Alpine Meet 1990

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(*Plate 62*)

When I told friends that I was going on the AC meet to the Bernina they all enthused about the Biancograt. 'Lovely route . . . you must do it . . . can't give it a miss,' etc. Muriel Derry, who lives near us, remembered it vividly. 'Fourteen hours on a single ham sandwich shared between Jack and me. But that was a *long* time ago,' she concluded wistfully.

I hadn't climbed in the Alps (ski'd, yes) for over 20 years and for once my wife and I decided to make it a joint venture. 30-odd years ago I took Carol up Flying Buttress and Spiral Stairs and she was, well . . . impressed. 'Please,' she had said, 'never let me do anything like that ever again. Please.' Yet here we were, discussing the Alps. 'Look,' she said, 'you go up and do your thing on the high peaks and I'll potter about the valleys sketching, pressing flowers. That sort of thing. I'll be fine. *Really*.' Well, that was the sport-plan.

We crossed the Julier pass at 7 one morning in late July and stood by the roadside, entranced by the view to the south. The Biancograt, of course, dominated the skyline and already I saw myself climbing it, boldly leading a party to the top accompanied by Vaughan Williams's music for 'Scott of the Antarctic'.

Later that morning we found a motley crowd of Brits in the nicest, shadiest part of the Morteratsch campsite and plans were soon afoot. A sizeable party was going up to try the Piz Morteratsch the next day, so we decided to join them. Carol, too. Forget the flower arranging: 'I'll just go up to the hut.' It was her first-ever hut-bash, first-ever load-carry, but she gave it, as they say, her best shot and we got there, if slowly.

At 4.30 next morning it was far too warm when I, Tom Sancha and Daphne Pritchard (in that order – but see below) set off up a well-worn track, headed for the Boval Col. An hour later we tried to be clever and cut off left for what appeared to be an easy snow gully. It was, but the snow was already like melting sugar and I suddenly began to feel awful. Tom, who'd been in the Alps a week para-ascending, or para-descending, I forget which, cruised into the lead and shot up the gully with disgusting ease, while Daphne was soon to glide past me.

Eventually we reached Morteratsch's main north-south ridge and were faced with the choice of either going up a steepish nose which led directly to the summit, or an easy but boring-looking plod to the left which avoided the nose. Most parties were choosing this latter route whose track had now become a knee-deep trench.

'Shall we try the nose?' asked Tom, full of bounce and eagerness. Daphne was definitely on. I gave a feeble nod of assent. 'Right, then,' said Tom, 'no need for a rope, is there?'; he then bounded off like some stripling chamois and was soon but a speck on the horizon. Daphne clunked efficiently up while I laboured along in the rear. Halfway up this slope, at one of my many rests, I decided to put on my gloves as any attempt to arrest a fall would have been painful without them, if not impossible. I found one glove and then proceeded to unpack the entire rucksack in a vain attempt to find the other, getting myself into a fearful muddle. I looked down. The slope was steep but not *that* steep, was it? I mean not steep-steep as the Kangshung face is steep?

John Town was somewhere near the summit of Piz Tschierva at about this time. In a campsite conversation a day later he let slip that 'there were a few parties doing that steep nose. At one point I looked across and there appeared to be someone all by himself, having an epi.'

There was. Me.

I was gasping for breath. I could only find one glove. Tom and Daphne had long since disappeared, and to cap it all I began to get the shakes. Somehow I got it together – ('dammit, I'm on an alpine doddle, not K2') – crammed everything into my sack and staggered upwards. The other two were waiting patiently at the top where the nose flattened out and shepherded me to the summit, where I slept for an hour. When I awoke, a dapper Swiss said, 'I am admiring your classical English clothing.' I shot him a glance. Did I detect just the tiniest hint of irony? I was wearing baggy cords, an old check shirt demoted to gardening and climbing and a rather down-at-heel Norwegian sweater (an article made of wool which one pulls on over one's head – I write this by way of explanation to all those who have been reared on zip-up fibre piles). I now realize what the Swiss alpinist meant. For classical, of course, read shabby.

