

Bernina Bummel

B. Wilberforce Smith

The deserted streets and alleys of Sils Maria in May provided a striking contrast to their winter appearance, for surely only slightly deranged members of the Alpine Club or Alpine Ski Club would go there at such a time. Some months before, our two Clubs had decided to hold a Combined Meet. Our numbers finally dwindled to three—all of us members of both Clubs. I recalled the advice of Dr Longstaff when consulted about the best size for an expedition. After some thought he replied: 'I suppose you could call three a large expedition . . . and one would constitute a small expedition'. So there we were, a large meet—Richard Brooke, Ivan Waller and myself. We had planned to spend about twelve days exploring the glaciers of the Bernina on ski, climbing whatever peaks presented themselves, of which there is a profusion.

We were lucky to find the Post Hotel open, for this is the time of year when hoteliers take their holiday. For our training climb, we had chosen Piz Fora, an undistinguished peak at the head of the Fextal, which would, however, stretch our legs and provide us with a view of the following day's route over the Fuorcla Fex-Scerscen. It certainly stretched our legs, and Ivan and I enviously watched Richard's back steadily drawing away from us along the final ridge. The route to Fuorcla Fex-Scerscen seemed straight-forward, except for a steep step dividing the Fex glacier from the Tremoggia glacier above.

A long run in varied snow took us back down the Fextal, its friendly and fertile pastures covered with spring flowers, in contrast to the wild barrenness above. Past the little chapel in Crasta, with its memorial stone to Christian Klucker, we descended to Sils. There we learned that the inn was due to close next day: come what might, we would have to move on to the Marinelli hut.

Next morning at four o'clock, we climbed quietly out of the dining-room window. Low oily clouds held a threat of rain; but as we climbed, the weather steadily improved, and by nine o'clock we were sweltering in the hot sun, tempered only by a freshness in the air. Up the Fex glacier all went easily. But then came something different. We had reached the broken cliff separating us from the Tremoggia glacier above. It was difficult to choose the least unpleasant way, for steep slopes had to be crossed before we could gain the safety of a big rock outcrop. We spread out. Fortunately the snow was stable and in excellent condition. Nevertheless, we were glad to be across.

The sheltered bowl of the Tremoggia glacier acted as an efficient—too efficient—reflector; so that for the last hour we all fried and frizzled in the sun. Thankfully we reached the freshness of the pass. It was midday. Almost without mention, we decided to give Piz Tremoggia a miss. At our feet, the gentle

slopes of the lower Scerscen glacier stretched downwards—just the sort of gradient for tired skiers with heavy sacks. Far off, a great red buttress rose steeply, and perched high up on its rocks we could just make out the Rifugio Marinelli. My heart sank at the thought of the climb in the hot sun still awaiting us.

The snow was in wonderful condition, probably on account of the cold north wind, and the big crystals of *sulz* snow hissed from under our ski as we turned. From time to time, as we paused, the intense silence was broken by the rattle of stones and rumble of small avalanches from the cliffs of the Sella ridge above us.

Passing by a green glacier lake, we halted at the foot of the final climb. The lower slopes were intimidatingly steep and lay full in the afternoon sun. As for the hut, it lay somewhere hidden high above us. After a long rest, we attacked the lower slopes. They were not as bad as they had seemed and soon eased off. But it was a wearying climb up to the hut, and we were all glad when it suddenly appeared from around a corner. It was five o'clock: thirteen hours' journey.

We were all longing for tea, but it was a long time before we got the stove going. This was the one occasion when I had forgotten to bring an old newspaper, and the Italian film stars on the glossy magazines were small recompense for their lack of inflammability. It was not until we adopted Richard's suggestion of using a candle-end that we got a rousing fire going at last. We felt that our veal steaks were well-earned that evening. There was bound to be one snorer among us, and it was Ivan. But his snoring was discreet and, that night at least, it seemed more like background music as we fell asleep.

There was no need for an early start next day, for it should not take more than three hours to the Sella Pass on the way to the Coaz hut. As we climbed, clouds gathered round us stealthily, enveloping us completely on the upper Scerscen glacier. Old ski tracks helped us a little, but it was mainly map and compass work, and it was a relief to sight the Bivacco Parravicini above us, for this gave us a 'fix'. Even then, it was not easy to locate the Sella Pass above, and the altimeter proved its worth.

Once more we were encouraged by old tracks as we felt our way down the Sella glacier, until a sudden clearing in the mist showed us the glacier clearly below us. The séracs and crevasses of the ice-falls were even more impressive than usual in the poor light. Clear of them at last, we had an exciting little run to the central moraine, from which we could see the new Coaz hut, high above the glacier, for the old hut was destroyed by an avalanche some years ago. A series of iron ladders, awkward to negotiate with our skis and bulky sacks, led up the final cliff to the hut. It was occupied, but we were the sole visitors. We learned with some trepidation that 60 skiers were expected next day, for it was a public holiday.

Next morning was full of promise, and we set off for Piz Glüschaint—the shining peak—an elegant white pyramid on the Sella ridge. As we climbed, it



61 *La Sella and Piz Glüschaint from Il Chapütschin*

Photo: B. Wilberforce Smith

steadily became more overcast, and the surrounding peaks were lapped in cloud. The weather was clearly breaking fast, and we reluctantly turned back.

That evening, the great invasion began, until it seemed that the hut could hold no more. The organisation of the hut was excellent, and party after party took their turn at the dinner tables without confusion. There was a babel of tongues, for not all were Swiss, and much friendly interest was taken in us, for it seems that Englishmen are rarely seen at this time of the year.

