

ADULA AND OBERLAND : PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

(Continued)

By G. GRAHAM MACPHEE

Read before the Alpine Club, November 6, 1945

WITH my incipient Knubel I set off by train for the Jungfrau-joch next morning with food for a week, so my prospects at last looked rosy indeed. I even forgot that blessed is he who expecteth nothing, for he shall not be disappointed. We arranged that I should lead. I have never been taken up a mountain by a guide. On the rare occasions when lack of other companions has forced me to employ a guide it was always on the understanding that he was to be a companion and I was to lead, so I have probably got a sort of complex about guided climbing. In the present party, I was to be the Don Quixote to his Sancho Panza.

We started on the Trugberg again after lunch. The rocks were again, or still, iced. My Sancho was worried about getting back under such difficult conditions with the possible danger of avalanches and bad weather. I felt he rather lacked the buoyant optimism that is so comforting to a leader in difficult places. However, we pushed on and in spite of the conditions got there and back in $5\frac{1}{2}$ hours. A magnificent sunset completed what seemed an auspicious start.

On Sunday, August 13, we left the Berghaus at 3 A.M. and went over the Obermönchjoch to the Ewigschneefeld. Here Sancho announced that the weather was bad and we should return at once. The report of a loud crack in the ice almost under our feet gave weight to his pessimism. I did not feel happy about continuing with an unwilling second. I felt even worse about turning back. As glaciers move and the ice must crack and since the weather looked to me settled I insisted on going on. We traversed the Gross and Hinter Fiescherhörner and got on to the glacier again, and here I had to find a way down the icefall by a route which looked to me the only feasible one. We reached the Concordia hut at 11 A.M. and spent the rest of the day sunbathing and loafing. The weather was perfect.

On Monday we went up the Grüneckhorn to the Grünhorn, where Sancho said that a storm was imminent and hurried me back to the Concordia hut $5\frac{1}{2}$ hours after leaving it. The weather continued perfect and I felt that his knowledge of local meteorology was not reliable. Even with a pessimistic companion things were improving, and four peaks in two days helped to restore my lost hopes. Three British climbers, whom I knew slightly, visited the Concordia hut on their way to the Jungfrau.

On Tuesday we went up the Aletschhorn by the Hasler rib, a nice climb. Sancho was full of the difficulties and dangers of the route, and in fact I felt rather as if rushing in where angels fear to tread. Again he prophesied bad weather and a storm, so there was no resting on the summit in the sunshine and admiring the views which from the Aletschhorn seemed to be particularly fine. If I insisted on lingering and a storm had come on, it would have made me look silly. On the way down, Sancho, going first, missed the Hasler rib and we went several hundred yards lower before I noticed this.

On Wednesday we left the Concordia hut and went over the Grünhornlücke and across the Walliser Fiescherfirn to the Agassizjoch in three hours. We climbed the Agassizhorn, a mere incident on the fine ridge of the Finsteraarhorn, and lower than some of the points we had taken in our stride a fortnight earlier, but it is a fine viewpoint. On returning to the pass, two figures were descried toiling up the final slopes, a guide and a Herr. The gait of the second seemed familiar. He turned out to be a man whom I met nearly every day at lunch in the club in Liverpool and whom I did not even suspect of being a climber. We joined in a pleasant descent from the Agassizjoch, under good conditions, and so came again to the Strahlegg hut. I had intended trying the seldom climbed, fine long western ridge of the Lauteraarhorn but Sancho would have none of it. He said it had a bad reputation for danger and difficulty and that I did not know the way and so could not go without a guide. He was due for an off day, while I of course wanted to make the most of the fine weather and climb while the sun shone.

Meanwhile the three British climbers who had been at the Concordia hut arrived here, and my luncheon friend very thoughtfully suggested my joining him and his guide. After protracted and delicate negotiations—such things are always delicate—it was planned that I should go up the S.W. ridge of the Schreckhorn with the three new guideless climbers, A, B and C. This would make my third ascent of the Schreckhorn and my second in a fortnight. A new summit would have been more attractive to me, but my newfound companions wanted to do this one and the S.W. ridge appealed to me as a fine climb. Also at the back of my mind were other plans, but these were kept dark for the present. That evening, tales of their previous climbs and of being benighted more than once rather shook my confidence in my projected party.

