

THE EAST SUMMIT OF DYCH TAU

By M. J. HARRIS

GEORGE BAND and myself had plenty of opportunity to examine the South face of Dych Tau while we were climbing Shkara. This magnificent face is dominated by two buttresses which lead to the two main summits of the mountain. The top of the left-hand buttress, which leads to the highest point, was included in the route taken by Mummery on the first ascent. However, the buttress which leads to the East summit, which is the more well defined and impressive, we knew to be unclimbed, and we were both very attracted by the idea of trying this route.

Back in the base camp after climbing Shkara we talked to the Russians about this possibility ; they made various helpful suggestions and indicated the route down the mountain. The time left for us in the Bezingi region was rather limited, and, after little more than a day's rest after our previous climb, we set off once again up the moraine beside the Bezingi glacier. We passed the last outpost of civilisation at the Missess Kosh, represented by an old shepherd's hut and a few graves, dropped down on to the Bezingi glacier and, at the bend of the glacier, returned to the moraine which we followed to the bivouac site we had used when we were climbing Shkara. Here we found Sir John Hunt's party, who were intending to climb Dych Tau by Mummery's route, and who had left our camp before us. They were intending to bivouac as high as possible on their route and they left making remarks about seeing us on the summit. George and I set off after them and then followed up the glacier leading to the Sella Pass. The lower parts of this proved to be very unpleasant, as it was steep and covered by loose moraine. We eventually stopped at a bivouac site directly beneath our ridge, amongst a pile of large boulders on the glacier. We were about four thousand feet below the summit.

Next morning we set off up easy snow slopes, then via an easy couloir to the beginning of the rocks of the ridge. We were beginning to understand the habits of the weather in the Caucasus by this time ; only after the finest dawns did it fail to snow some time in the afternoon. On this particular morning it was fairly fine which, it was clear, meant that we could expect some snow in the afternoon. After a few hundred feet of preliminary scrambling on quite steep rock we realised that it was high time to put the rope on. From this point onwards to the summit we climbed almost continuously in pitches. We had started on the left-hand side of the ridge and, as all the easier lines led leftwards, we had some considerable difficulty in working up



Photo, George Band]

DYCH TAU FROM SHKARA.

to the crest of the ridge. However, by about mid-day, after several hours of pleasant climbing on excellent rock, we reached the foot of a large steep wall which we had seen before from the other side of the glacier, and which we expected to be one of the main difficulties of the route. The obvious place to attack this wall was towards its left-hand side, where a deep corner was prominently visible. Some very pleasant steep slabs led to the foot of the corner and the first hundred feet of the corner itself went very easily. The last fifty feet, however, were very steep and partly choked with ice. I led off up the pitch and the climbing soon became rather hard. I inserted a piton at this point and stood in an *étrier* from it for some time trying to find holds under the thin ice and unsuccessfully trying to insert more pitons in ice-choked cracks. It was mid-afternoon and, as expected, it began to snow. I began to wonder whether this was the right time to be climbing this particular pitch, but George sounded very cheerful down below. I then tried climbing a little further out of the corner, away from the ice, and, using friction holds, I began to make progress. Soon I landed on a large flat platform at the top, the snow stopped and the sun almost came out. George followed without much difficulty. A new long section of ridge was visible above and we set off up this until, at about six o'clock, we found a reasonably adequate bivouac site, just below the ridge. There was still about two thousand feet of rock above. We had a tent sack with us and, wearing duvet clothing and lying on foam pads, we settled down for the night. With this equipment it was quite comfortable; the only disadvantage we found in this method of bivouacking was in the effects of the condensation inside the tent sack, which made our duvet clothing steadily damper throughout the climb.

Unfortunately the sun did not reach our bivouac site early and, consequently, it was about eight o'clock before we were moving again the next day. This time we were obviously due for a fine day and, but for one unfortunate fact, we should have been able to move together. This was that all the easier climbing on the whole of the ridge was on its western side; consequently the large quantities of snow which had fallen about a fortnight before were still plastering the rock on this side, which had had relatively little sun. The rocks on the eastern side were tantalisingly free of snow, but far too steep. After a long traverse to the left to avoid another steep wall, followed by a long series of very pleasant pitches of up to 'Just Very Severe' standard, we had a most unpleasant time climbing smooth slabs covered with soft snow, to regain the ridge. Another obstacle was becoming increasingly apparent above in the form of a smooth steep gendarme, which appeared smoother and steeper the closer we approached. The rocks on both sides were very smooth and the chances of success seemed very much

