

NARROW ESCAPES

BY G. O. DYHRENFURTH

(Translated by Hugh Merrick)

I HAVE been a climber since I was a small boy. It is not a far cry for a geologist to become a climber, but I affirm that for me the sequence was reversed; I was a climber first, without any excuse or motive to cloak my activity. I went to the hills because I loved them and they gave me the greatest joy in the world. It was through my passion for the mountains that I later became a geologist, geographer, skier, photographer, and a climber and historian of the Himalaya.

Here, in the retreat of my later years on the shore of Lake Brienz, I can look back on literally hundreds of climbs, among them many first-ascents and new routes—most of them guideless, a practice thought dubious half a century ago—and mostly as leader on the rope. An overwhelming majority of those climbs ‘went’ without incident and according to plan, but such a long climbing-life could not be entirely free from serious mishaps and unforgettable moments of high drama. It is not as a sensation-monger that I am now recalling a few such experiences. The simple fact is that the fairest flowers grow at the edge of the abyss.

I. POINT OF NO RETURN

I had long been attracted by the fine pyramid of Piz Kesch (11,227 ft.). I wanted to do it not by the ordinary route but by the East ridge, including the traverse of the Kesch Nadel (11,116 ft.). One evening in the autumn of 1913, after some splendid climbs in the Bernina group, I went up to the Kesch Hut from Bergün with my Viennese friend Albrecht Spitz. When I asked the guardian, a weather-beaten ex-guide, about the condition of the climb, he mumbled some obscure ‘Schwyzerdütsch’ into his beard. I only caught the last few words: ‘You’ll see for yourselves.’ All right then, we would go and have a look.

We tramped across the Porchabella glacier to the Fuorcla d’Eschia in the first light of dawn. The weather was fine though cold, with a keen ‘Bise’ blowing, as so often at the end of September. The nearer we got to the Nadel, the more menacing it looked. We had virtually no idea of the correct route, but that didn’t bother us over much. ‘Let it all come as a surprise—it’ll go all right!’ we said.

Just above the Fuorcla d'Eschia we took to the rocks and made our way easily enough straight up the crest of the ridge, using the fine holds in its good granite. A step in the ridge caused us no great delay and we reached a shoulder, an inviting spot for a short breather. Soon the angle increased rapidly, till the ridge became a huge vertical pillar, sweeping up to the top of the Nadel in three great leaps. These produced three fairly airy terraces, the last of which ran across to the summit.

In normal conditions it would have been a fairly difficult but highly enjoyable bit of climbing, with the possibility of turning the worst places on the ridge to one side or the other. Now, in this autumn of 1913, the slabs were covered by a thin veneer of ice, on which lay some fresh snow, and the steep intervening steps, on which no snow was lying, were running with water from the melting snow and ice. We were committed to a bitter struggle.

Clearing away the snow and using our ice-axes to winkle tiny holds, just big enough for the tips of our fingers and two points of our crampons, out of the ice-glaze, we slowly gained height. There followed one rope's length after another of tough, dangerous work, as hazardous as any I have ever done in all my mountaineering. The rope which joined me and my companion no longer had anything to do with our mutual safety; it only dictated our mutual fate.

The most uncomfortable part was the continual interchange of the kind of glazed slabs on which crampons are a 'must' and vertical rock-pitches which called loudly for 'Kletterschuhe.' We would have been very glad to beat a retreat, but we had long since forfeited any freedom of choice. There was obviously no future in any attempt to climb down; we had to go on up, come what may. The decision was taken in the one short consultation we held. After that we spoke no unnecessary words, saving them for vital directions on the rope. We were fighting for our lives with all the will and skill at the disposal of two experienced climbers.

We had got across the second terrace and were once again at grips with steep rock, clear of snow but dripping wet. Ten feet separated me from the beginning of the third terrace, but they were ten feet I couldn't manage, consisting of a slab of alarming steepness down which the melting waters came cascading. My sodden 'Kletterschuhe' (we wore the old 'Sexteners' with cloth soles in those days) would no longer grip; my numbed fingers had long gone on strike. And I had omitted to knock in a piton or two and to snap-link the rope to them where I should have, at a point a little way back.

I looked down at Albrecht, glued to the icy slabs 60 ft. below. The second terrace broke away down there into the void. I wondered whether we were going to go hurtling out over it. Then, about 15 ft.

to my left, I spotted a flattish groove and shouted down to my companion: 'I'm properly stuck. You have a go about 15 ft. to my left. Be quick, and go carefully, because I can't give you any protection!'

Albrecht summed the situation up and was on the move in a flash. I never saw him go better. Soon he was on a level with me, the rope hanging between us in a gentle curve. Then he reached the start of the third terrace and began to cut the first tiny steps in its ice. Presently he was 30 ft. above me. Now at last there was tension on the rope. Albrecht's *tour de force* had saved us in the nick of time.

We moved on a rope's length. The slope began to ease, the layer of snow grew thicker and more reliable, and as the cairn on the Nadel loomed up, we shook hands.

