

A BIVOUAC AT THIRTEEN THOUSAND FEET.

They sends us along where the roads are, but mostly we goes
where they ain't ;

We'd climb up the side of a sign-board, and trust to the stick
o' the paint.

—*Kipling.*

As far as the writer is concerned the year is divided into two very unequal portions, the larger being sacrificed in the pursuit of nimble twopences, the microscopic portion to enjoyment, and this account describes a slice of the latter in the company of three kindred spirits. Three of the party had spent a fortnight guideless climbing, starting from Kandersteg, conquering the Blumlisalhorn, Gspaltenhorn, making an eighteen hours' unsuccessful attempt to traverse the Jungfrau from the Roththal Hut, traversing four glacier passes, and eventually arriving at the Ober Aletsch Hut, which was to be the base for our attack on the second highest of the Bernese Oberland peaks—the Aletschhorn.

The fourth member of the party had only just arrived from England, and his training consisted of one gruelling pass climb. It was therefore decided that he and Johnston should spend a day in an excursion down to the Bel Alp for provisions, while Brierley and I prospected our mountain, and the route to it. Johnston and Barker brought back besides the provisions a glowing account of a splendid feed they had at the Bel Alp, well knowing that Brierley and I had lived on sardines and bread. Their teasing description of each course invited retaliation, so we subdued them by relating how the way to the peak lay through a labyrinth of crevasses and the ascent of a smooth rock face, to be negotiated by candle-light before dawn.

Like all lofty undertakings this excursion had its difficulties. To begin with the hut was not provided with an alarm clock, so that two of the party spent rather a sleepless night, matches continually being struck and watches sleepily examined. At two a.m.

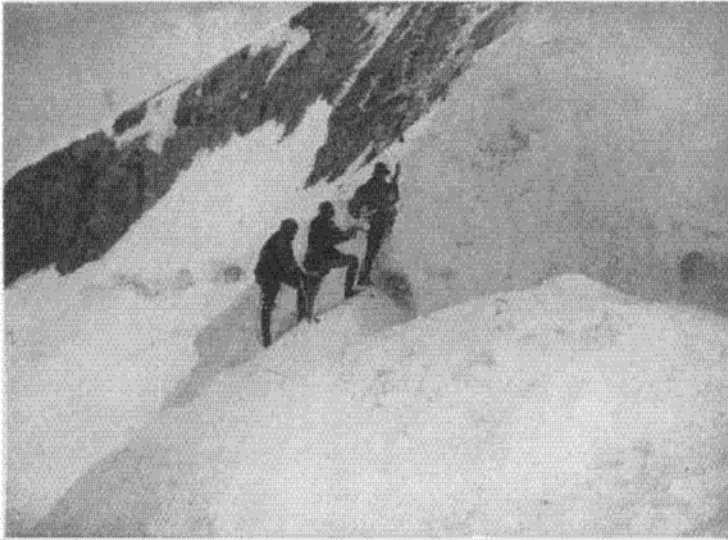


Photo by A. E. Barker

ON THE ALETSCORN.

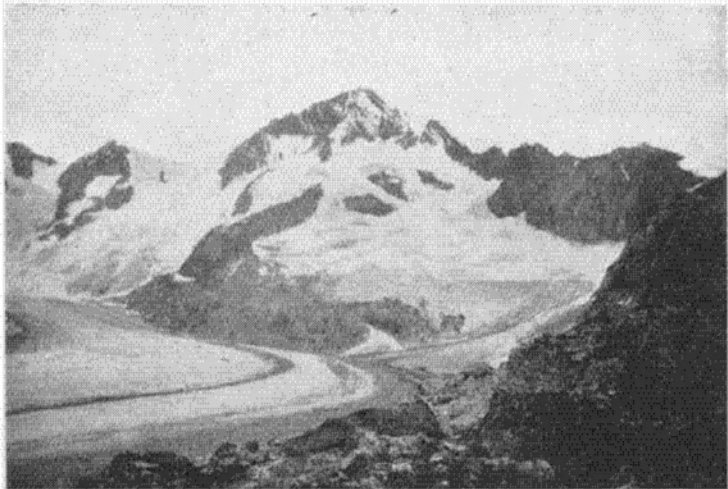


Photo by A. E. Barker.

THE ALETSCORN FROM NEAR THE OBERALETSCH HUT.

