

THE VAJOLET TOWERS.

PRIESTLEY PHILLIPS.

The Vajolet Towers are a connoisseur's piece, enchanting to gaze upon, fascinating to traverse, and presenting awesome views as one scales or abseils their walls. They have been likened to "a castle of the fairies," "ivory columns fashioned by the wind," "a row of dumb sentinels on the edge of the world." Other similes might be used ; and though they may appear to be contradictory and to cancel each other out, none of them would necessarily be false ; for the impressions the Towers make depend on the light and the weather. Under a full moon they are an æthereal grey, insubstantial and dreamlike ; beneath lowering skies they can look grim as a row of funereal cypresses ; in sunshine they are gay and colourful, as though they had just put on their summer frocks and touched up their complexions.

This last impression is something more than this ageing bachelor's reaction to their beauty. The Towers, be it remembered, were first known as "The Three Sisters." They were looked upon as beautiful but disdainful, girt with a protective armour which the most skilled and darling male could not pierce. The pessimists, who thought themselves realists, were, of course, wrong ; for about sixty years ago the climbing world received the romantic story of an unassuming young man's secret conquest of the tallest and loveliest of the Three Sisters. Here is Guido Rey's account of the affair:—

"Who, in cold blood, could imagine a man climbing to the sharp edge of that knife-like ridge and crawling up to its pointed summit, or, once there, daring to descend ?

"Yet one day a youth, a student of eighteen, being in this place, did dare to think of such an enterprise, attempted it, and reached the top alone. He had modestly performed a feat which is one of the most difficult in the Alps. He left no word ; only in a little pocket-book were found the date and a note or two, explaining that on the way down the rope broke almost in two, so that he was supported only by a few strands.

"The following year this youth disappeared while ascending the Weisshorn, and was never seen again. He was George Winkler."

That was in 1887. Five years later Hans Stabeler, aided and abetted by a Dr. Hans Helversen, wooed and won the second

sister ; and in 1895 the last of the three, doubtless feeling lonely, changed her name to Delago. Unlike their husbands, however, who have gone the way of all flesh, the Three Sisters scorn change and decay. They are as enticing as ever, still drawing their worshippers from places as far distant as Birmingham and Borth-y-gest. Which means that we must now turn our backs upon romance and face the horrid truth that we climbers—female no less than male—stand in admiration before these lovely creations, and then proceed to clamber all over them. Not always with impunity, be it said. Desperate ejaculations, nervous high-pitched laughter, and the suggested use of hard-boiled eggs as chockstones, are associated in the writer's memory with a certain notorious crack. But more of this anon.

It was on Monday, August 28th, 1950, that our M.A.M. party—a veritable regiment—arrived at the Vajolet Hut. We had two days left. The climbers were to be arranged in two groups, each to traverse the Towers in turn. But—would the weather hold? We had been unusually fortunate : a fortnight's sunshine, broken only by a short thunderstorm which held us up for a couple of hours before ascending the Tschierspitz by the Adang Kamin. Now, however, as we stood outside the hut after the evening meal, gazing at the Winkler Tower which pierced the sky high up on the right-hand side of the rocky Gartl Valley, Demetz expressed doubts of the morrow ; and those of us who had been chosen as the advance guard retired to bed somewhat anxious. We awoke to sense a change in the atmosphere.