After the strain of the last six hours, the traverse of the ridge to the main summit of Piz Kesch seemed a mere stroll. We sat up there in the warm sunshine, letting our gaze wander out across the lovely, familiar panorama of the Grisons ranges. The pillar of the Kesch Nadel stood dark and menacing against the gentle green meadows of the Engadine below. Then we trudged down the ordinary way to the Kesch Hut.

The old hut-keeper greeted us and expressed his astonishment that anyone could have traversed the Nadel safely in such iced-up conditions. I countered with the question: 'Why didn't you tell us so in the first place?' All he said was: 'Well, I thought you would turn back when you saw what it looked like.'

2. TOO LITTLE ROPE

We had had some wonderful weeks in the Dolomites. We had a string of fine climbs in the bag—the Vajolet, Schlern and Sella Towers, the Langkofel, from the North, the Fünffingerspitze, traversed in cruciform, the South face of the Grohmannspitze, the traverse of the Innerkofler Tower and the Zahnkofel, the Adang Chimney on the Grosse Tschierspitze and a number of other 'fashionable' climbs. My partner was Toni Sauseng, one of the great Austrian rock-climbers. We made a perfectly balanced pair and both of us were at the top of our form.

In the Grödner Dolomites, at the Regensburg Hut, a friend enthused about the traverse of the two Fermeda Towers and handed us a short written description of the route. So off we went.

The Gross Fermedatum, (9,406 ft.), by its long South-east ridge, is a glorious climb and we made short work of it. The descent into the Fermeda ravine to the west looked so harmless that we scrambled happily down into it, unroped and chattering cheerfully. There we found an overhanging pitch barring our downward way. We took a look at our written note, which read: 'Best to rope down the rock-face,

about 45 ft.' There too was a rope-ring for our purpose. I quickly threaded a 100-ft. rope through it and gave the ends a great heave over the edge. Toni, however, wasn't too keen on it; he preferred the blandishments of a narrow chimney. 'All right,' I said. 'You take your chimney. I'll rope down. It's quicker.'

Out I swung into empty air using the time-honoured friction-technique, over thigh and shoulder. After about 35 ft. I thought: 'You ought to be down anytime now'. I looked down, and caught my breath. There were both ends of the rope swinging free, some 30 ft. above the ledge I had to reach. In other words the length of the Abseil was not 45, but more like 75 ft. My rope was that much too short! What was I to do now?

My first thought was to slide down to the end of the rope and jump. The objection was that when I landed on the precipitous ledge I should probably break my legs, go rolling down and then fall to the bottom. For the ledge was extremely narrow and there was a great deal of the face below it.

My second idea was to climb up the rope again. There again, it was obviously impossible to surmount the bulge of the overhang.

I steadied myself and had a good look round. In front of me, at about the level of my chest, there was a ledge about six inches wide. If I could get my feet onto it. I would at least have gained time. So I heaved myself up on the rope with every ounce of my strength till I managed to plant my Kletterschuhe on that ledge. This gave me a breather and a chance to do a little thinking.

I looked for Toni. There he was, about ten paces to my right, worming his way down his overhanging, mossy chimney. I put him in the picture in a few well-chosen words. For a moment even Toni, of the iron nerves, was badly shaken; but he soon recovered his composure. 'Take it easy,' he said. 'We'll soon straighten things out.'

We had a council of war. The tiny ledge on which my feet were resting, ran across to Toni's chimney, but it could not be used for climbing, for it was narrower than one's hand and the smooth overhanging cliff above it bulged fiercely outwards. It was not for nothing that Toni was known as one of the best gymnasts in Austria and fantastic on rock. He slid out of his chimney like a cat and, hanging from the ledge, made his way as far as humanly possible in my direction. That brought him to within about 15 ft. of me. Meanwhile, clinging to the Abseil rope with my left arm, I had pulled the free ends of the rope up to me and made loose loops in them. Then I threw them over towards Toni like a lasso. The first two attempts failed, but he caught them the third time. Taking the ends of the ropes between his teeth, he climbed back into his chimney, where he jammed himself like a wedge of iron and drew the rope taut. That gave me a handrail, which

enabled me to traverse over to him with my feet pressing on the ledge.

'Not so good!' we agreed. And while I was fetching down the Abseil rope by pulling on one end, Toni remarked grimly: 'What a clot to write 45 instead of 75. He deserves a knock on the head!'

'How right you are,' I said. 'No excuse at all. But I wasn't so clever either. I should have made absolutely certain that my rope went the whole way down.'

That was the end of our troubles. We climbed on down into the Fermeda Ravine and completed the traverse of the 9,186 ft. Klein Fermedatum.

3. THE FALL

The Drusenfluh (9,301 ft.) in the Rätikon, to the north of the Prätigau, is a tough peak. In 1921 I had climbed it from the Lindauer Hut, with a not very experienced partner, and I wanted to make the descent by the 'Ostweg' to the Eistobel. The route is rated as difficult and is not easy to find, particularly when descending.

We had done a good two-thirds of the climb down. I had lowered my partner over a rather nasty pitch and wanted to rope down after him. So I tied a loop of line around a firm block, as I had done hundreds of times before, drew the rope through it and round my thigh and over my shoulder. Then I pushed off over the edge . . . and suddenly found myself falling through thin air. The sling of line had broken!

