

An Introduction to Mountains

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Some years ago a number of letters preserved by my mother were found in an old trunk, among them a dozen or so written by me from Switzerland between 1929 and 1932. From Cambridge I had joined the staff of Chillon College, then, until the great depression, a flourishing school between Territet and Ville-neuve, overlooking Lac Lemman.

As I sit, 55 years later, in a chalet beside Lac Champex while it pours with rain, I transcribe some of these, wondering whether they may be of some interest for the light they throw on the differences between the ways we ski'd and climbed then and now.

Apart from a summer holiday walking and scrambling in the Cairngorms, I had done no climbing other than as a schoolboy getting stuck on the Cromer cliffs and rescued by coastguards — an experience that taught me that it is often easier to climb up than down; and I had spent, while at Cambridge, two winter fortnights skating and skiing in the Valais at Morgins where all ascents were then made on skins.

At Chillon College, I joined the Montreux section of the Club Alpin Suisse and with a guide reached the summits of the Dent de Morcles and the Dent Jaune of the Dents du Midi. No account of these climbs survives, but there follow extracts from letters found in the trunk:

29.4.30. On Good Friday I went off with the Swiss Alpine Club for the most marvellous four days. The train left at 4.40am and I had borrowed an alarm clock that failed to go off. I woke at 4.30 and ran the whole way to the station with my skis and pack, but missed the train by 4 minutes. I had to chase it in a taxi and caught it at Martigny where I joined the four Swiss who made up the rest of the party. We took the mountain train to Sembrancher, and from there a car to Châble. Then we had to carry our skis and packs with four days food and clothing to the snow. I thought I would die, but we reached the snow by lunch and rested for an hour. We then set out with another party of three to cross the col in the Alpe de Vatsertet to get to the Cabane de Mont Fort which was to be our base. A frightful fog came down and although we climbed for five hours to a height well above that of the col we could not find it and had to ski back over our tracks: it was awful. The snow was very deep and as heavy as lead, and I was tired out. We had to turn all the time so as not to lose the climbing tracks and I fell at almost every turn. When we finally got down to the village of Verbier, just above the snow line, I was done in and went off to bed. However, hot chocolate and red wine — sounds a frightful mixture but did excellently — put me right. The next day it cleared for about four hours in the morning and we got to the cabane. The other party of three had slept the night in a cattle shelter and were there to meet us, but we couldn't ski because of more fog. All day long more and more people arrived from the other side of the col where there was a well marked track. That night we slept 38 in the tiny cabane, but it was all most amusing and we had a splendid omelette. The Alpine

Club huts are wonderful, very compact and well fitted out with excellent stoves.

The next day was absolutely marvellous. We were first up at 5am and started off up the Rosablanche, 100m higher than the Dents du Midi. We got to the top to find a very cold wind blowing over the ridge, but had the best descent I've ever made. We crossed two glaciers — the Grand Desert and the Glacier de la Chaux — the snow was perfect powder after the frost of the night before, and I've never enjoyed anything more. We got back at one, just as the snow was softening, and I went off to sleep till 5pm. Then, as the snow was getting into good condition again three of us started down into the valley on the other side of the col from which we had come up. As bad luck would have it, when we got about 750m below the cabane one of the others twisted his knee and couldn't go on any more. It was no good trying to go back so we sent a message by two others climbing to the cabane, and helped him down to a little village called Sarreyer where we arranged to pick him up the next day. The only bed we could find for him was that of the state *sage-femme* and we didn't start back till after 8pm. Though we were both very tired we had a marvellous climb up following our tracks down in the starlight, the mountains looking wonderful. We got back at about midnight to hot drinks, raw eggs and bed, and a most amusing night as someone would snore and the whole cabane failed to stop him. The next day we had a wonderful descent, picked up the injured man, drank a lot of Fendant and got back to Villeneuve yodelling and singing at 5 o'clock.

I had promised to take one of the prefects who had had to stay for the holidays on a walking tour for the last three days, so on Tuesday we were up at six and walked to Roche where we had a huge breakfast to extracts from Carmen and famous waltzes on a pianola. From there by goods train to Bex and on to Vernayaz on foot. We explored the Gorge de Trient, about 75m deep and only 2 to 6m across with a terrific waterfall above, of which my photo only shows half as it was too long to get in. The country is very lovely, meadows covered with kingcups and cowslips and hills lit up by the light green of larch just coming out. We had a very good supper in Vernayaz and decided to try to get up the Grand St Bernard the next day. Wednesday, walked to Martigny for breakfast, then up the valley to Orsières for lunch. After a bit of sleep we set off for Bourg St Pierre reaching it through the most ripping country about 7pm. We slept in the room said to have been used by Napoleon. Thursday was dull and cold with snowstorms higher up and we were advised not to go on. However, having got as far as we had and with nothing better to do, we decided to have a go and to turn back if we found it impossible. We soon reached the snow but were able to follow the telegraph poles to within the last 300m or so. Here the poles went over the rocks and we were afraid of starting a snow-slip if we tried to follow them. However, in spite of the snowstorm there was a terrific wind which kept the snow moving so that we could just follow the ruts of old ski tracks in the hard snow beneath. We had to take off the skis we had borrowed at Bourg and I had to carry both pairs as Johnson was getting a bit too tired. We walked up the last slope in a straight line so as not to start a snow-slip and when we got to the top we saw the monastery looming through the snow. It was 2 o'clock and they took us in, absolutely plastered with snow, gave us a magnificent bedroom, lunch with marvellous hot soup, and lent us clothes. We

slept most of the afternoon and then saw over the Hospice and saw the dogs, and slept again all night. We got up at 4 the next morning to see if we could get down, as school began that evening. There was still a terrific storm raging, so I went to hear Mass sung and by after breakfast it had stopped snowing. With only mist and blown snow to contend with, we decided to sally forth. We went very carefully and though the snowstorm came on again we had reached the telegraph poles which made it safe enough as we could follow them. One of us stood at a pole while the other went ahead till he could see the next one. We returned the borrowed skis and walked down to Liddes where we managed to cadge a lift in a car to Orsières. There we lunched and caught a train to the valley, and so back to Villeneuve by 5.30pm. You should have seen the Grand Combin as we got out of the storm and the mountains the other side of the valley appeared in the most wonderful soft blue sky.