Unprinted Reverse of Illustration

Brierley scrambled out of his blankets, and went outside to prospect weather conditions, which he reported were perfect. Johnston proved a heavy sleeper, mere shaking having no effect, but holding a lighted vesta close to his eyes, and then dropping the hot end inside his shirt, was an effective if rude awakener. For one hour all was bustle within the hut. Imagine the preparation and disposal of breakfast, re-packing of rucksacks, and then the plunge outside into the cold night air, to tie on to the ninety-foot rope. When Brierley had disposed of a frozen jelly, which had been left outside all night, the leader began to pick his way by the light of a glacier lantern, along the indistinct track that leads up behind the hut to the top of the moraine. To descend the zig-zag track down this moraine in the blackness of a dark night required careful work, but the small cairns the prospecting party had built at the turnings helped us to arrive quickly on the glacier. The glacier is a dry one, and not badly crevassed until it takes a sharp turn, north north-east to north north-west, and we made quick progress, our object being to reach the end of the rock rib, on the true left of the glacier, that runs out from the Aletschhorn in a south-west direction. Our previous visit of the day before helped us considerably, for to find our way across the badly-crevassed part by candle-light, was not an easy task to a party without professional guides. Once across the schrund the face of rock was easily overcome, for the small cairns we had built left no doubt as to the route, and we were in time to witness from the ridge of the rock rib a magnificent daybreak. According to a diagram in our guide-book, this rib is followed for about half its length, and then the route is shown descending to the glacier. As it afterwards transpired, at this point we took the wrong turning, like the young lady in Mr. Melville's melodrama, but all unknowingly we proceeded on our way and attacked the steep slope that was to lead us to the upper glacier at the foot of the peak. Instead of snow the slope turned out to be ice, and for over two hours the cheery ring of the leader's ice-axe as he cut a way upwards was the prevailing sound. Great care had to be taken, for the angle became exceedingly steep, and a slip would have caused the party to quickly exchange icy hand-holds for harps—or coal shovels.

The final part of the slope was snow in good condition, and steps

were kicked to the top; then after negotiating crevasses of great width, faint indications of a previous party were observed, leading over the schrund by a snow bridge and up on to the south-west ridge. We learnt afterwards that no party had been on the mountain for three days.

Our objective was the south-east ridge, which lay on the other side of this upper glacier, so skirting round the base of the peak we arrived at the foot of the steep snow wall, which the guide books describe as being the chief difficulty of the expedition. The trouble to begin with was to cross the bergschrund, which, owing to the exceptionally fine season, did not possess a snow bridge. After following the schrund a long distance past the usual route for crossing, a place was found where it was partly choked with avalanche snow, and by combined tactics the leader cut his way through the wall of ice and snow that overhung the schrund, and with the help of a shoulder the upper edge was attained. We were much behind time, owing to the hours spent on the first ice-slope, and the difficulty in crossing the last bergschrund. We ought to have retraced our steps; what we did will be condemned by all good mountaineers, though it may serve as a warning to other Rucksackers climbing guideless.

The snow wall seemed never-ending, we sank to the knees at every step, and owing to this and the steep angle, not to mention a broiling hot sun, we were fagged when the col at the foot of the south-east ridge was reached. The arête was composed for the most part of sound rock, the last portion ice, when every step had to be carefully cut, but all the difficulties were at last overcome, and the heavily-corniced summit was ours. The view was magnificent, especially of the Finsteraarhorn and the far distant Weisshorn, and all around were great soft snow masses swelling away to the sky, relieved here and there by the sharp lines of rock ridges, clearly cut as by a tool. The joys of conquest ought to have been marred by the knowledge that it was long past mid-day, and that rightly we should be once more back at the hut, instead of admiring views at a height of 13,721 feet. During a hurried meal we talked over our position, and it was agreed by all that there was not the slightest chance of reaching the hut that night. The question that remained to be settled was, should we hurry down the ridge and snow-wall

and spend the night on the glacier, or find as good a resting-place as possible on the rock ridge? One member of the party had once been benighted on a glacier, and the story of his experience made the rest of the party very decided that wherever else they spent the night, the glacier was absolutely barred.

While descending the ridge a sharp look-out was kept, and about 700 feet below the summit a gîte was decided on. A V-shaped trough three feet deep suggested to Johnston that, with the help of the ice-axes and loose slabs of rock, this might be roofed over. We worked hard, but owing to the narrowness and steepness of the ridge and the fearsome drop to glaciers on either side the work proceeded slowly, for each movement was a careful operation, and moving slabs of rock under the circumstances anything but an easy matter. After many failures the roof, if one could call it such, was finished, and we began to prepare for the long night. Our stockings being wet through, Brierley and I took ours off and pulled on in their place dry fingerless climbing gloves, not very classy hose, but warm. Johnston, having read accounts of nights out, removed his boots and put his feet into the rucksack, and his description of the warmth he would feel through so doing made us nervous lest he should get overheated.

