

## SANS GUIDE ET SANS GARÇON

*Jo Scarr*

WE left Dover for the Alps on 28th July, Muriel Baldwin, myself and Bambino (a Ford van). We had food for a month, one small tent held together by string and mildew, ice-axes, crampons, a rope, a little money and a lot of plans. Rash? Maybe, but we couldn't find any other girls who were free to go, and both of us, after two seasons with male parties, felt that we would like to have a go on our own. So armed with several lists of 'recommended routes' and much advice, varying from 'I'd do the Charmoz-Grépon traverse—splendid route', to 'Don't go on the glaciers without a guide', we set off.

We were heading for the Dolomites, feeling that we would be safer on rock, even if rotten, than on the less familiar snow and ice, but we decided to have a few days in the Alps en route. We chose Chamonix because Muriel knew it well, but I had never been there. Arriving at 11 p.m., dead tired after two days' driving, we pitched our tent in the official camp site—a dreadful spot which we left early next day to drive to Le Tour at the head of the valley. Here we established camp (or, more accurately, put up our pathetic little tent) and spent a lazy day in the sun recovering.

Next day a long hot slog took us to the Albert Première hut, which we found crowded with others who, like ourselves, had decided that there was a much better chance of climbing on the lower peaks above Le Tour, than on the giants plastered with fresh snow. We had decided to try the Forbes arête on the Chardonnet, possibly somewhat ambitious for our first route, but a party who had been up it the previous day had assured us that the snow was in good condition. By surreptitious detective work (euphemism for 'eavesdropping') we found that three other parties had the same route in mind so, wanting to be alone, we determined to set off either first or last.

It was last . . . In the half-light we set off across the glacier and as the first pink sun-light caught the top of our peak I realised that I had forgotten just how beautiful Alpine sunrises could be. On we went, wending our way carefully through the crevasses, although with footsteps to follow we had no route-finding problems. Then the first ice-slope, crampons on, and the exhilaration of climbing step by step on the crunching ice, sun on our faces, a sea of clouds below and mountains everywhere.

The first real difficulty was a little ice-wall which led on to the arête proper, the steps were already cut, but it was still steep with a gaping crevasse below. This surmounted, the ridge was a sensational snow comb along which we inched our way, very conscious of the exposure. Some delightful climbing on rock-gendarmes, a little more snow and then 'le sommet'! The others already ensconced there laughed as we solemnly shook hands, but for us it was a memorable moment—the first peak either of us had done "sans guide et sans garçon". Moreover, we had enjoyed every minute of it, and we both admitted that for very, very few of our previous peaks could we say the same. After our six hours of climbing we allowed ourselves an hour's sunbathing on the summit, then down to the hut and wine to celebrate a wonderful day.

The following day we moved over to the Trient hut, from which we planned to reconnoitre the Aiguilles Doreés. We knew that this traverse was an extremely long route, but otherwise, according to our advisers, not too hard. We had the A.C.G. guide book and this described the traverse from left to right, but that evening we got talking to a guide who told us that it was much better the other way round; when we enquired the reason he kept using a word we didn't understand (and still don't). We were in rather a quandary, but eventually decided to stick to our own guide-book and hope for the best.

It was bitterly cold when we set off, and we felt very much alone with no tracks to follow, and no-one else out at all. Spirits revived, however, when the sun came up and we began climbing, rather loose rock and some difficulty route-finding, but soon we were at the first gendarmes. Some pleasant climbing and then we reached the bit we had both secretly been worrying about, a Grade IV crack up a large steep gendarme called the Javelle. We were astonished to find that this was, in fact, an 'extra', one could easily bypass it on a giant ledge. Should we or shouldn't we? Eventually we decided to try it, or rather, I decided that Muriel should try it as, in a rash moment in England, she'd agreed to lead the cracks and chimneys, if I led the delicate walls and slabs.

The guide book mentioned that it was necessary to insert and pull up on a jammed knot sling to reach the first belay so Muriel armed herself with several assorted sizes, and led off. All went well

until, a few feet below the belay, she tried to insert the jammed knot. She tried everywhere but couldn't make it hold at all, so in desperation finally climbed to the belay without it. I was full of admiration and decided Muriel was such a tiger that she'd better lead the next pitch as well! Unfortunately our illusions were soon shattered when Muriel called down 'I've found it, it's up here!' All we'd done was to split the first pitch into two and a jammed knot runner was essential after all. We reached the top and then abseiled back down, a horrible moment when we thought the rope had jammed, but fortunately it came down eventually. We'd spent an hour and a half climbing a gendarme that we had no need to climb, unwise in view of subsequent events, but we would not have felt the traverse complete without it.

