

## GUIDELESS IN SWITZERLAND

S. R. HARPER

THE title sounds grand, but this is a chronicle of very small beer. It is a record of pinnacle parties of moderate accomplishment doing in the Alps very much what we do at home—that is, climbing mountains without professional or other assistance, and, as at home, encountering very bad weather. Climbing in the Alps is not different in kind from climbing at home, but the scale is different, and the scale involves problems of time and glaciers and snow and ice in general, which mean, for me at least, leaving a margin of safety so wide that it shuts out the big peaks altogether, and makes it essential to choose climbs of very moderate difficulty on the smaller ones.

In 1936 we did our biggest guideless climbs on rock, and on mountains with which, except for the Portjengrat, we had already some acquaintance.

In 1938 we set our absolute standard lower, and worked out routes with guide book and map in regions with which only one of us had any acquaintance, and that too old to be serviceable. We had an extraordinary sense of triumph when we arrived on the top of the right peak—however insignificant—for we were much buffeted by fate. The weather, bad in 1936, was execrable in 1938, with more mist than I have ever encountered in Switzerland, and terrifying storms. Guide books were out of print, or proved when we did get them to be so condensed as to be misleading. The S.A.C. guides which we managed to borrow employed a lot of our wet-weather time—and we had plenty!—in laborious translation. After which the weather would force us up a different (and easier) mountain.

In 1936 the party consisted of Evelyn Lowe, Penelope Seth-Hughes, Rosalind Proctor and myself. My recollections of the first five days, at the Engelhörner hut, include two good climbing days, and much rain; silly games with the four Swiss lads who formed with ourselves the permanent population of the hut—Up-Jenkins, played with the earnestness befitting a major war, and an incredibly strenuous bout of Animal Grab; Werner's scarlet face and chamois-bound into the open when he woke from a wet-day-afternoon nap to find about thirty tourists staring at him as if he had been a zoo exhibit; the courteous

casualness with which we were met when we got down at dusk from the Simelistock, by lads who had just strolled out for a walk after supper, and had no notion at all that we might be requiring assistance; sharp black peaks seen through mist; and the despairing drip of water from the roof.

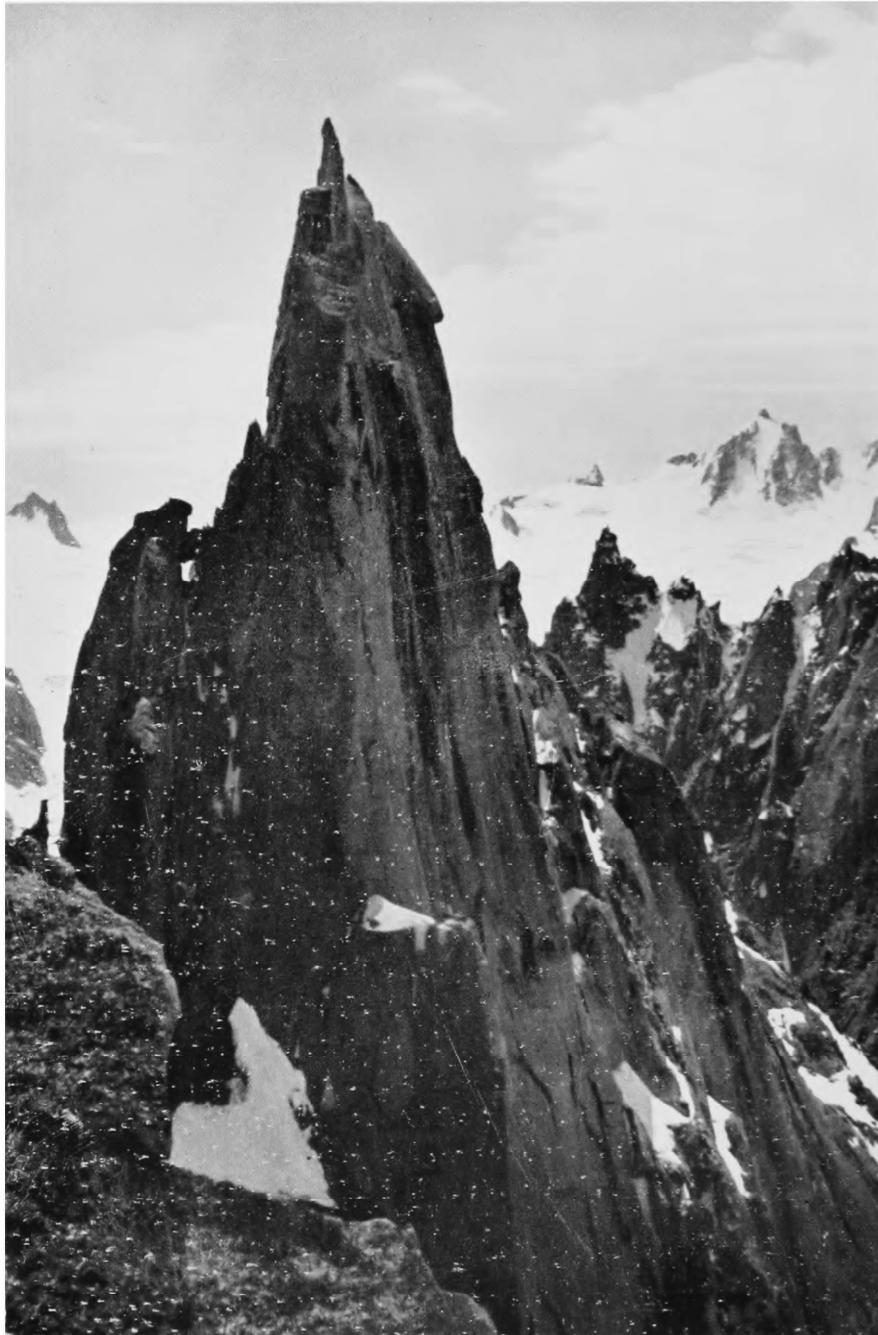
On our two good days, we did first the little and big Simelistock, and then the Kingspitz traverse, up by the Teufelsjoch and down by the ordinary route. The Simelistock is a pleasant climb with one good corner, and our descent was complicated by mist, which made us go back by the long way we had come, instead of descending on the rope by the short downward route. (To be honest, we were very uncertain of being able to find this, even in clear weather.) We landed on the path just as dusk fell.

