

AN ASCENT OF THE SOUTH FACE OF THE TÄSCHHORN

BY GEORGES DE RHAM

We are greatly indebted to M. de Rham for sending this narrative, and to Mr. R. L. G. Irving for translating it from the French.—EDITOR.

OUR party of four, Gabriel Chevalley, André Roch, Alfred Tissières and myself were at Zermatt on Saturday, August 7, 1943. A succession of difficult climbs had put us in first rate condition. With a low temperature, a north wind blowing and a rising barometer everything seemed to combine to favour the execution of a project we had been cherishing throughout the past year: the ascent of the south face of the Täschhorn. Accordingly, we walked up above the Täschalp in the afternoon and set up our tent on the right bank of the Weingarten Glacier and spent the night there.

At 2 A.M. on Sunday morning, August 8, my alarm watch ended my slumbers. 'Time to get up!' I cried, and put my head out to find fog and impenetrable darkness. Should we wait an hour or two? No, after all, the fog was clearing and showing a starlit sky above, and fine weather seemed a certainty; we decided to start. Tissières set to work to light the fire, warm the milk we had brought up from the Täschalp and cook the porridge which, with a tin of jam, was our breakfast. At 3.30 we were off, carrying only three rucksacks, a couple of ice-axes, no crampons, but a few pitons, clasp-rings and hammers.

Roch led the way in the dark with a candle stuck in a lantern, which helped us to cross some big boulders to the glacier. There the crevasses forced us to make several détours and perform occasional acrobatics on edges of ice. Daylight came as we reached the northern bay of the Weingarten Glacier and we made straight for the great rocky buttress of the south face of the Täschhorn.

We were climbing on two ropes, Roch leading with Tissières, while I came last on a second rope behind Chevalley. From the very start the rocks overlie one another like roofing slabs. By bearing to the right we found ledges which brought us back to the crest of the buttress which we followed for a stretch. Roch went ahead in great style and it was all I could do to keep up without getting blown. Higher up, we were in doubt whether to bear right again, but in the end we kept rather to the left of the crest. The rocks consisted of very steep slabs, often with small shale on them, and arranged in the same roof-like manner as below. As we neared the snowy shoulder which formed the top of the buttress, the rocks became impossibly steep. Roch had to turn sharply to the left across an ice slope and cut steps; this gave me a chance to take a short but much needed rest. Here our two

ropes joined up. By 9.30 Roch had finished the steps and at 10 A.M. we were all on the snowy shoulder.

Since early morning a vast sea of cloud, reaching to the level of our camp, had covered the Zermatt valley. As the sun rose, some very high clouds turned red before any of the peaks caught the light, then the Matterhorn began to give off a trail of smoke to the south and the sky whitened. There was every prospect of a cold day, just the sort of day to favour our success by preventing the fall of stones and icicles.

By following the crest of the snowy shoulder and traversing to our right under some great cornices we reached the point where it abutted against the wall of the peak. To our right a couloir ran up to an overhanging cliff under the cornices of the Teufelsgrat. I examined the place well and was convinced that any attempt to reach this ridge was doomed to failure.

Only one way seemed possible : to cross the couloir and bear up to the right so as to rejoin the buttress that rose like a great broad nose in the direct line of the summit. On the far side of the couloir higher up we made out a sort of cleft at the base of an obtuse-angled slanting buttress, formed by the intersection of an extremely steep slab, the lower being the upper, vertical wall. This was where Roch made his attack. He ran out a rope's length climbing up the right bank of the couloir, cut steps in the ice across it, got on to the left wall and drove in a piton for safety before tackling the extremely exposed traverse to the right of the cleft. The time seemed long as we hung on to minute holds while he kept up his persistent efforts to overcome the cleft. In a moment of relaxed vigilance Chevalley's rucksack disappeared down the couloir. The cleft was about 60 feet high, it was filled with ice and presented difficulties of the severest order. Roch cut nicks in the ice driving in pitons where it was possible. At the top he managed to get on to a rocky edge with a drop on the right, then climbed a chimney with overhangs in it and at last by a short descending traverse to the right reached easier ground. After this passage, he felt he needed something to eat, but almost directly after we had rejoined him, recovering the pitons as we came, he was off again. The upward traverse continued by means of ledges and short walls and brought us to the above mentioned great broad nose below the summit.

It was now 1.15 P.M. and the mist was all round us ; the Täschhorn itself had begun to give off a trail of smoke, eddies of the north wind reached us and made us shiver. Hoar frost was appearing on the rocks and on our clothes and whitening my friends' hair and eyebrows. The precipice to which we were clinging offered nothing but overhangs with huge pendant stalactites of ice. Such a generally icy atmosphere had its effect on the moral of the party, which had long since lost any inclination to laugh or joke.

