

THE DENT BLANCHE FROM THE COL DE ZINAL, 1928 AND 1947

By C. A. ELLIOTT

IT is a truism to say that no climb can be so unlike another climb as the same climb under different conditions, and of this a notable instance is the E. ridge of the Dent Blanche which I first climbed from the Col de Zinal in July 1928 with Franz Lochmatter. At Zermatt this ridge is popularly referred to as the Viereselgrat, a name that ought to be confined to the route of the original ascent of 1882 from the Mountet, which joins the Col de Zinal ridge about 1000 ft. below the top and at a distance of some 500 metres from it. I had read earlier accounts of ice-filled gullies, of double cornices, of burrowings in the heaped snow and of the risks of benightment, but I knew well enough that in the conditions of 1928 most of these horrors would have disappeared. I was not, however, prepared for the ease or speed with which it could be ascended in a very dry season. As to the speed, I felt my first alarm when, shortly after our arrival at the Schönbühl, Franz pointed out to me a note written in the hut book a day or two before by a German party led by a well known Grindelwald guide, which gave what appeared to be a remarkably fast time to the top. 'No racing,' I said to Franz, and Franz agreed, with a slow and, I thought, slightly impish smile, that racing on the hills was a detestable and senseless practice. Nevertheless, as soon as we set foot outside the hut next morning I knew that I was going to be propelled up that mountain as fast as my legs and arms would carry me. At the foot of the Col de Zinal we had to wait 15 or 20 minutes for light and then came the only dubious part of the expedition, for the only way over the bergschrund was on the extreme left where even at that hour stones were occasionally falling from the S.E. face. Once we had crossed the schrund we made off to the right and so up easy rocks, hard snow, and scree to the col.

The following references may be of interest :—

VIERESELGRAT

A. J. 11. 158. First Ascent, by Messrs. G. P. Baker and J. Stafford Anderson, with Ulrich Almer and Alois Pollinger.

A. J. 20. 53. Messrs. Winthrop Young and Mackay, with the brothers Theytaz.

A. J. 24. 627. Messrs. Raeburn and Ling's ascent with an account of the earlier history of the climb.

A. J. 26. 208. Mr. L. W. Rolleston, with Josef Lochmatter and Albert Chanton, in the very dry season of 1911.

A. J. 54. 358. Messrs. P. J. L. Philippson, C. de la V. Poussin, F. de S. de Moranville and O. Roland, with photographs of ridge.

EAST RIDGE FROM COL DE ZINAL

A. J. 34. 482. Messrs. R. S. T. Chorley, M. H. Wilson, and R. B. Graham, with Joseph Georges. Photograph p. 105.

A. J. 35. 290. Mr. E. G. Oliver, with Adolf and Alfred Aufdenblatten.

Above the col rises a buttress which gradually tapers into a ridge and continues in a long succession of towers. But where our predecessors in other years had found ice and cornice we found rock, some of it rotten—especially the rock which in most seasons is not exposed to the air—or *débris*-covered ledges or even short scree slopes. The buttress we climbed by a steep and loose chimney on the right, and the towers that followed it to the junction with the Viereselgrat we either climbed direct or turned on the left. The great red tower which looks so formidable from below had been filling me with certain apprehensions, but as soon as we got near it, it was obvious that it involved nothing more thrilling than a scramble to the left and re-ascent to the ridge on scree or very easy but unsound rock.

When we reached the junction with the Viereselgrat I pointed out very forcibly to Franz that, bar accidents, nothing could prevent us making better time than the Grindelwalder's party, but a short stop for breakfast was all that he would agree to, and we continued in something under two hours to the top. The upper part of the ridge rises very gradually and is broken by a succession of towers, or more often steps having from below the appearance of towers, which we climbed over or turned, usually on the left. Between the towers and steps was bare rock or good snow or once or twice a little ice, with never a cornice to be seen.

Last season, as we all know, was very similar to that of 1928, with even less snow, and I thought that, unless my memory had betrayed me, a repetition of the climb would be amusing without being desperate. Accordingly at 2.45 A.M. on August 18, Hans Brantschen and I set out from the Schönbühl. Again the bergschrund at the foot of the Col de Zinal had to be crossed on the extreme left where there was evidence of heavy peppering with stones from the face above. This time, however, after crossing the schrund, Hans kept to the left and we progressed for a time under the protection of a curious overhanging bulge at the foot of the S.E. wall of the Dent Blanche before making over towards the right. We had a short rest on the col (5.25–5.35 A.M.) and then tackled the ridge, on which the conditions were much the same as in July 1928, except that there was even less snow and no ice. So far as I can remember our route only diverged from that taken by Franz at the big tower immediately above the junction with the Viereselgrat. Here Franz had gone to the left on easy but rotten ground, but Hans thought it wiser to traverse to the right and climb a steep wall with good holds back to the ridge just beyond the highest part of the tower. After a halt for breakfast we reached the top at 9.20 A.M.

We returned at leisure down the S. ridge which brought back memories of my first ascent. That was in 1913 with Rudolf Lochmatter who had recently lost a hand in a blasting accident, and I can

still picture the grace with which he balanced up the rocks of the big gendarme and the neatness with which he wielded his diminutive ice-axe and, above all, his intense joy at once again leading a rope on a great climb. This time at the top of the Wandfluh we met a smiling young man skipping about among the rocks. He turned out to be Franz's only son and Rudolf's nephew, young Franz Lochmatter, who bids fair to be as brilliant a mountaineer and delightful a companion as his father and uncle.

Any readers of the ALPINE JOURNAL who may have progressed thus far may well be asking themselves why this bald narrative, lacking both the psychological analysis of today and even the flea and brandy jokes of yesterday, was ever written or ever published by the Editor. For the Editor I cannot answer, but my reason for writing it is that perhaps it may be of use to some staid climber who may find himself in the Valais in another such dry season. The reputation of the E. ridge of the Dent Blanche is such that its ascent is hardly considered by those who do not seek expeditions of great severity and length, and in most years this reputation is undoubtedly justified. But occasionally it may prove to be a climb neither severe nor unduly long in point of time. On the two occasions of which I have been writing, there was no passage which could conceivably be called difficult (indeed it was only in a very few places that we were not moving together) and it provides what is to me one of the greatest delights of mountaineering—a long high ridge of magnificent architecture presenting constant little problems of route finding and, for the individual, of rope management and of discovering the most economical and rhythmical way of negotiating rise after rise of moderately difficult rocks. I do not forget that the art-concealing art of Franz Lochmatter with his simian ease and of Hans Brantschen with his masterful rhythm must in itself halve the difficulties of any climb. A less competently led party would here and there make a false cast or take a less satisfactory line. But even so, if they knew their business they should not in a really dry season take an outrageously long time in arriving at the top.

In criticism of the route it would be fair to adduce the nasty place at the foot of the Col de Zinal (but in a season like that of 1947 there are few big routes which are entirely safe from falling stones) and the lack of snow or ice to give variety to the ridge. The rock also is none too sound, but there are many ridges which are more rotten, and the need for extra care decidedly adds to the interest.

Let me suggest, therefore, that in a dry season this route loses its terrors and presents an infinity of attractions to the staid mountaineer.