We had started on the expedition with sufficient provisions for the day only, and an argument took place as to how the food question should be arranged. One proposed a good tuck-in to keep out the cold during the night; the opposition party thought breakfast should be the main meal, so that we should have sufficient energy to reach the hut; the final decision was to divide the food into three equal portions for supper, breakfast and mid-day. It meant starvation rations, dividing the small supply into three meals for four hungry men, but personally I derived a fairly satisfactory feeling by drawing in my belt to its last hole and swallowing a slice of bread, three sardines, six raisins and a square-inch of chocolate.

We had two carriage candles, so Brierley put into operation a body-heating apparatus of his own invention. Having crawled into the shelter, he lit the glacier lantern and fixed it under his knees, his theory being that the heat from the lantern in this position warmed the blood as it flowed through the two main arteries, so that a beautiful glow of heat would be felt all over the body.

Perhaps this was so, but it was not long before his teeth joined ours in an endless chatter, though this might have been out of sympathy or else a deep scheme to keep us from borrowing the lantern. The shelter turned out a perfect fraud, for after Brierley and Johnston had got in, Barker's biggest efforts only succeeded in getting his legs under cover, and every movement sent a portion of the roof down into space, and the pathetic appeals from the two in possession would have thawed the heart of a bailiff. Most of the slabs were thrown off, but by no arrangement could all four get shelter, so Barker squeezed as much of his body between Brierley and Johnston as was possible, and I took up a position higher up the ridge in the lee of a projecting rock. The frost was keen, and the cold soon made itself felt, so that it became an absurdly difficult matter to hold a pipe between the teeth, which could not by any amount of will-power be kept still. We had all an overpowering desire to sleep, but at the back of my mind, or in some other remote part of my anatomy where no one can see what is going on, I had the idea firmly embedded that if anyone slept at that height and temperature, it would be a sleep that would do no one any good but the undertakers. This I managed to impress upon Barker and Johnston, and they in turn kept Brierley informed of it throughout the night, by judicious punches on any part of his body they were able to reach.

It has been truly said that comfort is not the ideal of the true Alpine climber; inaccessability is his watchword, discomfort his normal condition, and we were exceedingly happy in our airy bivouac, attempting to cultivate the enduring patience of a cat and to be as heedless of time as an oyster.

Towards ten o'clock lightning began to play about the summit of the peaks, and in time reached us, but we did not experience any shocks. In the open light of day the quaintly-carved pinnacles on the nearest peak had held no terrors for us, but when dumped there on a dark night, and these were weirdly shown up by the lightning flashes, we might be justified in supposing we had "got 'em" rather badly. The electric display lasted about two hours, and no sooner had it stopped than a cold wind sprang up and snow began to fall.

I crept as near to the leeward side of the ridge as I dared, but it was not long before I informed the three in the supposed shelter, that if I attempted to maintain my present exalted position on the

ridge they would be able to eat my share of the provisions at breakfast, as I should by that time have lost all interest in such matters. This touching appeal had great effect. Barker lay full length on the icy bed of the V-shaped scoop, then I was invited to lie on top of him, and Johnston on top of me; Brierley, crouched up amongst our legs and feet with the lantern still in position, formed the end of the bed. We remained like this for a long time until Barker could stand the weight of twenty-four stone no longer, and complained that cramp in every part of the body was worse than frozen limbs, so we carefully sorted ourselves out, Brierley and Johnston still remaining in possession, while Barker and I made tea.

This was a lengthy proceeding, ice and freshly-fallen snow having first to be melted, while it took two fillings of the spirit to get the water to anywhere near boiling point. There is no doubt that it was largely owing to this small aluminium spirit-stove that we suffered no bad after-effect from our night's exposure, for we managed to have hot tea three times during the night, and never was anything enjoyed more, despite the strong flavour of methylated spirit.