Two days later at midday Tom, Daphne, Carol and I were being driven up the Val Roseg in a horse-drawn conveyance bound for the Coaz hut. Coffee and cakes delayed us in the hotel at the roadhead and there followed the long walk, up past a little hamlet of alpine pastoralists who produced delicious creamy yoghurt for us in earthenware bowls, along a high, beautifully flat shelf, to the Coaz hut perched on a rock buttress at the head of the valley. It was a glorious scene, dominated by Piz Roseg.

There was no stopping Carol, who was determined to bag a peak, and an hour before dawn the next morning the four of us were stumbling up scree bound for Il Chapütschin (3386m). Carol was clutching my long-shafted hickory ice axe, 1960 vintage, and would shortly strap into an ancient pair of ten-point crampons borrowed from a friend. Daphne and Tom moved rapidly ahead; this allowed us to take our time, which we did, lots of time, meandering over the glacier, peering into crevasses, wading through soft snow, tackling a little ice slope, until we finally negotiated a jumble of boulders, crampons screeching, to the summit of this modest but thoroughly worthwhile little mountain, 32 years after Flying Buttress. It was a moment to savour and Carol was smiling and snapping photographs; half an hour later she was still smiling ('from relief') before we plodded down, taking our time, to rejoin a much relieved pair of friends at the hut. It had been a memorable day.

Tom and I joined forces for what was to be my final climb, the North Pillar of the East Peak of Piz Palü. I noted that its first British ascent, in 1947, was by Everesters J O M Roberts and C G Wylie and, as my guidebook had once belonged to Anthony Rawlinson (kindly presented to me by Lady Rawlinson), himself a reserve for the 1953 expedition, I felt, somehow, quite illogically, drawn towards the route. It had fewer so-called 'objective' dangers than its two parallel pillars, and, frankly, looked easier.

The next night Tom and I dined in the Diavolezza Hotel with superb views of our peak surrounded by about a hundred other Piz Palüers. John Town had assured us that nearly all of them would be going for the ordinary route, but we were determined to make a flying start.

At 9pm the dining room emptied. All the proles like us trooped off to the barrack-like concrete dormitory block and at four the next morning rose to a man and silently paraded for breakfast. No unseemly rush or noise. A vast throng of climbers patiently waiting for their rolls and coffee. It was curiously impressive – and very un-British!