The story goes that on such occasions the whole of one's life flashes through one's mind like lightning. I was only terribly astonished. How could such a thing happen? The sling was perfectly tied; how could it have broken?

Then I landed with a crash. My right foot grounded first, then I fell forwards on my face and on my right hand. I might easily have rolled on down and gone plunging into the Eistobel. My partner may not have been a good climber, but now he at least displayed presence of mind. He grabbed me and held me fast.

I hadn't fallen more than 25 ft., but was bleeding from numerous flesh-wounds. I had hurt my right hand pretty badly and, most uncomfortable of all, torn the ligaments under the arch of my right foot. I could hardly put my foot to the ground. So great was my nervous tension that at first I felt hardly any pain. I got my first-aid case out of my rucksack and applied my own emergency bandaging.

The Eistobel was still some 500 ft. below. I had to get there, and I did. Then, supported on two ice-axes, I dragged myself through the 'Hidden Cwm' back to the Lindauer Hut.

Next day they carried me down to Schruns in the Montafon, an unpleasant experience. Back in Zürich a capable surgeon sewed me together again. It all healed well and a year later I was back in the hills.

What was the real explanation of the mishap? Probably this: I had a small flask of hydrochloric acid in my trunk; we geologists often use it to measure the limestone content of rock samples. Apparently the stopper of the bottle was not absolutely tight. The sharp vapour from the acid had rotted my hank of line which lay beside the bottle; when the heavy call of an Abseil came upon it, it just broke. A ridiculous little oversight, which nearly cost me my life.

More recently, quite new slings have been known to give way because nylon, or similar plastic ropes, while their breaking-strain is high, are very vulnerable in high temperatures and on sharp edges, owing to the heat engendered by friction.

4. JONGSONG PEAK

On June 8, 1930, we left Camp 4, our high camp at 21,227 ft. and climbed this frontier peak, in the angle between Sikkim, Nepal and Tibet. The summit of this great peak consists of paleozoic limestone, very much like the upper part of Everest. Busy with my geological observations, I and Lewa, my orderly, were left behind the rest of the party and it was not till half-past four in the afternoon that we reached the main summit (24,510 ft.). After a couple of minutes spent in rapt and silent contemplation of near-by Kangchenjunga, the Everest group in the distance and the view far out over the brown plateau levels of Tibet, we started down.

The others had already embarked on the descent, but I still wanted to go over to the slightly lower East Summit, called the Domo (24,416 ft.).¹ I hurried across, leaving Lewa on the main summit. The snow crest was wide and apparently quite safe. Then, suddenly, the floor gave way beneath me. . . . Quicker than thought, I spread my arms out and went down, chest-deep. 'Slap into a summit-crevasse like the rawest novice,' was my half-spoken comment, 'and all through rushing it!' I took another look into the greenish-blue abyss beneath me and gingerly edged my way out backwards. Then I proceeded without any further mishaps to the East Summit, where I took a look around, before hurrying back—as quickly as one can at such an altitude—to the main summit to rejoin Lewa, whose teeth were chattering with cold.

We started down at about 5.30, committed to a race with the night. When darkness fell we were still only half way down the face; the moon's light was of no avail, for our side of the mountain, was in shadow. The

¹ Professor Dyhrenfurth informs me that the latest S. of I. height for the Jongsong Peak is 24,416 ft. but it has been established by MM. Marcel Kurz and H. Bossart that this refers to the lower East peak, or Domo. According to the calculations of M. Bossart the height of the main summit is 7,473 m. (24,518 ft.), with a maximum error of + or - 3 m.—D.F.O.D.

wind grew fresher, driving thick clouds of snow dust on its breath. A layer of powder-snow on the rocks made climbing abominably difficult. In a moment of carelessness I had mislaid my fur-lined flying helmet; my head-scarf, balaclava and a cloth of Lewa's were slender protection against the grizzly cold. On top of that, we were worn out—after all, we had climbed over 3,000 ft., I had been along the summit ridge and back, and now the descent in unfavourable conditions was taking its toll. My heart packed up every few steps. We had taken a small supply of oxygen with us, but it was all used up. There was nothing for it but to press on. 'Go on!' I urged Lewa, 'Go on!'

The snow-clouds thickened, it grew darker and darker, but somehow we felt our way downwards, on the exact route of our ascent, with the experienced climber's sure instinct. Suddenly, we found ourselves sitting on a small rock platform, close above the gentle safety of the snowfields. It had seemed unlikely for some hours past; but we had done it, after all. We stumbled down the slope to the North Saddle, under which Camp 4 lay sited. On the saddle, we looked back for the last time. The snow clouds were still driving across the face; above them, Jongsong Peak soared unbelievably high into the star-studded heavens.

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My little glance over the years has awakened nostalgic memories of many a fellow-climber, now gone from among us—Albrecht Spitz, Toni Sauseng, Ulrich Wieland, Frank Smythe, George Wood-Johnson and foremost among so many splendid Sherpas, Chettan and my brave, loyal Lewa. I salute them all.