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MY SECOND MONT BLANC CLIMB

By W. STETTBACHER

(Conclusion)

From the easternmost point of the Dome de Miage, the climber descends to the north-east over a steep ridge of snow or ice to the Durier hut. One of the scenic attractions of mountaineering on the range of Mont Blanc is that the range rises abruptly from low valleys and fertile wooded hills. This applies particularly to the westernmost end, and the climber on the Dome de Miage looks down some 9,000 feet on the meadows dotted with villages, the contrast between which and the snow and ice in the foreground is singularly beautiful and dramatic.

The ascent of the Aiguille de Bionnassay from the Durier hut is a delightful climb over steep pinnacles of rock, intermixed with razor-sharp steep ice ridges. The finish is spectacular. The climber cuts or kicks up a snow or ice slope fully 50 degrees in angle which steepens and steepens until at last, with dramatic suddenness, he steps up on to the summit ridge. This mountain top is formed by a knife-like snow edge. He who treads the summit of the Aiguille de Bionnassay will recollect a sensation of unearthly altitude on this cold celestial edge. Even the view is secondary to the feeling of complete detachment from the lower world. And when, in addition, the day is windless and warm, when not a breath stirs in the vast firmament from which the sun shines with fierce intensity upon mountains and clouds, the experience is never to be forgotten.

I began my summer holiday by staying a few days in the Saas Fee district. In company with Arnold Andenmatten, a guide from Saas-Fee, I climbed the Lagginhorn, from the newly constructed Weissmies hut. This is a peak just over 4,000 metres high, and this trip enabled me both to get acclimatised to the alpine air and to add another "Viertausender" to my list.

On 21st July, I met my regular guide, René Marcoz, at Martigny Station, just before midday. He conducted me to his small, newly acquired Citroen car. I am strongly anti-automobile, firstly, for reasons of health, and secondly, because of the considerable risk in getting maimed for life or killed outright. However, on this occasion, I was quite glad to use his car, if only because we thus gained a lot of time.

We went straight to Chamonix, St. Gervais and Contamines. We parked the car near by, and climbed the same afternoon up to the peaceful and beautiful Alp de Miage. This is a real paradise, surrounded on nearly every side by steep mountains and glaciers descending towards its meadows, while ibex and chamois are mixing freely with cattle and sheep grazing on the meadows. Our intention was to pass the night here, at a modest but otherwise comfortable Chalet, in order to climb up to the Durier hut the next day. This is a stiff and steep climb, leading over a glacier criss-crossed with crevasses, while the rocks higher up are made treacherous through stonefall.

The evening looked promising, but the weather deteriorated during the night, and from my bed I saw vivid flashes of lightning, intermixed with the roar of thunder. We quickly agreed that we could not possibly reach the Durier hut and descended instead to St. Gervais, taking the electric tram described earlier on, in order to climb the Mont Blanc the following day, should the weather improve. When we left the tram at the terminus, there were some indications of

a coming improvement in the weather. Listening on his transistor radio to the midday weather forecast from Switzerland, my guide got quite excited, shouting, "They are announcing the coming of a period of high pressure, with very good weather for the next few days". While climbing up to the hut situated on the Aiguille du Goûter, I had great difficulty in keeping close to my guide, as the going got extremely strenuous, partly also because of my heavy pack. I was wondering how I would fare during the actual attack on the Mont Blanc the following day, when I was already in difficulty now? However, twenty-four hours later, when I was able to watch in comfort from the hut above as many as forty tourists in all making the same ascent, I realised that I had done quite well. Most of these climbers had to stop repeatedly for rest, lay down their loads, and a good many reached the hut in a totally exhausted condition.

We left the hut at 4.30 the following morning, preceded by two parties. We were the only ones to climb the Mont Blanc on that particular day. As usual, at this time of the day and after a night at a refuge, I did not feel too happy at first, but after half an hour's climb over the route previously described, I was soon my normal self again. We caught up with the other two parties near the Vallot hut, but decided to make a short halt, to take some refreshment, and also some snaps. On reaching the "Bosses de Dromadaire" which the other two parties took at a slow pace, stopping every few yards for breath, my guide almost started running. When we were over this steep hump at last, I asked him why he was in such a hurry. "I wish to listen to the morning weather forecast", he replied, and, true enough, we were just in time to hear it. Twenty-four years ago, when I climbed the Mont Blanc for the first time, I suffered greatly from the rarefied air at this stage, and only by a superhuman effort managed to get to the top. This time, the whole ascent was more like a promenade, only the first hundred yards over the razor-like ridge required extreme caution, as I do not pretend to be a tight-rope walker.