The Teufelsjoch was fairly hard to find, and the climb up from it intimidating beyond belief. It was not as bad as it looked, or we should not have got up, but it was exciting, and we started dead cold, having rashly lunched on the pass. Even Penelope, most callous of photographers, faltered when Evelyn tackled the overhang. The way down was not hard, but it was difficult to find (for kletterschuhe leave no scratches) and it involved one picturesque descent on the rope, which I do not believe to have been in the book.

These two climbs had warmed us up pleasantly, and had given us a pretty good idea of the climbing standard and of the geography of the Engelhörner. But, alas, we were to get no more. The weather broke and it rained uncompromisingly for a week, with one small break when, in company with Gladys Low, whom we had met at Grindelwald, we raced a thunderstorm up the tiny Strahlegghorn. Penelope and Rosalind had to go home before the hills were clear enough to do anything more without guides, but Evelyn and I moved over to the Saas Valley, with the Portjengrat in mind.

We arrived at Saas Grund on a lovely Sunday evening, to find our guide book and maps unattainable in the post office. It was not a season in which to waste fine weather, so we left them there, and set off up the valley into that magical region reached only by those who wander mapless and without reliable information. We tramped up a curling valley in the gathering dusk, and just when we were beginning to consider ourselves





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THE GRÉPON

lost, we came round a corner on lights and voices—English voices. We could still see the long ridge above us that must be the Portjengrat, and all we needed to know was which end to start. Anyone can follow a ridge, map or no map; but we had heard of a gap where one must descend on the rope, and taken the wrong way the gap might be unclimbable.

So we turned to the voices, and Evelyn said :

‘ Could you tell us which end of the Portjengrat you start ? ’

There was a little pause, then :

‘ But where is your guide, Fraulein ? ’

‘ In the post office ; but we only want to know which end the climb begins.’

‘ In the *post office*. . . ? ’

And then a shout of laughter, explanations, and a gracious invitation from the party’s guide to follow his traces across the glacier to the foot of the rock-climb. We accepted gratefully, mentally deciding to be so far behind that the rock-climb at any rate should be all our own work.

Accepting help should have destroyed the fairy tale atmosphere, but it did not. We actually enjoyed getting up before dawn, and came down to breakfast with the quivering exaltation proper only to early youth. Even the discovery that three other parties were bound for the Portjengrat could not damp us. We let them start well ahead, but either we raced, or they were slow, for we caught them up on the edge of the snow, and fell into conversation with Frederick Supersaxo, who was guiding a French couple. He asked a lot of questions, and seemed impressed (fortunately for us) by the Teufelsjoch. At any rate when the other parties turned toward the centre of the ridge, he protested vigorously against our following. That way was a *chemin des vaches* : it left out the whole climb : it was no way for mountaineers like us. So we followed him (meditating on the disadvantages of coming without the guide book, and grateful for our rescue), and he took us to the foot of the climb, and let us alone. The rest was pure delight. The weather was still uncertain, and mist boiled in the corries on the Italian side, but we climbed in sunshine, and on good clean rock. It was not a hard climb (I remember only one exposed corner, with a queer balance) ; but I do not remember a more delightful day.

In 1938 I went with Jean Orr-Ewing and Marjorie Heys-Jones to the Maderanerthal. It is a beautiful valley, but too shut in for a queer sultry August, with thunderstorms and mist and stifling heat. The weather was malignant, and the mists came down as soon as we had finished prospecting, and wanted to climb. Our first climb was the traverse of the tiny Swarzstöcke, on which we walked by faith, not sight. Two days later a reluctant gleam of sunshine lured us up to the Cavardiras hut, and the Oberalpstock—a tallish mountain, but dull. Jean and Marjorie did the Piz Ault next day, but an attack on the Düssistock was foiled by a most magnificent thunderstorm.

