

Our Next Issue

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spick-and-span dormitories, and also individual rooms with bath and lavatory. The hotel is excellently managed, and the wants of each individual are splendidly catered for.

We had a very good dinner, prepared by a proper chef, and, given the necessary cash, one could dine and wine here as well as anywhere else.

Our objective the next morning was the Aiguille de Rochefort. We were awakened at 3 a.m., and served with a cafe comple of the highest standard. Fully rested and in excellent condition, we left the hotel at 3.30 a.m., walking on the hard snow from the Col de Geant towards the buttress of rock of the Dent du Geant, skirting the Aiguille Marbré. Before reaching a broad ridge of ice and rock leading directly up to the Dent du Geant we had to scale a deep wall of hard snow about 100 metres high, at an angle of sixty degrees. We found it advisable to put on our crampons, which, with their ten sharp points of steel, give a good grip on hard snow or blank ice. This staircase of ice and snow was quite a severe test, and we were glad when it was behind us.

We now noticed nine parties of two, roped together, closely behind us. They were from the Alpine School of Chamonix, each party consisting of a guide and his pupil. All these learners found the going tough, except a girl of about twenty in the last party. A student from Grenoble, she made progress with the greatest of ease, and I could not help feeling a little envious, since she had many years of climbing in front of her, while my climbing career, if not yet coming to a close, was much more advanced. Little did I think at that time that a few days later her young and promising life would come to an abrupt and untimely end. While ski-ing with this Alpine School, unroped, she fell into a crevasse fifty yards deep, and died instantly. Her guide had not complied with the strict rule that climbers should always be roped together when crossing a glacier. It appears that it has become fashionable among a section of skiers not to do so, and this accident was the inevitable result.

These parties intended to climb the Aiguille de Rochefort, like ourselves, and we let them pass. A good many steps would have to be cut on the icy ridge leading towards the summit, and our motto was "let others do the hard work"!

The loose rock and the ice on the broad ridge leading up to the Dent du Geant required great care. One of my crampons came off, but, fortunately, I caught it just as it was about to career thousands of feet downwards. From time to time, our eyes looked up to the final bastion of the Dent du Geant, a real giant's tooth. It looked as though this "dental operation" would not be possible, but about a dozen thick ropes fixed on to the vertical slabs, facilitated the ascent. (I had done this climb nine years earlier.) We saw some climbers high up, moving like tiny creatures on the tower of Babylon.

On reaching the spot where the difficult passages on the Dent du Geant begin, our way parted, and we had to follow an ice ridge sharp as a razor, in parts only six or eight inches wide, and rising at angles varying up to sixty degrees. The chief obstacles were cornices which left us no choice but to swarm beetle fashion along their shapely but frail convex backs. A false step by one of us would have had catastrophic consequences. On the side of the Glacier du Geant there is a sheer drop of thousands of feet over walls of ice and snow, while on the side of the Val Ferret, the ice ridge appears to be struck on an enormous buttress of rock. In case of a fall, one would land almost in the Val Ferret. During one of the difficult passages, one of my crampons again fell off, but luck was again with me, and I caught it just in time. The wind was now

howling over the ridge, doing all sorts of funny tricks with the rope connecting us. The extreme cold forced me to rub my hands with snow, to get the warmth back again into my fingers. There were repeated hold ups by the parties in front of us, an indication of the difficulties ahead. At about 8.30 a.m. we set foot on the summit, and shook hands, as is customary on such occasions. I had done yet another "Viertausender", although this Aiguille is only one Metre above the 4,000 metres zone. The weather was just wonderful, and the view and visibility extensive; in the South, we saw clearly the Gran Paradiso and the Grivola which we had climbed a few days before.

The other parties left in another direction, but my guide had to be down in the Val Ferret shortly after midday, as he had to catch the coach to Switzerland via Aosta, where he had an engagement with other climbers. We therefore started to descend the way we came. I was rather worried about this, with this fearful ridge, only a few inches wide in parts, sloping down steeply, but as it so often happens, my fears were unfounded, and my guide could have held me in case of a slip. He, on the other hand, being the last man down, could not take the slightest risk, had to take every precaution, and therefore took much longer than I. Each time before he started moving, I rammed my ice axe into the ice, placed the rope around the handle protruding about an inch or so, and my guide could thus have been securely held in the event of a fall. Of course, only one of us was moving at a time.

We got safely back to the Hotel Torino, had some light refreshments, taking the first cable lift down to Entreves. There, our ways parted, as I intended to go on foot direct over the Col de Ferret to Ferret in Switzerland, about 25 kilometres away and requiring another climb from 1,400 metres to 2,500 metres up.

Having handed over practically all my belongings to my guide, for him to deposit them at Orsieres, I was able to move at full speed and to get back to Ferret and Orsieres in record time. A good hour below the summit of the Col Ferret, I passed the debris of the former large Refuge Elena, which had been totally destroyed a few months earlier by an avalanche.

Mountains are a good adventure. They change little enough in their attributes and charm for us to consider them permanent. It is to their changelessness that they owe their power of "renewing our youth" whenever we are again among them. The same atmosphere, the same appearance, always produce the same feeling in us.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

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