

THE DENT BLANCHE BY THE VIERESELGRAT.

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The serenity of our arrival at the Schönbühl hut, after a most pleasant walk from Zermatt on a cool afternoon, was marred by a yodelling figure which pursued us rapidly up the final steep ascent. It was a blow to our pride to find that Biner's sister had come up in two hours, instead of our four, to bring up a favourite ice-axe which had firmly refused to be found in the morning.

Bernard Biner, our guide, is a tall, lithe and active man, usually very cheerful and proud of his English, but capable of being determined and glum when speed is essential. Number two on the rope, Miss R., an American, would probably not object to being described as tough. Her previous exploits on the Arête Young and the Marinelli couloir were sufficient tribute to her courage in mountaineering.

Midnight found a thin mist over the glacier. It was an excuse to make a leisurely and very comprehensive breakfast, and we got away at 1.15. There was enough moonlight to do without a lantern, but not enough to cast any shadow. As we plodded over the Schönbühl glacier, each step forward meant an unsteady searching with the foot to find if it was hump or hollow, and our progress was a grim plodding punctuated with remarks in various languages when the footing proved unkind.

We had given a good deal of careful thought to our equipment for the day so that we might travel light and yet lack no essential. Biner carried the only rucksack, in which was a small supply of food and little else. Our own pockets accommodated extra sweaters, gloves, mittens, helmet, snow cream, lantern and a supply of prunes, chocolate, sweets and peppermints. Anticipating that we might need crampons we carried these tied round our waists.

At the Col de Zinal we had to light a lantern to pick out the holds. They seemed few and unsatisfactory in the uncertain light. Ice had to be chipped away, loose rocks avoided, and over all was a thin covering of snow. It was a relief to be on the Col, which we reached at 4.10. Rising up on our left was a towering grey bastion of rock looking grim and unkind in the early morning light, but it was made of honest rock and gave us a chance to warm up and loosen our limbs after the cold passage to the Col.

From then on for five hours we climbed steadily and without halt. Gendarmes of all sizes, some of good rock, some of bad. Patches of snow to be walked over. Overhangs of snow and ice to be avoided or sometimes traversed on the rock face below. Rock ridges to be followed until they lost themselves in snow patches which were more frequent this year than usual. Whatever the particular obstacle might be, the great ridge had us in its unrelenting grip and we worked steadily upwards. While we were roped and on a few occasions moved one at a time, for the greater part of the time we moved independently. I doubt if all our conversation during this five hours would have filled five minutes, and our only food was what we each had in our own pockets. But our pace was steady and our progress as unrelenting as the opposition of the ridge. Such climbing may lack the free and easy joy of a guideless day, but it has immense compensations in the glorious feeling of pleasure it gives in a sustained effort against a really worthy adversary.

We reached the final snow ridge at 10 o'clock, and immediately Nos. 2 and 3 declared that a state of emergency had arisen and something must be done about it. We had feared that the dreaded double cornices might delay us, for ours was the first ascent of the season, and reports of others looking down it from the summit suggested that this final snow ridge was not in easy condition. But by now we could see that there were no double cornices, so we could halt and eat. Reluctantly Biner agreed, and we had our first short meal. The snow to the summit was in good condition, and without using crampons we reached it at 10.40. There was a clear view in all directions and we spent ten minutes enjoying it, but it was far too cold for comfort, and we soon started down the ordinary way to find a warm and comfortable shoulder for a halt and meal.

Good steps made by parties doing the ordinary route that morning made the descent easy for most of the way. The traverse on the west face was iced and unpleasant, and the final descent of the loose rocks off the Wandfluh seemed a dreary business at the end of a day. We found it difficult to spot an easy way off, and I, at any rate, decided that it would be no place for a guideless party before daylight.

The Schönbühl glacier was reasonably kind to us. Although the day was getting on, we had few really soft patches and were back at the hut at 4 o'clock, where we celebrated our day by drinking unbelievable quantities of tea.

"Wir sind doch vier Esel, dass wir hier heraufgestiegen sind" was Alois Pollinger's remark on the first ascent of this ridge in 1882 (but done from Mountet). But he who will climb it to-day in good weather conditions will feel himself no ass when he gets to the top. If he has our good fortune he will feel that he has accomplished one of the climbs which from start to finish gives unfailing pleasure, because for the whole of its length there is no uninteresting moment.