

TWO SIDES OF THE MONTE ROSA

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Ten years can be a long time, and they seem especially so when one is trying to think up details of climbs done that many years ago. That is my problem now as the *Journal* Editor has suggested that I should contribute to the current issue. A few notes on the one route are the only aids to memory so accuracy is not guaranteed !

Way back in 1951 Mary Hingley and I had a season's climbing in various centres, but two climbs on the Monte Rosa were the interesting ones of the year and neither, I believe, are popular with climbers from Britain.

For our first climb from the Bêtamps we selected the Cresta Rey. This excellent route direct to the top of the Dufourspitz was our choice for two reasons. Firstly it would take us as high as we should be going that year for acclimatisation, and secondly we had heard that this was a fine route of no great technical difficulty. Perhaps an added reason was that by making a two-day expedition of it with a night in the Margherita Hut we could make a fair peak bagging expedition in the four thousand metre class.

We didn't make a particularly early start with only one hour of lantern light. Soon after first light we reached the small ice fall which cuts off the upper glacier basin lying at the foot of the Dufour and Zumsteinspitze. Following old tracks was all right for a time but when these became nothing more than a line of crampon marks we soon lost them and ran into our first difficulties of independent route finding. At least it didn't take us long to find we had gone wrong when we landed on a large isthmus bounded by a vast crevasse. On returning from this impressive place we worked round to the left and after a few short bouts of step-cutting landed on the upper glacier. A plod of another hour up the middle followed, and then we were able to bear left into the little glacial bay to the right of the Dufourspitz.

For this part of the route we had received specific instructions to keep well to the right under the Zumsteinspitze, and though this was well off the direct line it was certainly the one of least resistance. Another great advantage too was that it gave a clear view of the whole face of the Dufourspitz and the Cresta Rey. By contouring round the glacier at a fairly high level we reached the rocks of the ridge some 200 feet above their base and about five hours after leaving the hut.

For the first few hundred feet the climbing was of no interest, being nothing more than scrambling over rather loose rocks. Then

as the ridge rose it became steeper and more solid, giving delightful though easy climbing. In a number of places we thought it prudent to move separately but only one pitch sticks in my mind. Here a short slightly overhanging wall rose some 25 feet above a wide ledge. Judging by the trail marks there were three possible routes up the wall and I had one attempt at each before finally succeeding on my first choice. After this, steep and interesting climbing carried us up the remainder of the ridge. Two hours had sufficed for the actual Cresta Rey itself.

Being on top at an early hour led us into the trap of dallying in the heat of a perfect day. Some hours later we moved on for what appeared to be the short scramble over the Zumstein and on to the hut. Scrambling it certainly was, but on an extensive scale. How many hours it took I don't remember now but I do know that it wasn't long before dark when we reached the hut. This was a very comfortable night stop from our point of view, but for a party of three Swiss just up from Geneva it seemed to be one of misery before they had become acclimatised.

Next day we made the switchback descent over the various 4,000 metre peaks *en route*. For me at any rate this peak bagging was singularly unsatisfying, as it was such an anticlimax after the previous day. Anyway, who has ever thought of climbing mountains by starting at the top and working downwards ?

After this two-day climb on the Monte Rosa, Mary and I took to the other side of the valley for one brief expedition on the Rothorn. Two years previously we had climbed the Rothorngrat together and now chose the Kanzelgrat, which had been specially recommended to us. It is a short but steep and spectacular climb finishing with views straight down the East face.

For our final climb of the year we returned to the Bètemps Hut to sample the Santa Caterina Arête—a climb which had long attracted me after reading the description of the first ascent. After the vital hut preliminaries such as staking out sleeping space, we contacted the guardian, Alexander Graven, in the hope of obtaining advice. The hope was in vain however as Graven refused to discuss the question of the Santa Caterina for a guideless pair. The interview probably lasted less than a minute and it seemed hopeless to press him any further. There was nothing for it but to swot up the book and have a quick look at the first part of the route on to the glacier. It was quite impossible to reconnoitre the route proper as it was some three hours up the glacier before the ridge came into view. Supper over, Graven joined us at our table and proceeded to give us a detailed description

of the route. He had made what he thought was the 10th ascent only five days before so the details were fresh in his mind, even down to a pair of crampons deserted at the foot of the serious difficulties on the first tower. Who had left this perfectly good pair of crampons we never did discover, but from their rusty state they must have been there some time. Naturally we were curious as to what had produced this sudden change of attitude in Graven from the taciturn to the voluble. It was, it seems, due to the arrival of a Zermatt guide who had watched our antics on the Kanzelgrat and gave a charitable opinion as to our chances on the Caterina.

Armed with this stop press report we made an early start soon after midnight. The hours to dawn have left little impression except that the route on to the glacier was much more tiresome in the dark than it had appeared the previous evening and that the distance up the glacier seemed never ending. Five hours saw us to the bergschrund which was a double one. The first was crossed by a long diagonal and insecure looking bridge ; no real problem, except on the nerves, whilst the second one was more difficult. Its upper wall was some eight feet above its lower lip and the obvious place to cross was marked by the remains of hand and foot holds cut by the Graven party. These had to be renovated and my landing on the top of the schrund was assisted by some strong pushing on my rear-end with Mary's axe.

Seven o'clock saw us on the Jaegerjoch where we had our first real rest of the day. This small joch is some 2,000 feet below the summit of Nordend with all the rocks in the first half and an easy snow slope for the last 1,000 feet. The guide book speaks of the rock ridge as being divided into four towers with the main difficulties on the first and third. It seemed to me that a more accurate picture is that the difficulty is almost entirely on the first tower, of perhaps 300 feet in height. The start along the crest of the ridge was easy for about 100 feet until the deserted crampons were reached. From this signpost we climbed diagonally to the right, away from the ridge itself. The wall was extremely steep and one or two false trails are laid with odd pitons. The key to the problem was a shallow 80 feet chimney which landed us above the steepest part of the wall. I feel the rest of this tower should have been easy, but as it was an exceptionally dry summer the left-inclined rake back to the ridge was more difficult than it appeared. Instead of a nice snow walk we had ribbons of ice and patches of grit and loose rock lying on top of smooth slabs. Back on the ridge proper a few easy feet took us to the so-called second tower. This was no more than 30 feet high and though the climbing was vertical, and times even overhanging, the holds were all good six-inch incut ones. They were, in fact, more like ledges than holds.

A short snow arete now led us to the third tower. This was more broken than the first, and the pitches were all short. Nowhere was there any great difficulty, though one pitch hanging over the Italian side was exposed. It was by now well over mid-day and the easy snow to the final tower was soft, heavy going. As for the fourth tower itself, it is a complete anticlimax being little more than scrambling. The final snow slope was at a very easy angle, but soft snow in the heat of the day after approximately fourteen hours from the hut can be an exhausting process.