Our party set off on Thursday, August 17, at 3 A.M. on two ropes consisting of me and B, then A and C. Near the foot of the climb a stone fell. A party below cursed us volubly in French. Whether our rope did in fact dislodge it unnoticed, or whether it fell naturally 'under the imperious behest of gravity,' as Frank Smythe would put it, we could not decide. Fortunately no harm was done. We nevertheless continued our climb somewhat chastened. The rocks were in good condition. We reached the summit $4\frac{1}{4}$ hours after leaving the hut quite oblivious of the fact, of which we were told later,

that this was a record time. A and C arrived a few minutes after us. We did not hurry down, but had other reasons for not waiting too long. Here I started putting my proposal and continued down to the Schreckjoch. Fortunately A, the leader of the second rope, later, alas, to be killed in the war, was my ally and would have changed to my rope if the other two had not ultimately consented to accompany us to the Lauteraarhorn. A led this traverse with C on the first rope, I and B followed. This continuation is a fine ridge and in one stretch seems to 'project frightfully over its base.' We got to the top of the Lauteraarhorn 5 hours after leaving the Schreckhorn. My object now was to descend the long western ridge. I had not yet broken this news to the others. Clouds were gathering long before we reached the top of the Lauteraarhorn and a storm really did seem to be brewing this time. The sun had disappeared. My new suggestion was turned down even by A. I rather agreed with the other three in view of the weather, and did not press my plea.

We came down the ordinary route, which must be one of the most unpleasant in the Oberland, and got on to the Strahleggfirn on the wrong side by about 600 ft. of the Strahleggjoch which now had to be ascended and crossed. The snow on the rocks had melted a lot since my previous crossing seventeen days before. The threatened storm did not come to pass, but I think we were right not to take the considerable risk of being caught by bad weather on a long and reputedly difficult and rotten ridge. We got back to the Strahlegg hut in 4 hours from the Lauteraarhorn and $13\frac{1}{2}$ hours in all after leaving it in the morning, and felt we had had a very enjoyable day. The weather still looked bad, so the other three hurried down to Grindelwald, while I stayed another night at the hut with Sancho. I think it rained during the night. Next day I descended to Grindelwald with him in $2\frac{1}{4}$ hours. We parted in a café. He was entirely satisfied with his part in the proceedings and remarked that this expedition would help him a lot for his future. So we parted the best of friends.

My next occupation was to shop, lunch, and set off with my three companions by the 2.15 P.M. train for the Eismeer station of the Jungfraubahn. It was raining heavily, so the threat of bad weather on the Lauteraarhorn had not been mere imagination. The meteorological outlook was not reassuring to me. We found the descent from the Eismeer station to the glacier quite tricky, and two guided parties, who had got off the mark the moment the train had stopped, left us far behind. The route to the Mittellegi hut is as exposed as if on the roof of a house, the hut being as it were on the roof ridge. Happily the rain soon stopped, but there was of course new snow higher up. The views of peaks seen through moving clouds were most impressive. Nature seemed in an angry mood.

We reached the hut to find the other two parties well established. One of the guides was apparently also the non-resident hut custodian and evidently viewed four guideless climbers with great disfavour. We got bunks near the smoky stove, which events proved was not

wholly disadvantageous. After the rain, it was a stormy-looking evening. We had visions of being marooned in the hut by bad weather, no joke for me. We had a magnificent fruit salad for dinner. Before turning in to bed, we visited the airy platform above the Mittellegi Glacier and looked down the seemingly vertical drop to the lights of Grindelwald twinkling—a bad sign—far beneath us in the valley.

My trusty alarm watch, which had done good service on the Somme and in the Salient, went off at 4 A.M. I leapt out of bed and took possession of the stove to light the fire, before the guides got properly awakened. We made and ate our breakfast under the hostile gaze of the other parties. We could not follow the remarks made in the local dialect of Schweizerdeutsch, but imagined they were not complimentary to us. No doubt in order to get rid of us, they insisted on finishing our tidying up. They perhaps expected us to be slow on the climb.