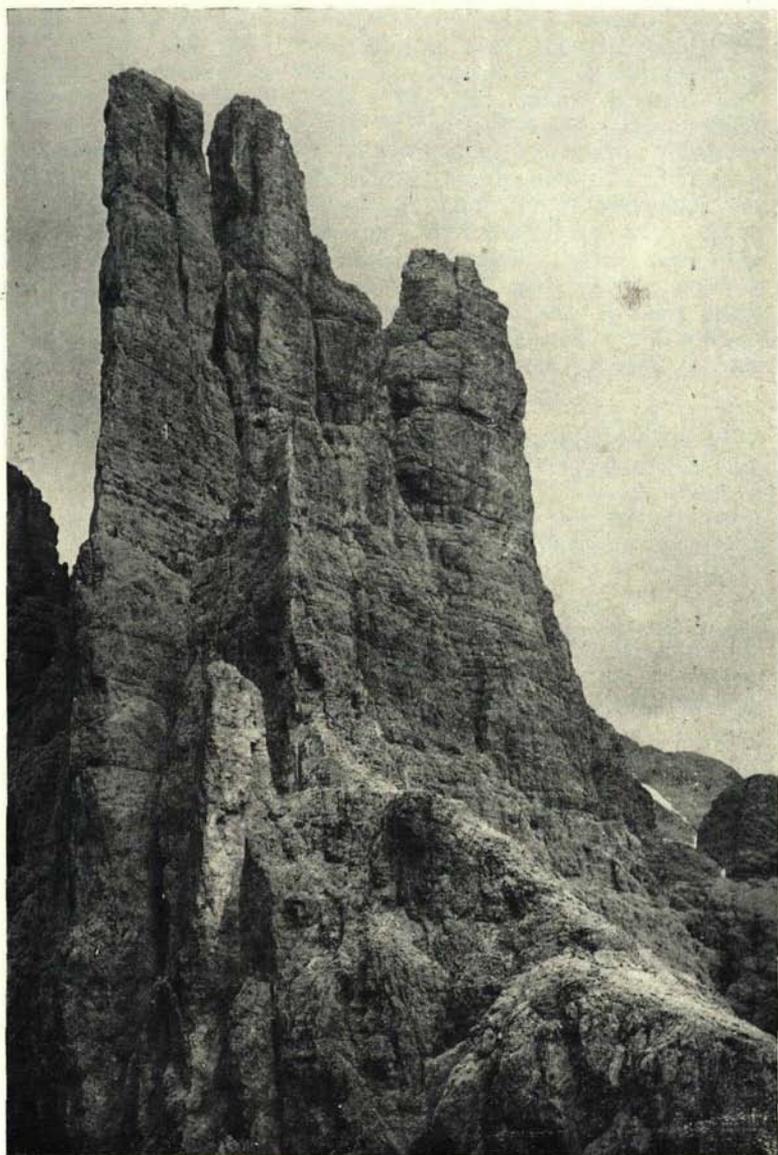
While we hurried over breakfast Demetz paced up and down outside, shooed us out of the Hut when the last cup of coffee had been drained, and set a cracking pace up the Gartl Valley. Those who sweated behind paused occasionally to watch the Stabeler and Delago Towers appearing from behind the Winkler. Before we reached the top of the valley, all three were seen side by side. It was a glorious spectacle. The pace quickened as we made across to the base of the central tower, where we were to leave our rucksacks, change into our climbing shoes, and rope up. There were seven of us : Demetz, Barbara Cole and Cyril Machin, myself and Hester Norris, Gavin Parish and Jack Grant. An easy walk along broad ledges, and a pleasant pitch or two, would bring us to the outer edge of the Winkler Tower and the notorious Crack. Here was the Tower's most formidable defence. First-rate climbers of an earlier generation had spoken of the Crack with bated breath ; and in 1930 six Rucksackers had found it a tough proposition. On that occasion I was last man, and I well remember watching the grim contortions and reddening faces of the other five as they grappled

with the unaccommodating bulge near the top of the first pitch. Long before my turn came I was wishing I had stuck to golf. . . .

Some of the M.A.M. party had asked me about the pitch. All I could tell them from my somewhat hazy recollections was that you had to climb up the right wall of the Crack for about twenty feet until the bulge forced you to traverse left into the narrowest portion of the Crack ; you then had to stretch up for some sort of left handhold and lever yourself up until a "Thank God" hold above the bulge came within reach. Then you could swing out and muscle-up to a sizeable and very comforting platform.

Demetz and Barbara were well above the platform when Hester and I arrived at the Grand Circle from which the pitch is viewed—to behold Cyril outstretched in the vice, quite secure, his left hand groping for something to lay hold on. He then began to inform the world in general that he was coming down. There being no response, he repeated the information, which was again received in silence, it being tacitly assumed by those below (Gavin and Jack had now joined us at the Grand Circle) that the man who a few weeks previously had led the Pinnacle Wall on Craig-yr-Isfa couldn't possibly be beaten by a mere five-foot bulge. In the end, Cyril thought so too. He ceased to be a human chockstone and balanced himself out of the Crack. A few moments later, an enigmatic smile on his face, he was looking down on the next victims.

