THE NORTH FACE OF THE SCHERMBERG IN WINTER[1]

By KARL LUGMAYER

(*Translated by Hugh Merrick*)

I grew up near the old iron-working town of Steyr in the fertile foothills south of the Danube. In the Steyr valley, straight out of the woods, to whose lower rim the cornfields stretch up in summer, rises a mountain range which has had me enthralled ever since I first discovered it as a lad. Its silvery-grey rocks thrust up for more than 3,000 ft. in a mighty wall. It starts with the regular pyramid of the Kleine Priel, and continues through the Grosse Priel, to whose immediate right a sharp peak goes winging skywards; and from it a wall plunges sheer for more than 3,000 ft.—the magnificent North face of the 8,000 ft. Schermberg. In the clear, plastic air of Föhn conditions every spike, every ledge can be clearly seen. It was those white limestone masses which, according to the season of the year, can shine invitingly a silvery blue, or white with snow, or glower dark and menacing, or again impress the eye with their regal purple—it was they which awakened my passion for the great hills with their massive rocky teeth. And though I have since come to know many great mountains all over the world, my affection for those boyhood peaks has never waned, nor have they suffered any diminution of stature and beauty. The Schermberg still holds my gaze to-day.

I was twelve when I first came near to it on a school outing. I came out of the dark green shadow of pine-woods, to be dazzled by the huge blue face of a rock-wall—the North face of the Schermberg.

Later, the clear silver sheen of the precipices of the Totes Gebirge, and of the Schermberg in particular, in winter, made an ambitious winter-climb seem even more desirable. It is in such winter-climbs that we find new ground, adventure, hardship, tough struggle and danger all combined. It is the very element of snow and ice on the ledges, in the gullies and chimneys, which gives a mountain that 'something', which invests

[1] The Schermberg (8,040 ft.) in the Totes Gebirge boasts a North face about 4,600 ft. high. It is not only the great 'Wall' of the Totes Gebirge themselves, but one of the highest faces in the Eastern Alps. Between December 30, 1950, and January 1, 1951, Karl Blach and Karl Lugmayer made the first winter ascent of the difficult 'Linzer route' in a long struggle lasting nearly three days.

it with a quality of newness and greatness. 'Something' which makes it worthwhile and indeed mandatory to get to grips with it. Away with obstacles; this is the beauty of climbing!

For in winter we are all out to invite all the difficulties, the cold, the snow, the ice, the shortness of the day—everything we try to avoid in summer. It is these very trials and tribulations which go to make for exceptional experiences. And the North face of the Schermberg seemed a very suitable choice for such an experience. Of course such a serious and demanding climb calls for considerable grounding in every branch of mountaineering skill. By then, we reckoned we had acquired the necessary qualifications.

The first time a friend and I approached that great face a stormy wind was driving black clouds up the Almtal, and everything was blotted out. Our venture would have been both senseless and dangerous. A year later, on New Year's Day we were back again; on the lower part of the face we had to deal with considerable masses of snow, which made things very difficult. Once again, we realised that the weather was deteriorating, even while we were at it, and as we withdrew, avalanches of powder-snow gave us a great deal of trouble. So I had been foiled again.

However, the face gave me no peace, and a year later I was at grips with it again. This time I went on skis across the 'Ring', by which one crosses from the Steyr valley into the Almtal. My partner intended to join me next day, coming up the Almtal and meeting me at the Almtaler hut, which is not manned in winter.

Late in the evening of the second day of Christmas, I passed by the hunter's lodge on the Bernerau with a heavy pack on my back. It was a bright, clear night; so I did not turn aside, but skied on into the dark woods, where I was able to watch some forty stags, does and chamois at their nightly feeding-place. Barred from their peaceful company, I went gliding past and reached the hut about midnight.

It was my intention to reconnoitre the conditions at the base of the wall until my friend Karl Blach arrived, but the mists which descended thickly on the valley during the course of the morning prevented my even getting a footing on the face. I waited a day and it seemed a very long one; Karli was supposed to come in the evening, but I waited in vain. The weather looked very unpromising to me—maybe that was what was delaying him. On the second day I was getting somewhat worried. When the third came round, I decided to wait till mid-day. I was just on the point of leaving a note for him and going, when I heard him shout a greeting from the woods at long last. He had not been delayed by the weather after all; it was simply that he hadn't been able to get leave sooner. He was in fact able to report that the weather forecast was excellent and the mist was confined to the valley levels.