We moved to the Goeschiner Alp, but the weather was so hopeless than I had actually left for home when a fine day sent me doubling back to meet the others at Steinalp. It was colder—surely a good sign; and though there was a lot of snow on the hills, in a day or two the smaller peaks should be accessible.

On a lovely morning we set out to do the Vorder Thierberg. As we could not buy or borrow the S.A.C. guide, we were dependent on Ball, whose laconic style contrasted rather ominously with the long, descriptive adjectival sentences in German through which we were accustomed to curse our way. Fortunately, the Vorder Thierberg presented a north face uncompromisingly hung with icicles, and we turned to the easier Giglistock, which was our second string. We had been wakened late, had been delayed by a difference with a glacier stream, and had wasted time prospecting on the Vorder Thierberg, but there was plenty of time, and after a scramble over the Grünekehlen we reached the top shortly after eleven. It was pleasant there and we lingered. There was a hot sun, a most picturesque chamois, and no hurry. There was a lot of cloud in the valleys to the south-west of us, and the wind was back in the old quarter, but none of us doubted that the weather would hold for the day.

We consulted Ball for a way down, and he gave one apparently shorter than our upward route by the Steinlimmi. Beginning at the hotel, he indicated a route along the grass-clad ridge of the Thahleggli, and up the scoop between the Thahleggli and the Brunnenstock, and ‘by a snow slope reach the summit.’ (Three and three-quarter hours.) It sounded fine.

It was not, of course, Ball's fault that by the time we were on the edge of the snow-slope the mist was drifting past and thickening every minute, but we were surprised to find the snow-slope a steep glacier, with no fewer than three large bergshrunds. A thundery summer and recent snow had produced a surface of loose snow on bare ice, which could hardly be called treacherous since it did not attempt to deceive. You stood on it and went straight into the bergshrund. Through gaps in the mist, we could see a long glacier with a lot of ominous depressions, and then a curtain was drawn with gentle finality. We were to see no more. After consultation, we decided to skirt round on the rocks of the Brumenstock, where the chamois had been, getting lower and further towards the Thahleggli. In this way we could circumvent some of the bergshrunds, and make the inevitable step-cutting shorter. Ball seemed so confident; there must be a way; and the chamois got on splendidly. Actually, his taste in rocks was execrable. Of all dilapidated rubbish heaps the Brunnenstock on that side is the worst. For an hour and a half we crawled down, often moving one at a time and afraid to breathe in case the whole disreputable dump collapsed on top of us. Finally, Jean lost patience and began to cut steps down the ice. We were much tempted to slither, but the visibility was about ten feet, and we could not be sure we had outflanked all the crevasses. Another hour and a half saw us on a flat snowfield, where we conducted a short but spirited argument over two compasses and a map.

The rest was pure farce; we found the Thahleggli ridge without difficulty and proceeded as directed by Ball. At the end of three hours we had discovered about a dozen ridges, all running in the right direction (or thereabouts) and all ending in unclimbable grass and earth precipices. A good many we explored twice, arguing the while with perfect courtesy and complete lack of conviction. By six, I, at least, was contemplating the crowning absurdity of a night out, not a thousand feet above the hotel, with all the exasperating expense and humiliation of a search party complete with stretchers and cognac.

Then—quite suddenly—the puzzle solved itself. On Marjorie's suggestion we walked down a grassy scoop in the

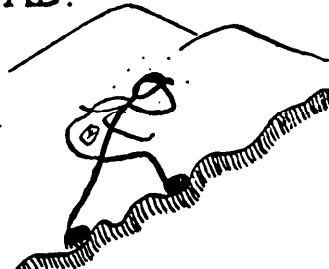
direction of the Steinlimmi glacier by which we had ascended. We were quite sure it would end in a precipice, but the lower the warmer. It did not : it led us out on the Steinlimmi glacier below all difficulty, and in twenty minutes we were on the path. We got back before dark in mist so thick that we could not see the hotel until we banged into the fence.

The mist was still down when Marjorie and I went home two days later.

## THOUGHTS ON A FIRST LEAD.



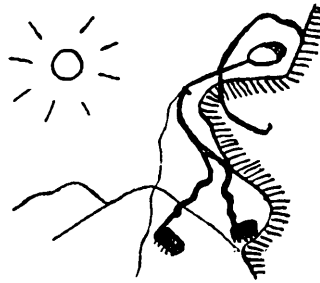
GRAND TO BE OFF TO THE HILLS AGAIN.



AM GETTING TOO OLD FOR THIS KIND OF THING.



ALWAYS KNEW MY LEGS WERE TOO SHORT.



THIS SETTLES IT, I'VE DONE WITH GLIMBING.



LET ME GET OVER THIS SAFELY, THEN NEVER AGAIN



MANAGED THAT LAST PITCH RATHER WELL. GRAND DAY! NOW, TOMORROW,

M. Wood.