However, that's not the end of my adventures. Saturday I spent getting straight and had some good tennis, and on Sunday Blundell, Markham, Ryley and I set out to explore further up the valley of the Trient while the flowers were still good. We had a splendid day but I got back feeling rather tired and with a sore throat from eating too much snow. I was just off to bed after supper when the news arrived that one of the new boys was lost on the Malatrait, the mountain behind the college. It's a tricky mountain and I've been stuck on it, so off we went to collect a search party and lantern in the village. We heard him about 8pm and shouted to him to keep still while we tried to get up to him. First we got too high and couldn't get down to him, and then we tried up a ravine full of avalanche snow and I fell into a crevasse, but without hurt. Then we could hear him plainly and thought all was well. He sounded as if he was just out of the ravine to the right, but our difficulty was to get out of the ravine ourselves. Two of the Swiss wouldn't come, so I and the other roped up and had a most exciting climb in the dark with loose rocks hurtling round us. We got out after about an hour, only to hear his voice the other side of the ravine which had been throwing the echo back. We stayed where we were and yelled encouragement to him and directions to the other two Swiss who eventually got to him. We all got back safely and Hunter's hot whisky cured my cold. The boy, a Bonham Carter, had gone up with three others and coming down they had left the path to try to find a quicker way. Unable to agree, they had split up and poor B C had spent 7 hours sitting on a rock.

1.5.31. Back to work, but I had a wonderful last week of the holidays. I had promised to take Kendzior to the Britannia Hut and sent him on a day ahead of me so that he could do the long climb of about 2700m from the rail-head at Stalden in two bits. I left on Sunday morning, lunched and picked up Kendzior and Imseng, our guide, at Saas Fee and got to the hut for a very good supper and night's rest in comfortable bunks. It was fun to be with Imseng again after beating him in the Swiss Romand championship and I didn't want to be solely responsible for Kendzior in an area I did not know. We had four days perfect climbing and skiing: the Strahlhorn, Allalinhorn and Alphubel over 4000m, and the Fluchthorn, 3800m. The summits of the first two were very steep and we had to wear crampons, but we got to the summit of the Fluchthorn and above the Alphubeljoch on ski. Kendzior was not strong

enough for the last which I did with Imseng. We left the hut at 5am and got to the top at 10 coming down very steep and roped between great crevasses and having to turn all the way — 1000m in 15 minutes without a fall. Of course the snow was perfect, powder on crust, but Imseng was quite impressed with my skiing. However, pride had its fall that evening. On return to Saas Fee we had our heavy packs to carry and at about 2700m got into heavy crusty snow. I fell and broke a stick and spent much of the descent trying to do jump turns out of fearful heavy tracks, often falling.

Date missing, but I think February '32. I had a wonderful weekend with the Swiss Alpine Club last Saturday and Sunday. I left directly after work on Saturday and motored to Lac Champex with one of the party, the rest having started in the morning. We got there at 4 o'clock and started for the Cabane Dupuis which we reached at 9pm, doing the last bit by lantern across the glacier. The rest of the party were already in bed. On Sunday we all started at 6am and climbed the Aiguilles Dorées, getting back to the hut at 2pm and down to Orsières by 6, whence to Martigny by car, supper, and by train back here by 9pm. This is one of the more difficult climbs so was a great experience for me, and quite an honour being asked to go on it. Only two of us got up the most difficult bit, the Aiguille Javelle with a vertical chimney 12m high. I had to haul myself up parts of this with the help of the rope as it was too difficult for me without; but I didn't do too badly and had all sorts of new experiences such as cutting steps in real ice rather than hard snow, and coming down awful looking places by rapelle de corde. We did a lot of unroped climbing where I found myself a bit nervous to start with, but I soon got used to it, and it is much quicker.

15.3.32. Two Sundays ago I had a grand day with the SAC. We caught the 5.30am train from Montreux and got out at St Triphon, between Aigle and Bex. From there we *walked* carrying our skis via Monthey and Morgins to the Portes de Culet. From the Douane Hut we had a ripping descent to the bottom of the Tour de Don where we had breakfast and skinned up to climb the Don. The top was all ice, but quite amusing. Instead of the usual way down to Châtel we went along the ridge to the Col de Croix and down the other side to Révereulax: what must be far the best run round Morgins. The valley is shaped like a glacier valley, without trees — 1000m of open running. At Révereulax the snow ran out so we walked back to Vionnaz and across the valley to Aigle. The Rhône valley has never seemed so wide before. What a day! I'm going to the Britannia Hut again. The SAC is holding a Course de Haut Alpinisme there for a week with lessons in bivouacking, practice rescues, etc, food and all for 55 francs for the week.

19.4.32. We had only two really decent fine days at the Britannia Hut and for the rest of the time the temperature was from 20 to 27 below zero centigrade. It was very bad luck striking such weather, but otherwise it was well worth it and both amusing and instructive. It gave me some idea of what happens if one is caught out really badly by the weather when climbing. On the other hand we all managed to enjoy ourselves. The Swiss sang beautifully, all taking parts, and every evening after supper there was singing, yodelling, vulgar stories and chess or cards.