in doubt. Once again the only hope seemed to be on the left. I traversed on extremely small holds across the left-hand face of the gendarme and then with some difficulty crossed a narrow icy couloir. A very pleasant slab beyond led to a corner and I was very relieved to see that this looked reasonably straightforward and would take us back to the ridge beyond the gendarme. It was in fact an extremely enjoyable pitch about a hundred feet high and continuously about 'Severe' standard. We arrived on a magnificent platform right on the crest of the ridge. The final tower of the East summit arose straight above us. It was beginning to get dark again and here was a perfect bivouac site. We made a shallow depression in the snow on the ledge, made the usual meat bar soup and were then able to gaze at the whole length of the Caucasus around us as the sun set. The long ridge stretching from Dych Tau to Koshtan Tau, popular with the Russians as a prolonged traverse, was visible to the east, with the distant peaks of Kazbek in the distance; the familiar peaks of Ushba and Elbruz appeared to the west. Directly opposite, stretched the long line of the Bezingi wall and we were just about level with the summits of the wall. More distant peaks appeared beyond them.

Sunlight reached the bivouac site almost as soon as the sun rose above the horizon and we were soon away, traversing up to the left towards a promising looking break in the rocks. Suddenly we came across a piton. We had obviously joined the route taken in the normal traverse along the main ridge. It was a very welcome sight; the only sign of life for the past three days had been one party going up the glacier towards the Sella Pass and the occasional aircraft above. A beautiful hundred-foot pitch followed and we emerged back into the sun on a steep snow slope, which led after one or two short pitches to the summit. The weather was still perfect and we sat for some time in the warm sun before starting the traverse across to the main summit. This descent and reascent of about four hundred feet took us about four hours. On the ascent to the main summit we met loose rock for almost the first time on the climb. The rock on the ridge we had just climbed was excellent granite, it could hardly have been better. We had hoped to find traces of Sir John Hunt's party on the summit, but there were none. This was particularly disappointing as we had hoped to follow their tracks on the descent. We later learned that they had turned back when the weather was bad on the first day.

Time was now becoming really short. We had given a control time, after the usual Russian fashion, which was a mere twenty hours away, so we set off down as fast as possible along the North ridge, aiming to get as low as we could before having to bivouac again. The ridge was mostly snow, very long, with occasional rock steps down which we had to abseil. All that we could remember of the details we had been given

about the descent was that we should turn off the main ridge just before a small rocky outcrop.

Unfortunately we chose the wrong outcrop and, after descending several hundred feet of easy snow slope, we found that there was ice under the snow. Keeping as close to the walls of a rocky rib as possible we tried to reach its crest at various points to examine the far side. It all looked very unpleasant, and rather too late we started to look for a bivouac site again. We eventually settled down in the darkness on a very narrow snow platform. There was very little food or time left and we hardly had any breakfast next morning. We left almost before it was light and restarted the descent of the ice slope which stretched endlessly down towards the glacier. The three methods of descent, abseiling, climbing down the ice in pitches on crampons and climbing down the rocks at the side all seemed to take about the same time. Every few hundred feet we changed the method, eventually, after several hours, we were able to put in an ice piton and abseil over the bergschrund on to the glacier. The time was eleven o'clock and we expected a rapid descent to the Russian bivouac, whence we knew a path descended to the Missess Kosh. The glacier proved somewhat troublesome, for we came upon a further ice slope. Fortunately another ice piton and a long abseil soon took us over a second bergschrund, and we then soon crossed the glacier and reached, thankfully, the Russian bivouac. A long slope of scree and slabs shrouded in valley mist was now the only obstacle and just before reaching the Missess Kosh we were very pleased to meet the rest of our party, who had come out to look for us. We were four hours overdue.

It had been a magnificent expedition. More pleasant, continuous and interesting climbing could hardly be imagined. But there was also a certain impression of over-seriousness. In a party of two, in particular, one occasionally felt very vulnerable and remote from contact with the rest of the world. No wonder the Russians have elaborate safety regulations. But in spite of this one felt that here, perhaps, was mountaineering at its best and that it was all well worth the trouble and effort to find it.