

My second Mont Blanc climb [to be continued]

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MY SECOND MONT BLANC CLIMB

By W. STETTBACHER

For many decades past, the Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn have undoubtedly been the most famous mountains—the Mont Blanc, because it is the highest point in the Alps, and probably the highest that most of us can ever hope to reach.

The summit of the Mont Blanc is, surprisingly, a flat snowfield, on which even a plane has landed. There is neither a cross nor a stoneman there. Perhaps a previous party has dropped a few orange peels, but traces are soon wiped out, as snow falls often on the Mont Blanc. The summit is one of those strange places on earth, where Man does not leave any lasting traces.

Today, the Mont Blanc is climbed differently from what it was 150 years ago. When Balmat and Paccard made the first ascent in the year 1786, they used to wear tall cylindrical shaped hats, long frocks, and carried alpenstocks and ladders. Today we climbers have strapped to our feet crampons with as many as twelve steel points which grip the ice, and we carry light sleeping bags in our rucksacks, as well as very light but tough nylon ropes.

The normal routes which today lead to the summit are either from the Cabane Grand Mulets (Chamonix side) or from the newly constructed hut on the Aiguille du Goûter (St. Gervais side). They are technically not very difficult, in fine and warm weather, but, at the same time, the Mont Blanc can be a very difficult and above all a very dangerous mountain. It is one of the most dangerous mountains of Europe, which has resulted in the greatest number of deaths, and will continue to be so in future. It must not be forgotten that the Mont Blanc is nearly 5,000 metres high, and as it is the most direct outpost of the Western Alps, it receives the full fury of the atlantic gales.

The ascent of the Mont Blanc gives immense satisfaction, both on account of the panoramas which are being unfolded before the climber's eyes during the ascent, and because of the enormous circular view from the summit. But there is also the strangeness and solitude of the summit, which dominates all the horizons.

When taking the route via the Aiguille du Goûter, one has the benefit of an electric tramway up to 2,450 metres; thence two hours' easy walk takes you to the Cabane de Tête Rousse, situated at an altitude of about 3,100 metres. From there, one has to climb up to the steep Aiguille du Goûter, which route is often full of snow, exposed to stonefall, very steep and tiring at the end of the long journey. When you arrive at the top of the Aiguille, you find there the newly constructed hut, at an altitude of 3,835 metres. The construction of this Refuge, holding about sixty persons, was possible only through the regular use of helicopters. The climber can dine and wine here, just as in an Hotel, at moderate prices. This is a magnificent spot, like an eagle's lair, giving an impression of high altitude; the sunset here is not to be missed, and the view and impression of high altitude one gets here is something not likely to be forgotten.

On the other hand, passing the night at such an altitude may cause considerable physical inconvenience; I myself was unable to sleep during my two nights' stay; I could merely rest, and continuously suffered from a slight headache, which is forgotten almost immediately when the next day is fine and one gets into the fresh air.

From here, one rapidly gains height over steep but easy slopes, to reach and pass the summit of the Dome du

Goûter about 4,300 metres high. The Cabane Vallot is reached in a few minutes, and the other route from Chamonix joins.

The route from Chamonix, from which the first ascent was made, leads over the Plan de l'Aiguille, which can be reached by cable railway. After three to four hours' climb, the new Refuge of the Grand Mulets is reached, 3,051 metres high. The starting point from this side is low, 3,051 metres as against 3,855 metres! However, this represents only two hours difference in climbing, and these two extra hours may be compensated by the reduced fatigue during the first day, and especially because at such lower height the heart is less subject to strain, and the sleep better.

Both routes, as previously mentioned, join at a height of 4,362 metres where the Cabane Vallot, with a small Observatory nearby, stands. If this refuge were not built of light metal, it would have been used as firewood by tourists stranded here in fog or blizzards. This would be barbarism, if the hut were situated at an altitude of 2,000 metres, but here we live in another world. The sun does not always shine on the Mont Blanc; the storms on the Mont Blanc are rightly feared. Many a party reaches this hut when they are at the end of their tether. Even on fine days, the temperature inside is below freezing point. All the chairs, tables, beds, etc., are made of light metal, to make sure that they are not used as firewood.

From the Vallot hut, the summit can be reached in about two hours, provided that mountain sickness does not make itself felt. The 4,500 metres zone is for a man from the lowlands a source of danger. Suddenly one is seized with an overpowering desire to sleep; the legs feel heavy like 2 cwts. of lead, and it is with the utmost difficulty that they can be moved. The only desire is to rest, and to sleep. Climbers thus affected would lie down for their eternal sleep if they had no companions to urge them on, by force if necessary. No one is safe from mountain sickness.

The first obstacles after the Cabane Vallot are the steep snow humps known as the "Bosses de Dromadaire", from where the summit is seen some 1,000 feet higher. It is particularly from here onwards that the climbing may become both difficult and dangerous in bad weather, and blizzards sweeping the mountain have been responsible for numerous fatalities. It is also here that climbers feel the effects of the rarefied air, and have frequently to stop and gasp for breath.

The last hundred yards are over a steep ice or snow ridge, as sharp as a razor, and less than a foot wide. Here, it is impossible to deviate, either to the right or left.

I recently read in one of Mr. F. S. Smythe's books (Frank Smythe was a famous pre-war British climber, known for his attempts on Mount Everest, who died a few years after the war as a result of an unknown germ which he caught while in India) that there was no finer level traverse than to cross the Mont Blanc from west to east (or if preferred in the reverse direction), spending the first day in traversing the Dome de Miage, about 3,650 metres, the second by traversing the Aiguille de Bionnassay (over 4,000 metres) and Dome du Goûter to the Vallot Hut, and the third day traversing the Mont Blanc itself.

(To be concluded.)