The climb had made great demands on Roch, who had lead throughout ; I felt I ought to give him a call that when he had had enough he could be relieved. But I did not urge it, for I knew our pace would

slacken if I went in front and we had no time to lose. Moreover I have no objection at all to coming last with the assurance of the rope and the advantage of seeing the least strenuous route by watching the efforts of the men in front. Also, I felt rather numb from the cold.

Roch, however, made a gallant lead up the nose, but after getting up about sixty feet he suddenly stopped and said, 'Rham must go in front, I've got cramp, my hands close and I can't open them; but it ought to go all right.'

Accordingly I climbed past Chevalley and Tissières and we roped up in a different order. I tied on to Chevalley with two 80-ft. ropes. I left him my rucksack and went up to rejoin Roch with a hammer, pitons and clasp-rings attached to my belt. In a strangely subdued voice he asked me how I felt. I told him I was all right, not mentioning that I was half frozen. I then climbed on up the nose, till it became overhanging and I arrived under a vast sort of ceiling from which a whole forest of icicles was suspended.¹ They had to be broken off, an operation of some danger for my friends below. Chevalley was the only one to be hit; luckily he was not seriously hurt. The climb straight up above the ceiling was impossible; it looked however as if by edging along a couple of yards horizontally I might be able to get out of our impasse by getting on top of a kind of roof. It was a terribly exposed place, and I did not dare tackle it till I had driven a piton firmly in and passed the rope through a clasp-ring to guard against certain disaster if I came off. But fixing that piton was no easy matter; the crack in the rock opened out when the piton was driven in and the rock tended to disintegrate. At last after a long struggle in a horribly uncomfortable position three pitons were got in; together they should give sufficiently good holding and I began the traverse. To my horror the first hold I reached proved worthless, just a fragment of loose rock. Stretching out further still I managed to grip a second hold, which was luckily firm, and get a footing on the roof, where my rubber soles enabled me to stand without slipping. A few yards more, and the place was climbed.

Here I drove in another piton firmly to belay the others. Chevalley came up with one of the rucksacks and an axe, and then it was Roch's turn. When Tissières arrived after recovering all but one of the pitons, I had already gone on. It was after three o'clock, so there was need to hurry. Higher up we were forced back again on to the centre line and had to overcome a slightly overhanging wall with only the tiniest holds and those not too firm and sloping the wrong way. When my hands had not lost all feeling from the cold, they were terribly painful, as contact with the rocks had removed the skin from the ends of my fingers. Despite the doubtful security given by a

¹ I think this must be the place described by Mr. Geoffrey Winthrop Young in his splendid, thrilling account of the first ascent ('Memories of the Mischabel'), the place which was so brilliantly climbed by Franz Lochmatter, in nailed boots, without pitons, when snow was falling. Even with all the resources of modern technique, pitons, clasp-rings and rubber shoes, I thought it was exceptionally severe.

wobbly piton I found the place fearfully exposed. I was feeling also that we were going too slowly and tried to quicken the pace, but when I contemplated the consequences of the slightest slip I realised that time mattered little and that nothing, in fact, counted except getting up without falling off.

A little further on I bore once more to the right of the direct line, hoping to reach a stretch of rock not quite so steep. Instead of that I came to another overhang and this time, instead of any comforting platform, everything above it was vertical. Badly stuck, I was just beginning to get back to the central line when I espied an icy crack, lower down to the right, which looked as if it might provide a way on to the south-east ridge. So I held Chevalley from above while he led into it, disappeared behind a projecting corner, crossed a difficult cleft with the assistance of the rope and then shouted back that there was a way out. I was soon beside him and, climbing up a groove in a patch of loose, orange coloured rock, I came out on the south-east ridge near what appeared to be the summit tower. We were all gathered together on the ridge at 5.35 P.M. Seeing the lateness of the hour and our uncertainty about the way down the ridge, and fearing a night out in such arctic conditions, Roch suggested an immediate descent without visiting the summit. I fell in with the suggestion, not without some genuine regrets; I should have liked to traverse the short stretch between us and the top and measure the distance.² But I was conscious of having been too slow in the lead on the last part of the climb and Chevalley and I had occasionally lost more time by getting our ropes entangled. Roch had been kind enough to show no signs of impatience, so I felt it was up to me to agree to his proposal, the more readily since the cold, misty conditions prevailing would have made the visit to the summit quite futile.

We hurriedly gulped down some food and drink and began the descent at 6.5 P.M. The mist soon cleared off and afterwards a glorious sunset night came on while we were in the northern bay of the Weingarten Glacier. A small bright crescent moon helped us through the big boulders by the moraine and at 10 P.M. we were back in camp.

² Tissières and I paid another visit to the Täschorh soon after, and we then estimated the distance to the summit from where we struck the south-east ridge at about 160 feet.