After a satisfying lunch—he had brought some fresh meat with him—we made tracks up through the wintry woods. We could only see the very lowest part of the wall. The easy slabs and ledges, which in summer lead up to the prominent larch-tree where the climb begins, now presented a formidable ice-barrier. Since the previous week's thaw, it had turned really cold. Great balconies of ice and whole galleries of icicles were visible in the crannies and gullies in the rock and below the huge overhangs. Our idea was to prepare this first obstacle for the following day, pushing on as far as the great gully, but turning back, whatever happened, two hours before sunset. As Karli started up those ice-glazed rocks, I said 'I'll be happy if we get up to the larch in the time.' He scrabbled about for a while, then with some difficulty traversed out to the right, mostly on pure water-ice. I had to wait more than an hour before he found a stance where he was able to get a long ice-piton into the hard-frozen grass, with much labour and after hacking away the ice. My climbing boots with special soles enabled me to take a more direct line as he belayed me up. The whole place looked like a huge frozen waterfall. Icicles as thick as one's arm even gave one support for delicate balancing. Indeed, as on all really difficult climbs, the whole thing became a question of balance. We decided to continue traversing in the gully, then ploughed our way forward along a ledge—here there was deep, unstable powder-snow on tricky polished ice—avoided a couloir with several ice-overhangs in it and by three o'clock, in spite of everything, reached the larch-tree. We only took a glance at the way ahead, as far as the mist allowed. The narrow, rising ledges, ultimately leading to the traverse of the great gully, were heavily laden with snow, but we were by now far more confident. So we just climbed down the gully, danced gaily down over the ice-overhangs, and skied down quickly, to reach the hut before dark.

We cooked, roasted, baked and ate—stocking up, as it were—for we had no idea when we would get our next square meal. We packed our rucksacks by candlelight. Would the obstinate mists give us trouble? Well, we should see. We went to sleep full of confidence, determined to get all the sleep we could beforehand, not knowing where we should spend the next night.

In the morning, there was still plenty to do, for the hut had to be tidied. In the end we got away, armed with a huge additional tea-flask, heavily sugared, and made our way up through the woods for an hour. As the trees thinned out, daylight came. The mist lay a little higher than on the previous day, but the face was still effectively hidden from view. Near the last pines we stowed our ski and I also left my heavy boots, as I had decided to climb in my light 'kletterschuhe,' for which I had brought along special crampons.

With these light crampons I felt quite safe on the ice-overhangs in

the couloir which we had avoided yesterday. I climbed a lovely chimney, not forgetting to fashion a few extra hand and footholds to enable Karli, who had no crampons, to come up quickly.

At the larch, which we reached this time in little over an hour, we took a first swig from our huge thermos, then moved up over icy hummocks of grass towards the rock-ledges, where the ascent to the first ledge proved harder than we had expected. Brittle rock with few holds revealed itself under the layer of powder-snow, as I worked my way up, on scratting and grating crampons, crawling along the ledge, pushing my rucksack ahead of me, digging my hands deep into the unexpectedly loose snow, on which I felt just as if I were swimming. However, there were places where it was firm enough to provide handholds, but only when one was on safe footholds. Here we took a short rest in a little niche, emptied the heavy thermos and left it behind.

Karli now traversed into the gully. It was a dicey piece of work, a kind of giddy dance, before he disappeared from my intently watchful gaze. The rope ran through my hands very slowly and I could hear the strokes of his axe as he cleared his holds of ice. When I came round the corner after my long wait I saw that the lower section of the gully narrowed to a chimney, which I was able to surmount quite quickly. Then I went hard at it on firm avalanche-snow up to the steep bed of the gully. I was able to dig my twelve-pointers more firmly into the snow till my whole boot was almost buried. This provided quite useful steps for my partner who was able to follow me fairly quickly. After two more rope's-lengths the snow became soft again and we stamped our way up, moving simultaneously. When I took the lead again and finally traversed out to the right to the great buttress from the gully, which by now overhung with fantastic roofs of rock, I found myself going in up to my hips. The work became hard and dangerous as the texture of the snow changed again, where the wind had caked it; and I had to beat a way through it, because underneath lay treacherous, small-grained snow-broth.