We reached the summit after 3½ hours, a fast time, and as the weather was glorious, with visibility extending over hundreds of miles, we were in no hurry. I took numerous photographs which turned out well.

I was a bit fearful of the coming descent over the steep and narrow ice ridge, but my guide showed me the technique to adopt, which consists of negotiating it with the feet turned outwards at an angle of 45 degrees. Everything passed off perfectly. Shortly after this passage, my guide pointed to the spot where, a fortnight previously, two Englishmen slipped on the icy slope and fell to their death. This spot looks easy enough, but it only requires a single slip, which is easily possible when a climber is short of training or suffers from the rarefied air.

We were back in the Aiguille du Goûter hut before lunch. It was my great pleasure to meet there in the afternoon one of the greatest guides and climbers of all time, who is also a brilliant writer of alpine books, lecturer and photographer, Gaston Rebuffat. During the past twenty years, he has taken part in the greatest climbs, including the Northern Wall of the Eiger ten years ago. I have not given up hope of doing some climbing with him in the next year or two.

Later in the same afternoon we were observing three climbers traversing the Aiguille de Bionnassay—our objective the next day. They were incredibly slow, not a good augury for us! They took about five hours to descend from the summit to its northern base, and, as we found out the next day, they took fifteen hours to make the traverse from the Durier hut to the Vallot hut. They had to cut thousands of steps in the ice, which is very hard and slow work.

We were doing this traverse the next day in the reverse direction. With the fine spell of weather, at least forty climbers preceded us making for the Mont Blanc. Following their traces for about an hour, we branched off below the Aiguille du Goûter descending over steep ice ridges towards the base of the Aiguille du Bionnassay. We were enormously helped by the steps cut in the ice the previous day by the other party, which were still in good condition. Then, the steep northern ridge of the Aig. du Bionnassay, which has a number of dangerous "Corniches" which have to be carefully by-passed, had to be scaled, and we set foot on the summit at 8.30 a.m. The passage down the steep southern ridge was also greatly helped by the steps cut the previous day. Intermixed were some difficult rock passages over pinnacles or a razor-sharp rock ridge, which were made the more delicate because the crampons were still strapped to our feet. We reached the Durier hut, looking almost like a

big wooden box in which six to eight persons can sleep—without much comfort—at 11 o'clock. This hut is situated at 3,100 metres, and we had yet to traverse the Dome de Miage, already described earlier in this article. Everything passed off according to plan, save that I did not protect myself sufficiently against the hot sun, and burnt my face and arms, from which burns I only slowly recovered.

We arrived at the Hotel Trelatête, high above the resort of Contamines, at 4 p.m. the same day, and one of my greatest climbs had come to an end.

SWITZERLAND TO LIMIT M.P.s

The Swiss electorate accepted a constitutional amendment which had already been passed by Parliament and which restricts membership of the National Council to 200. The proposal was accepted by 330,761 to 188,605 with six Cantons (Schwyz, Glarus, Fribourg, Grisons, Thurgau and Ticino) rejecting it. The reason for introducing this amendment was the rapid increase in population which would have meant a considerably larger National Council within a few years, and it was felt that a limitation would facilitate the working of Parliament.

[A.T.S.]

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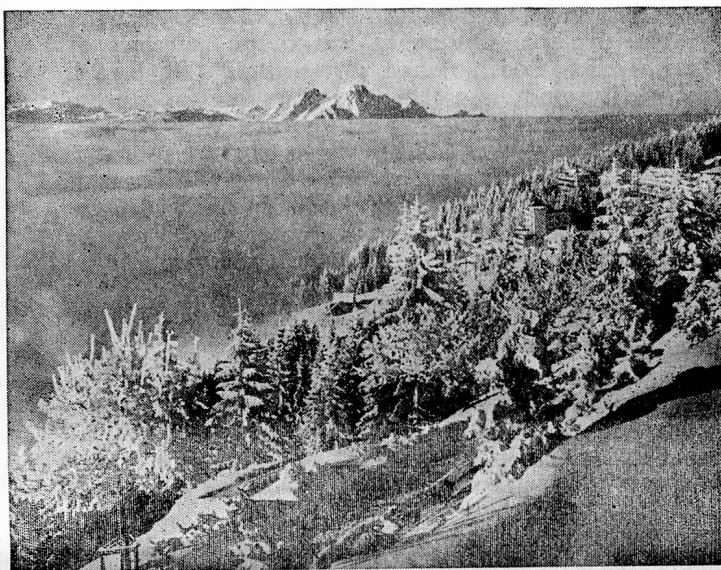


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