We had several false alarms of daybreak, one so early as midnight, but there was no mistaking it when it did at last come, the time being four o'clock. At first we could not see any distance owing to the dense clouds that enveloped us, but we made preparations for the descent. The snow, which had now stopped, had covered the rocks and ourselves, also Johnston's boots, which after a long search were discovered where they had been jammed into a crack, so that they had been mistaken for chockstones, being frozen so hard it was impossible for him to get them on. His hands were also slightly frost-bitten, so we decided to wait till the sun rose, and with its welcome warmth thaw our clothes and bodies out of this frozen state. About five o'clock the sun rose and soon dispersed the clouds around us. The summits of peaks innumerable began to show themselves, and the discomforts of the night were compensated for a hundredfold by the magnificent views that we now witnessed. Large banks of pure white clouds were slowly lifting from the Nesthorn, and as we stood on the ridge we saw a splendid example of the "Brocken spectre." We each saw our own shadow on the clouds, magnified many times, illuminated by a halo of rainbow colours, with a smaller halo round the head. Though we stood

within a few feet of one another, none of us could see any shadow but his own. It does not fall to the lot of every climber to see a day-break from the crest of a narrow ridge 13,000 feet above sea-level, and long after the "Brocken spectre" had vanished we sat revelling in the warm sunshine and feasting our eyes on the glorious views that were to be obtained in every direction. We were brought down to earth by someone stating that a feast at the Bel Alp was what he yearned for.

The descent to the col, owing to snow and ice-glazed rocks, proved the hardest part of the expedition. We had at last to abandon the rocks and cut our way down the steep ice-slopes. The snow wall was frozen hard, and our flounderings of the previous day were plainly to be seen. The bergschrund was easier to cross descending, for planting an ice-axe firmly in the snow the last man used this as a belay in lowering his companions down, and shoulders were then ready to act as a ladder for his own descent.

After retracing our steps across the glacier to the foot of the south-west ridge, we attempted to find a route that would lead us to the top of the rock rib, and so save us a descent of the ice-wall that had been our undoing the day before. We were baffled by the crevasses and schrunds that continually cut off further progress, and Brierley, with his years of experience of this class of work, had to take the lead and eventually piloted us to where the glaciers steepened into an ice-fall and joined the rock rib. Once on the rocks the going was straightforward, and we took it easy all the way down to the hut, which was reached after an absence of thirty-five hours.

S. F. JEFFCOAT.

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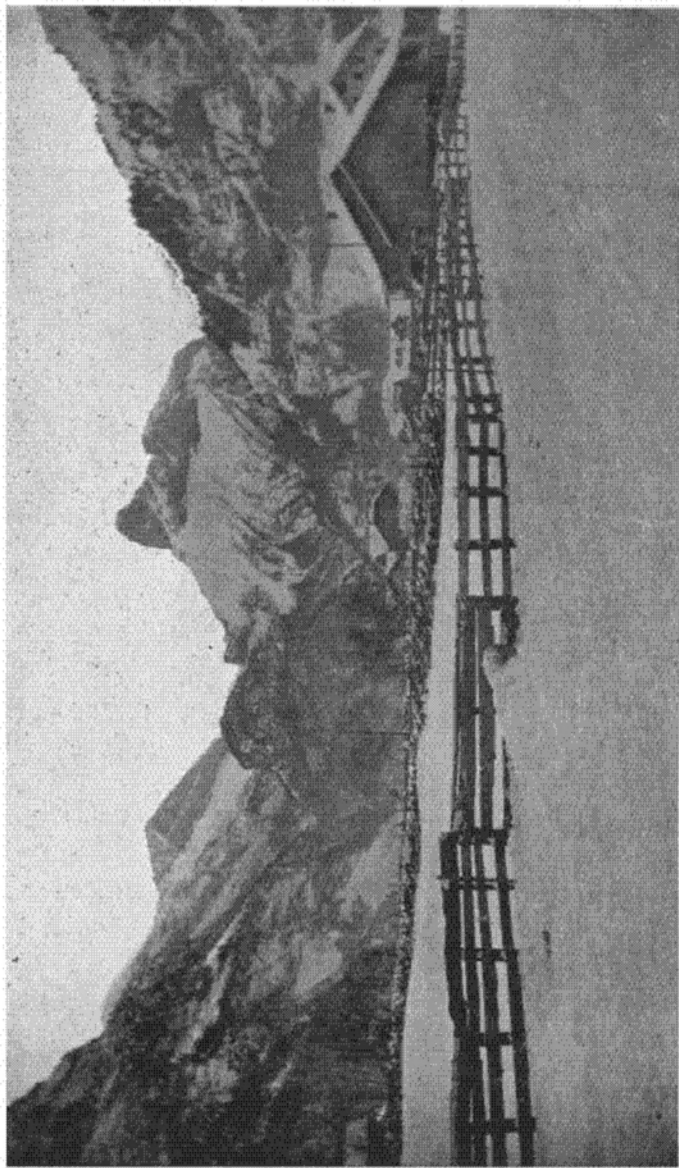


Photo by S. L. Pearce

KANDERSTEG LOOKING SOUTH,

ALTELS, RINDERHORN, AND GELLIHORN IN THE BACKGROUND.