We left the hut at 5 A.M. The going was quite good. It was said to be the first ascent of the ridge after the bad weather if not even of the season. The fixed ropes were covered with ice. In one or two places the ropes were encased in columns of ice like slender pillars and could be used as belays, although the ropes themselves could not be touched unless the ice was first hacked away. The ropes thus iced were of no assistance, and we did the climb as if they did not exist. The views from the ridge were superb. The bad weather had produced marvellous cloud effects. We reached the summit at 8.15 and the sun came out.

We did not linger long as my train was due to leave Grindelwald at 6 P.M. I felt thankful that the weather had allowed me to do such a fine climb on my last day. Something prophetic seemed to whisper this was to be my last climb, as indeed so far it has proved to be.

It was decided that having led up the ridge I should continue to lead down in order to do the considerable amount of step-cutting that the icy condition of the slope necessitated. I should like to point out that my step-cutting is not good and is only done, like reading a paper, from a sense of duty, or from necessity. With B behind to hold me, we soon outdistanced our second rope. We then found that C did not like our, or rather my steps and was enlarging them all, although he had A behind him to hold him. This delayed us until the guided parties, who were far behind, got to the summit and started the descent. So many stones now began to fall that we were forced to take shelter until the guided parties overtook us. Then we all descended together. With all these delays it was $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours after leaving the summit before we reached the Eigergletscher station. This route down the Eiger seemed foul, with loose stones on sloping ledges, the whole slope like a slag heap. It must be purgatory to ascend. We drank coffee at the station before a train by great good fortune arrived conveniently to take us down to Grindelwald.

There was just time to have a bath, change, pack, have tea, and bid arewell to my kind hosts at the Schoenegg hotel before my train

left at 6 P.M. The other three very kindly came to see me off. By this time the weather had broken. I left Grindelwald in torrents of rain, which rather softened the pain of separation.

It was still raining in Interlaken and very stuffy. After dinner I was lucky enough to get a sleeper to Paris. By this time, Sunday, August 20, the clouds of war were gathering fast. People were hurrying home. I was nearly done out of my seat in the aircraft to London booked weeks before. Only the intervention of my French climbing friend, evidently high up in the French Air Ministry, prevented me from being left behind.

Taking it as a whole, my holiday had not been such a failure as at first seemed inevitable. The awful barrenness of the first three weeks was largely compensated by the wonderful week of fine weather at the end which enabled me to climb nine peaks in six days and altogether fourteen new peaks in the whole twenty-eight days as well as three repetitions, seventeen in all.

And so my last holiday ended as it had begun, and as this meeting will soon end, at the Dorchester.

THINGS BY THE WAY

By GEORGE SALT

Read before the Alpine Club, February 5, 1946

IT can scarcely be denied that a man is rewarded by his recreation in proportion to the ability, the skill, and the interest that he applies to it. In what we, of this Club, consider to be one of the best of recreations, a certain ability, a minimum fitness of body and mind, is essential to success. As mountaineers, we know the value of skill, and have felt the physical joy that springs from a difficulty dexterously overcome. But beyond ability and skill, which are rewarded by attainment and physical content, mountains give back to us in proportion to the breadth and depth of intelligent interest we take to them.

That is no new thought. This Club has had, and has now, eminent members who have brought back from the mountains ideas and observations that have enriched literature, art, and science. They are the giants, and stand apart. But most of us, I imagine, are moved to write lyrically in our notebooks at least once a season, or to try to compose a photograph that shall be a work of art. And we have our private reward. Many of us pretend to a smattering of geology; and although we may not see in this ridge or that glacier what Tyndall would have seen, we see enough to raise a lot of questions—which is the usual end of a scientific observation. Some of us take a flora, and increase our pleasure in finding some high alpine bloom, or enjoy ourselves on an off day in a hunt for rare and beautiful things about the hotel or hut.