It was now 11 a.m. and we were still not halfway along the ridge so we pressed on. All went well until we reached the great ice couloir, but as we ventured on to the ice we realized it would not be easy. The ice was too steep to crampon up, and when I tried to cut steps I found the ice so rotten that it just disintegrated. I retreated back to the rock, and we reviewed the situation. There was no alternative route, the only rock was overhanging. If we had done the whole traverse in the other direction we would have abseiled down the rock and thus avoided the couloir, but it was too late to change our minds now. After lunch and much discussion we decided to 'have a look at' the couloir, for when we had traversed into it for about 40 feet we would have a better view and be able to judge whether to go on or retreat. This time Muriel led off, laboriously cutting 'soup-plate' steps.

It took half an hour for her to go 40 feet, but then the ice seemed to improve and she yelled down 'I think it's O.K.' Another half-hour and she was belayed and ready for me to follow. I proceeded gingerly, finding that the rucksack tended to upset my balance; we had made the mistake of taking only one sack (to save time sack-hauling) which was inordinately heavy and a considerable hindrance when climbing. I found Muriel belayed to a peg in the rock-wall bordering the couloir. The stance was so small that we had to stand on each other's feet to change places, and I would have led through, but Muriel having started on the job wanted to finish it, so she led on.

In spite of the sun it was very cold, and all feeling gradually

*SUMMIT RIDGE OF THE RIMPFISCHORN*  
*Muriel Baldwin and Pat Wood on the ridge*

*Photo: Jo Scarr*



went out of me as Muriel slowly cut her way upwards. The ice was so rotten with water running underneath that each step took several minutes to cut, and I realised that a bivouac was almost certainly inevitable. Other people were obviously getting worried too, for a helicopter flew over from the Trient Hut and hovered over us for several minutes, but I waved and it flew away again.

It took  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours to cut the 100 ft. up to the ridge, and when at last it was my turn to climb, I was almost too numb to move. However with the help of a tight rope I sped upwards and then we were there, on top of the ridge, with the most difficult part of the route behind us; what a relief! We opened a tin of sardines to celebrate, and then feeling very light-hearted, set off again. First an unpleasant section of steep, wet snow on rock, then some beautiful rocky slabs led us to the Tête Biselx, the highest point on the ridge. Here we realised that a night out was inevitable, so carried on till it was almost dark and then found a rock-ledge for the night.

We were not ideally equipped for a bivouac even though we had foreseen the possibility—we both had giant polythene bags, Muriel had a duvet jacket but I had only an extra jersey, having nearly bought a duvet in Chamonix, but finally decided to think it over for a few days. How I regretted it that night! To complete our equipment we had a packet of Spangles and four dried apricots, having broken all the rules and eaten our emergency rations for lunch. Actually for a bivouac at about 12,000 feet it wasn't too bad; tee'h-chattering and no sleep, but a beautiful, still night, and with philosophical discussion and a Spangle every hour, the time passed quite quickly. After a breakfast of two dried apricots each we were waiting for the sun to come up before starting, when suddenly we heard voices. We quickly climbed up towards them and found they'd heard we were 'missing' and come up to look for us. They were very pleased to see us alive and well, and after pointing out the way down, carried on to climb the Tête Biselx.

We thought the route down would be obvious, but our adventures were not yet over. Somehow we got off route, and found ourselves at the top of a vertical 50 ft. chimney. An abseil sling was already in position so we were not the first to come this way, and below us we could see the col and bergschrund we must cross. It was an awkward abseil in a narrow chimney, so when Muriel had

gone down I slid the sack down the rope and then threw the ice-axes down into what looked like soft scree. Mine broke . . .

From the col we decided to abseil over the bergschrund, but unfortunately when rigged up, the rope-ends just dangled into it! We thought of abseiling to the lip and then taking a flying leap, the last man (me according to Muriel) holding on to one end of the rope as she leapt, but I vetoed the suggestion. The only alternative was to cut steps across an icy gully to some rock which led down closer to the bergschrund. This I began to do, finding the ice very thin and rotten, when I heard voices immediately above. It was a French party returning down the ordinary route who, seeing what had happened, dropped me a rope. I had neither pride nor will-power to refuse at this stage, and with their help we were soon across, down the rock and over the bergschrund. Our ways then parted, so saying goodbye we plodded back towards the Trient Hut, zigzagging to avoid crevasses, real and imaginary.

The last slope up to the hut seemed endless, and when at last we got there we found out on the terrace a great crowd who had been watching our progress through binoculars, most embarrassing!

However, everyone was wonderfully kind, we were unroped, sat down, given a 4 pint pot of tea and told that we'd done the first guideless feminine ascent. More and more tea, a huge meal and a bottle of wine; memories after that grow very hazy . . .