Next morning we were up at four, breakfasting on bread and honey and cold water, for the promised thermos had not been left out. In view of the threatening sky, we decided to climb Il Chapütschin, which is one of the easier mountains, though an excellent ski tour. A lovely little hidden valley led up to the long N shoulder of the peak. About 10 cm of snow had fallen during the night, and as we walked up the hummocky valley floor, we contemplated the joy awaiting us on the run down. Normally, the skier crosses the lowest point on the shoulder, to reach a little glacier running up to the peak, but it looked so unpleasantly wind-swept that we decided to climb the shoulder on foot. An amusing little scramble ended up with a short walk up snow and rock to the peak.

The weather had held off during the climb, and we were rewarded by a fine view across the broken bowl of the Sella and Roseg glaciers to Piz Scerscen and Piz Bernina, now deep in haze. There is a fine choice of tours to the various culminating points on the Sella ridge, which makes the hut such a

popular one for ski-mountaineers. On the far side it was quite different, for the cliffs fell almost sheer to the Tremoggia glacier, where we had been—was it just three days ago?

Our anticipation of the run down was utterly fulfilled—dream ski-ing in the lightest of powder-snow, over which we floated down effortlessly, across the hummocks and through the hollows. There was a sudden transition to spring crust. It was all such a delight that thoughts of return to the hut were swept from our minds, and we halted only when we reached the moraine. But what did 200 m of extra climb matter, in exchange for such joy? It was sultry on the climb back, and it was clear that the weather would not hold. Outside the hut, we were greeted by the young alsatian avalanche-dog, belonging to the hut-keeper. Puppy-like, he rolled in the snow, delighting in sliding down the slope on his back. That evening, snowflakes were swirling round the hut, and it seemed as though we would be bound for Pontresina.

I could hardly believe my ears when I heard a cry 'Schönes Wetter' next morning. It was true, though, but a slight opalescence in the sky added a little doubt. Ivan had decided to have an easy day; so at about six o'clock Richard and I started for La Sella. It seemed abnormally late to start, for the first rays of the sun were already bathing the hut; but it was a cold morning, and the new snow should remain in good condition for some hours. About 30 cm had fallen during the night, lending a freshness to the scene rare at that time of the year. Before very long, we were crossing a broad glacier leading to the foot of Piz Glüschant. We shared the same idea. Why not have a return match? With one accord, we turned straight uphill. The fresh covering of snow gave the séracs an almost ethereal quality, and the joy of the rhythmical climb up began to fill us. Joining some new tracks made by a couple of Swiss skiers just ahead, we reached the point from which we had retreated the other day; and, contouring below a long schrund, entered a steep little valley bounded by a huge ice-wall. It was indeed steep, but the new snow was well bonded. I knew that both Richard and I were thinking of the descent. After a while, the gradient eased and a short climb took us to the foot of the final ridge.

While we were putting on our crampons the two young Swiss passed us, the leader making rather heavy going of the steep snow, for he had no crampons. The wind had carved out the ridge into a sinuous crest, and little gusts smote us from time to time, chilling our fingers and showering us with cold snow-crystals. A short length of exposed ridge led to the summit. We crossed it with care. On the far side the cliff fell sheer to the Scerscen glacier far below which we had crossed on the way to the Marinelli hut. There must have been a wonderful view, but I remember little of it, for the four of us were packed closely on the summit ridge, and it was hardly the place to relax and enjoy the scenery. Clouds were once more building up around us, and we hastened down to our skis.

A rising wind was blowing a continuous veil of snow across the upper slopes. I wondered what the steep slope would be like. Somehow, it was not all that

steep, and after a tentative try, we swung down in the powder snow without difficulty. The easier slopes below were a constant delight, for the snow remained unspoilt; nevertheless the four of us kept company.

Shortly after our return, Ivan arrived back at the hut, having had a good day exploring the Sella glacier. Not long after, the customary clouds began to cover the peaks and by evening snow was falling. We decided to leave for Pontresina next day, for we would have to buy more food in any case.

That night the wind howled round the hut, and when we came down in the morning low cloud, driven by the wind, obscured everything. The quickest way down to Pontresina seemed the best course. Suddenly, after breakfast, to our astonishment the clouds began to thin; blue sky appeared; then, one by one, the peaks uncovered themselves. This was different. Why not cross the N shoulder of Chapütschin and run down to Sils? Most of the other parties remaining in the hut had the same idea.

Soon after eight, we were away. There was still a strong westerly breeze blowing, and it was clear that there might be some danger of wind-slab. One of the Swiss parties was ahead, their leader knowing the district intimately. Choosing an impeccable line, he avoided all potentially dangerous places on the steep slopes leading to the glacier above. Great plumes of snow were being driven from the summit slopes. We had already been there, and decided to run straight down to Sils. Below the little glacier, remarkably steep and open slopes led us down to a kind of subsidiary valley above the floor of the Fextal. It was a wonderfully isolated place running below the broken cliffs of Piz Corvatsch. A short climb took us across the shoulder of Furtschellas. After that, we knew that it was all downhill to Sils Maria.

There was much new snow which gave us excellent skiing above, but it softened abominably below the tree line, for, after all, it was mid-May. Unbelievably, it remained with us almost into the village. There we refreshed ourselves while waiting for Ivan's wife to arrive with their caravan to take us round to Pontresina.

Next morning, half a metre of new snow lay in the streets of Pontresina. It looked as though our meet was over. We gave the weather one more day, for we hoped to have a shot at Piz Bernina. It was not to be. Reluctantly, we packed our bags. Despite the weather, we had achieved some success and wasted no opportunities, to say nothing of the fun we had had. Next year. . . .