The slabs, usually so easy, called for endless niggly labour. Every hand and foothold had to be cleared of snow. Karli took over the lead again and sweated his way up a chimney-like fissure, while I waited and froze. Before I followed him up, I took off my crampons. By the time I reached Karli I too was quite warm again. He continued in the lead up the buttress we were now climbing, for he was already familiar with it in summer conditions. When things were not too difficult we moved at the same time, on the short rope, for considerable distances. The rocks were mostly covered with loose powder-snow and, as dusk drew on, a few snow-flakes fell softly from the mists.

The upper part of the 2,300 ft. buttress provided unexpected difficulties. As I waited, the cold was so fierce that I even forgot to admire the

marvellous frost-formations on the rock. I kept on hopping from one foot to the other, while the sound of an axe striking on rock sounded lightly down from above. Every now and then came a shout of 'Stones!' whereupon sizeable lumps would come thundering down. Then suddenly, the mists seemed to part and, as I looked up, I could see the dark silhouette of the summit wall with the sun's last rays touching it; and above it the first star was shining bright. Then the mist closed in again. It was nearly an hour since my friend had moved up overhead and now he was explaining that he needed more rope. There was nothing for it but to climb up towards him, so I went up on brittle downward-sloping stuff, testing every stopping-place with the utmost care. At last Karli found a stance and said I could come on up. Climbing rather further to the left than he had, I was surprised how quickly I made ground, although it was getting dark; and when I finally joined my partner, the fog lifted properly at last and the whole summit wall was revealed in its entirety. But we had no time as yet to enjoy its beauty. Karli, in his haste, had forgotten to put on his mittens when he took in the rope a little while back; and I had to massage his ice-cold fingers with grease till they began to hurt him.

On we went up a corniced arête—the snow reflected just enough light—till we found a suitable spot for a bivouac. We had succeeded in disposing of two-thirds of the face's height on our first day. Our feeling that the weather was set fair, in spite of the mist, was confirmed, and we had every reason to be happy and relaxed.

We hollowed out a kind of flat sitting place in the snow and arranged a cooking-place with bits of rock from near by. The first thing, however, was to massage Karli's hands again. Then we unpacked our treasures from the rucksacks. We took our boots off, put them straight into the sleeping-bags to prevent their freezing solid, and then followed them inside. All of this was done under the protection of the tent-sack. While I was giving the petrol-cooker a preliminary warming against my body, we had our first chance of admiring the lovely night. The fog had sunk a little and, as far as we could see, a cloud-sea, glittering bright in the moonlight, lay spread far and wide below us. Gradually, a few tops broke through; the crenellated Kremsmauer to the east, the Kasberg, the summit of the Traunstein and, far to the north-west, the Feuerkogel with its brightly-lit hotel. Countless stars glittered high above it all. It was indescribably beautiful and our happiness knew no bounds.

Soon the petrol-cooker was working and we were washing down the Christmas cake we had brought along with hot ovomaltine. By now a great weariness had fallen upon us, and soon we pulled the comfortable sleeping-bags over our heads, to sleep, huddled close together, almost unbrokenly far into the bright morning.

It had become piercingly cold and we hated leaving our warm sleeping-

bags. We packed up hastily, decided there was no time for breakfast, and set to work on the next rock-tower straight from our bivouac place. That soon warmed me up, although I had to clear away a lot of snow. And so we moved up towards the summit-wall over horrid, deep snow-slush, across little islands of rock heavily glazed with ice, and steep, hard-frozen, wind-swept rubble. Karli had to leave his rucksack with me, as he went up the steep rock, lucky to be able to keep warm while it was my turn to freeze again. And yet, with the very act of roping the rucksack up on the spare line, I was soon warmer than I cared for.

Now it was my turn to lead again. There is an oblique crack running to the left up the wall at this point. It is probably not very difficult in summer, but now it was tricked out with bone-hard snow. I was held up by an overhang right at its start. There was a piton sticking out, but I knocked a second one in before daring to trust my weight to it, for the footholds were entirely glazed with ice. I had to make every handhold in that crack serviceable by banging it first with my fingers. As we were roping the rucksack up, one of our axes came to life and went hurtling down the whole of the immense summit-gully.

