloosed my sack, and taking out the cowbell bound it as 'Domglocke' with two cheap watch-chains to the signal. It clanked merrily, but Oscar objected to the ceremony as wasting a good cowbell on the Zermatt or Randa guides!

It was 11 A.M. and we lunched just 24 hours after leaving Saas Fee. Slow time, but the average age of our party was 45 years. Down to the Festi hut we plunged through soft snow, and arrived there extremely tired. In fact we felt rather jaded next morning when we sallied out

to make yet another variation in the way to Saas. We ascended in very soft snow to the gap between the Hohberghorn and the Stecknadelhorn and found the snow on the first-named peak ready to avalanche off. Turning to the right we made our way well up the Nadelhorn before descending to the Windjoch. The weather now became decidedly thundery and our axes hissed with electricity as we bolted down the ridge. By 5 P.M. we reached the Mischabel hut and then ran down to Saas through rain, hail and lightning. Our welcome was great, for Saas was grateful for the revival of the custom of climbing the Dom. According to Oscar it was six years since it had last been done, and, according to the same authority in 1938, our ascent has not yet been repeated.

A garbled version of our adventures flew about the Hôtel du Glacier, and the excitement was increased by the exploits of M. Blanchet on the Dürrenhorn³ next day. But when I heard one old lady declaring to another that in the course of some titanic adventure 'two gendarmes came out, but the third one held!' I felt that fiction was still a long way ahead of truth.

Content with three different routes into and out of Saas in five days, we now broke the rules and descended to Stalden on foot. A night was spent in Zermatt to renew old associations, and on the afternoon of the 16th we left for Italy and Egypt. The 1 P.M. train was so crowded that we had to stand outside the carriage on its end platform. I spent the time as far as Randa talking to the greatest guide of our time, Franz Lochmatter, and his 'tourist' whom I took to be an American. Franz was delighted to hear my wife had done the Viereselsgrat, and they got out at Randa bound for the Weisshorn. Two days later, at Verona, I read of their deaths.

Our Saas game was now interrupted for some years, but in August 1938 the same old gang was mustered and again we slept in a bivouac above Simplon Dorf. This time we repeated the original route of the first conquerors of the Fletschhorn. The route (903 in the *Guide des Alpes Valaisannes*) was unexpectedly easy, and except for the cutting up to and through the final cornice without excitement. Oscar reached Saas the same night, but the rest of us slept like logs in the Weissmies hut.

Next year Oscar dropped out and was replaced in our quartette by Major Bagnold, the Saharan explorer. We made our twelfth way out of Saas by telescoping two good old passes into one. From the popular new hut on the Lange Fluh, we ascended to the Alphubeljoch and thence to the Alphubel itself. It was a beautiful day, July 29, and all the Alps from Dauphiné to the Engadine were arrayed for our inspection. We descended to the Mischabeljoch, and struck straight down the Weingarten Glacier for the Täsch Alp. Presently, to avoid the icefall, we took to a low ridge on our left, and almost immediately were brought to a standstill. Two *rappels* down to the left failed to bring us into practicable country; indeed the ridge fell with us so

³ A.J. 45. 382.

that we found ourselves but little below its crest. So we changed face and tried two more *rappels* down to the right. These brought us to the glacier again. A little more icefall made us rather fretful, but we were determined to dine in the Monte Rosa at Zermatt that night and we did.

We gave our thirteenth expedition little chance to be unlucky for we returned on the 31st over the easy Feejoch. So far, so good ; but I must have boasted on my return about knowing all the passes from A to Z, from Allalin to Zwischbergen, for a cunning A.C. veteran at once wiped our eyes with a highly superior route which I had never thought of. Dr. Longstaff informs me that his party, led by Amandus Supersaxo, on August 3 ascended the Lenzspitze, descended to the Lenzjoch and made not Randa but Zermatt the same night. To repeat that must be our next ambition, and put a worthy end to our peripatetic exercises in and out of Saas.