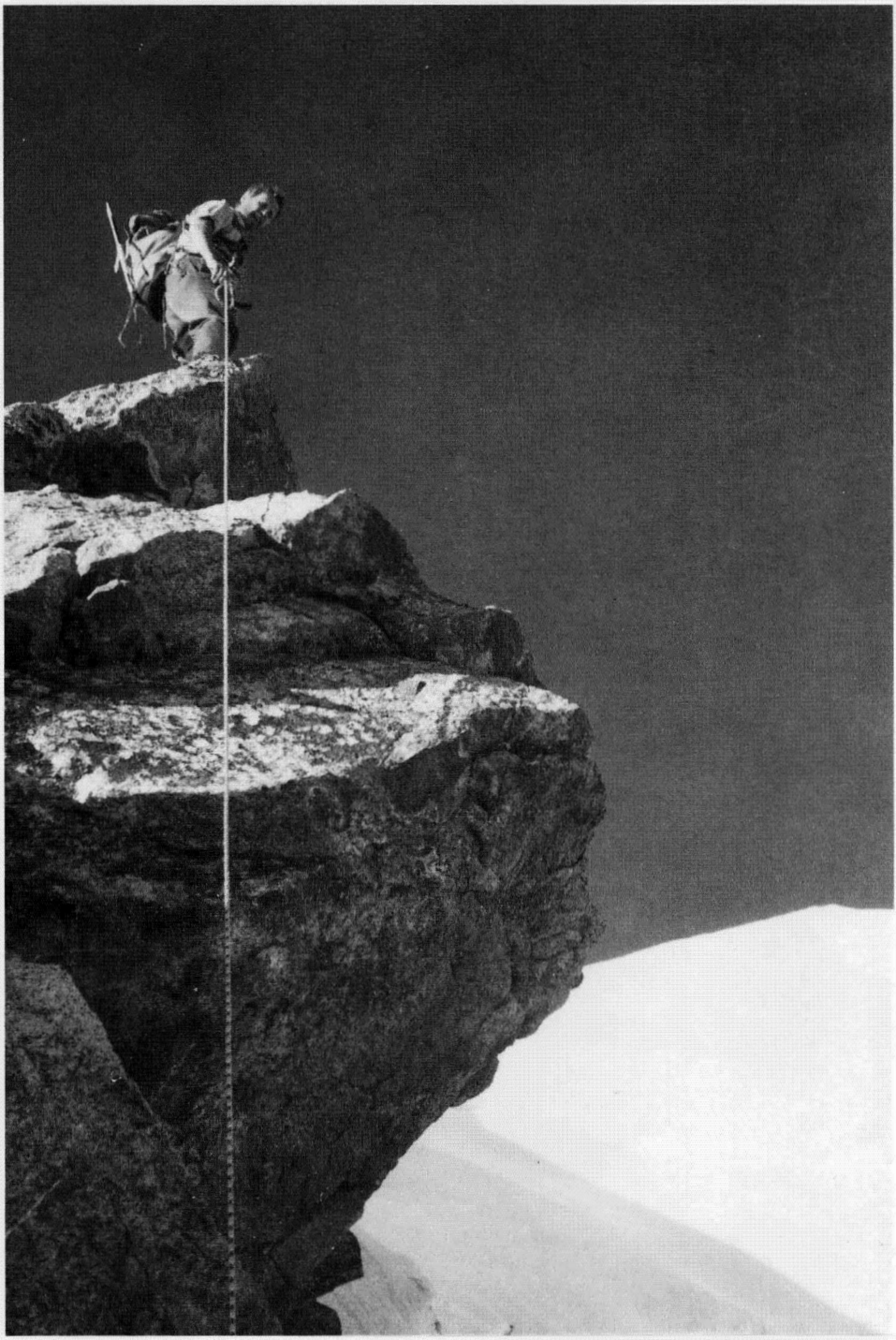
We managed to get away amongst the leading group and at 4.45am were cramponing across the Pers glacier in third place. It was a magnificent morning, perfectly still, if a trifle too warm – but that was the summer of 1990. We noted the rocks strewn across the glacier below Piz Cambrena. Not a place to be, later in the day. An hour after our start I looked back. A silent army of alpinists was strung across the glacier in single file. However, a party of three, ominously, appeared to be gaining on us. Correction: *was* gaining on us. We stepped up a gear and just managed to reach the foot of the climb ahead of them in a flurry of sweat and heaving chests. The party of three had somehow become five. Oh *dear*.

I led the first pitch and was just tying on when the young *bergführer* guiding the first party shouted up at me to take in my rope quickly! I yelled back, a little testily, that I was *not* going to hurry; and Tom joined me. The guide's clients were competent and he himself turned out to be quite helpful, so all was well. However, we were not going to have the route to ourselves. A pair of young Swiss were also hard on our heels.

The North Pillar of the East Peak is a fine, clean route. Solid, chunky granite provided excellent holds, and we appeared to flow up it. We moved together throughout, except once when I went off route and made a pitch. The Swiss then went ahead, whereupon we slowed down and began to enjoy ourselves. The climbing was very straightforward, about AD to AD sup, and I think we both felt, perhaps, a little unchallenged. We paused at the end of the rock section to don crampons and refresh ourselves and then crunched up the final snow arête to reach the summit at 8.50am, very nearly halving the guidebook time of five hours. The climb reminded me of North-East Buttress on the Ben.

For the next eight hours we footled about, traversing the Central and West summits of Palü, abseiling sections of the Fortezza ridge in log-jams of humanity, descending the wrong bank of the Pers glacier, constantly arriving above cliffs of vertical grass and rubble before collapsing outside our tents at 5pm. Nice climb; shame about the descent.

The next day Carol and I packed up and meandered gently home in nine days, pottering about the Oberland and enjoying walks in the Jura. Each night we slept under the stars. It had been the perfect holiday for us both. The Biancograt? It'll wait. A few days after Palü, Tom did it; and not without incident. Perhaps he'll tell us about it in some future article?



62. Michael Binnie on the N pillar of the E peak of Piz Palü. (Tom Sancha) *(See also photo No 84)* (p 135)