Karli next tackled a 30-ft. dièdre, at the top of which he found no good belaying-place, so I had to move up a bit, till at last he did find one and I could rejoin him. Here we came upon the 'Climbing Book', hanging from a piton in a metal cassette, and Karli entered the first winter ascent of the 'Linzer route'. On we went on bone-hard snow, more like ice, in a shallow groove, which merged into a crooked overhanging chimney, one of its walls consisting of rock, the other of ice. In it we made wonderful progress, backing and splaying upwards in fine style, till a projecting roof brought us to a halt. We traversed back to the right, jammed one arm in a crack to surmount a detached block, and finally reached a ledge. But darkness had suddenly fallen; to climb any further on this steep and difficult terrain would be sheer folly.

So we had to bivouack a second time, on a small pulpit with a magnificent view below it. This time it was not so comfortable. We had to hack a sitting-place and a step for our feet out of the heavy covering of snow and ice. All our equipment had to be fastened to numerous pitons and we too had to be tied on, otherwise everything would certainly have gone down into the depths. We also tried to hang the tent-sack up, but the pitons refused to arrange themselves where we wanted them. The unused part of the rope served as a seat, but the heat given off by our bodies made the snow and ice so smooth and slippery that we were continually sliding off. Any unpremeditated movement could mean disaster.

We balanced the cooker on our drawn-up knees. Trusting to a successful completion of the climb next day, we ate the rest of our provisions (though they were intended to last several days) at one go,

and drank a strong brew of Nescafé. We felt fine and our appetite was so good that we got through a whole tin of fatty ham.

It was New Year's Eve. The weather was lovely and promised to stay so. A keen wind blew snow down on us, but we only heard its rustling on our tent-sack. The cooker generated the very heat of hell and the petrol-fumes stung our eyes. Whenever the cooker had to be relit, I played about patiently with my lighter, which I had always taken along since my experience with damp matches when bivouacking on the Eiger. Time passed tediously slowly, and we kept on looking at our watches. And once, for a change, we even stood up. The mists had cleared away completely and we could see a light at the hunting lodge on the Bernerau, could even hear occasional sounds coming up. And over there, at the Feuerkogel hotel, there were actually rockets showering out into the night sky. The new year had begun! So we quickly warmed a new brew of coffee in which to drink its health. We hacked out a new platform, laid the sleeping-bag on it and used it from then on simply as a cushion to sit on. I put on my 'kletterschuhe' and crampons so as to have more room to spread my limbs. Karli had the rucksack for his feet, and then we pulled the tent-sack over our heads again. We brewed coffee incessantly till morning came, and used up almost the whole of our sugar supplies. Half a loaf and a little pouch with matches and torch-batteries in it had long since been swept away down the face.

As soon as it was light enough, I started off on the day's work, searching the glazed slabs desperately for holds; and though every yard had to be fought for, the upward urge and joy of climbing were so strong that I was able to move up by the most delicate balancing processes. Then Karli had a tough struggle with a heavily iced chimney, packed with snow. At every belay my wet boots froze solid, then thawed out again after the next few movements. Now we knew we were not far from the summit, for the wind began to blow thick banners of snow down on us every now and then. Several times I was on the verge of falling asleep, and the cold had me whimpering like a small child. Karli refused to act as second any more, for fear of nodding off during the periods of waiting.

At the foot of the last crack I had to wait an absolute eternity. Drifting snow buried me to the knees and, when at last I was able to move up, the gusts were so strong that I had to close my eyes against the blown snow.

Then, suddenly, we were clear of that gigantic North face, and stretching before us lay the sunlit snow-levels of the high plateau crowning the Totes Gebirge. There was the snow-slope swinging up to the Grosse Priel, the Spitzmauer and, further to the south, but quite near, the shining head of the Dachstein.

We ran up to the summit of the Schermberg over snow-cornices. At exactly 2 p.m., in cutting cold and a howling wind, we entered our

successful climb in the summit-book. Once again we wished each other a happy New Year and then turned to race down, sometimes on hard compacted snow, at others up to our chests in loose powder, more or less by the normal route, to the bottom of the face, where we had left our ski.

Karli went home through the Almtal the same evening. At noon next day I stood again, alone, on the 'Ring' and let my gaze wander over the shining silver of the face. It had been the fulfilment of a dream.