By the time I myself got to the vice, the ghost of Mrs. Winkler, taking pity on my white hairs, had provided two tiny footholds, one on each wall, thus saving me from any stony embraces ; but on Hester's arrival there they had disappeared. Needless to say, she scaled the wall with grace and agility, and daintily traversed to the base of the vice. Then, after a short upward movement, came a long pause, and silence—a silence broken from time to time by sounds as of a schoolgirl being tickled. Finally, unlike Peter Pan, who used to descend to the stage on invisible wires, Hester, still full of grace, glided to the platform on a nylon and (forgetting we'd met quite recently) shook Cyril and me warmly by the hand. In our eagerness to catch up with Barbara and Demetz we couldn't stay to see what would happen to Gavin and Jack. Rumour had it that they intended to use the hard-boiled eggs which they had put in their pockets as chockstones. But either they were not needed, or else forgotten in the rigour of the contest, for when lunch-time came and they felt in their pockets their fingers plunged into a moist mush intermingled with broken shell. The eggs must have been boiled in warm water !



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Peter Nock

Left to right—Delago, Stabeler, Winkler.
Two climbers can be seen starting the South-West Spigolo of the Delago.

The rest of the ascent, always interesting but nowhere particularly difficult, was soon done, and we were about to enjoy the magnificent summit views when clouds swept over us and the rains descended and the winds blew. The temperature dropped, and down we, too, went as rapidly as possible to the terrace which sweeps behind the tower. We traversed along it to a piton. Demetz here informed us that the climb must be abandoned, and instead of the short abseil to the step-across on to the Stabeler wall, we must go right down to the saddle. Barbara led the way. After padding down the wall at a quite respectable rate she came to a halt, whereupon Demetz shouted to her to *hurry, hurry, hurry!* But, as Barbara plaintively explained, it wasn't easy to hurry down a doubled rope when one had come to the end of it! However, we all arrived at the saddle somehow. And so back to our rucksacks.

What of the morrow? If the day were fine, were we just to go up with the second party to the base of the Towers and sit watching them climb? The happy alternative was, I think, Norman Cochran's idea: we ourselves could ascend the Stabeler with Tony Demetz, and then wait on the terrace below the summit to join the others for the remainder of the climb.

We did wait there—but not for anything like as long as we expected. Demetz, on that final day, was tuned up. We were sitting on the terrace anticipating a deliciously lazy hour or more, when suddenly a form emerged about twenty feet from the Winkler summit—Demetz! Half crouching, he crossed a little slab at a canter, jumped a gap, strode up the final low-angled wall, and began hauling in the rope like a high-g geared winch, pausing for no more than a second or two—just to stand on his head. Soon there appeared another figure, going as though the devil were close behind it: Tom Millward. The rest—Blake Barker, Norman Cochran and Ruth Wiernik, Tom Reynolds, Lawrence Middleton and Ted Lloyd—seemed leisurely, by comparison, and long before the last of them had come into view Demetz had got the advance guard into motion.

The rest is soon told. Walking round together to the junction of the Stabeler and Delago Towers, we ascended by a grand face climb and the mildly severe Pikel Chimney to the final summit, and five exhilarating abseils took us to the lower and easy reaches of the dividing gully. Hot, excited, joyous, we sat down to appease our hunger, and then walked across the head of the Gartl Valley to the spot whence the finest view of the Towers is to be obtained. The shadows of passing clouds swept up and over them, so that

they looked now a cold grey, now a pale ivory warmed by delicate shades of pink. No longer were they were rock formations to be traversed and trampled upon, but the Three Sisters, graceful and alluring, whose admirers come to them from near and far. Egg crushes, stony squashes, hot karabiners, rope-frayed garments—all were forgotten. We drank in the beauty of the Towers, and went down to the Hut well content, each with a choice picture for our Hall of Memory.

The Shepherds, I say, whose names were Knowledge, Experience, Watchful, and Sincere said moreover, "We would that you should stay here awhile, to be acquainted with us, and yet more to solace yourselves with the good of these Delectable Mountains."

—from "The Pilgrim's Progress."