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MOUNTAIN SUPREME — YET CONQUERED

by W. Stettbacher

(Concluded)

All of a sudden, the ground under me seemed to give way. I shall never know what exactly happened, except that I started sliding down a steep slope of snow, or ice, in almost complete darkness, gathering momentum, waiting and hoping for the tearing jerk which I knew must come if my guide were to arrest my fall, but it never came. My slide lasted only a few seconds, when, fortunately, I came to rest on a ledge of ice, covered by recently fallen, soft snow. Taking stock of the situation, I found that apart from a small trickle of blood caused by a slight scratch on my forehead, I was apparently unscathed. Then, for a second or two, the sun shone through the mist, and I was looking up a vertical ice-wall at least 20/25 yards high over which I must have fallen. This was probably an enormous *Bergschrund*, one of the many for which this Kien Glacier is notorious. A *Bergschrund* is the large crevasse formed at a sudden steepening of the upper snow-ice, normally where it comes up against a rock face or even a concealed rock face. As I whirled downwards, with the last bound sending me spinning through the air, I lost my ice-axe, and also one of my gloves. My next thoughts were of my guide. At the time of my fall, he was about ten yards behind me; now, he was lying ten yards in front of me, on the same ledge. He was moaning: "I am hurt, I am hurt, I have difficulty in breathing".

Some mountaineers with similar experiences, say that like persons who have been rescued from drowning, they remember a multitude of things rushing through their heads, many of them trivialities or absurdities. This was not my experience, and this bounding through space neither felt disagreeable nor seemed to worry me.

We were in an apparently impossible situation, and I cannot pay enough tribute to the ability with which my guide, probably seriously hurt, led us through a dense mist, down the remainder of the Kien Glacier. This glacier, during the short glimpses which we caught when the sun shone through for a second or two, looked malignant, full of ice-falls and criss-cross crevasses. As an exhibition of strength and skill, it could not possibly have been surpassed in this steep glacier unknown to him. Never able to see more than a few yards ahead, he still went on with the utmost certainty, and without having to retrace a single step.

Soon after, we were face to face with another icefall, partly overhanging, at least 30 yards high, as my guide's reserve rope was 60 yards long, just long enough for *Abseilen* on the doubled rope. As an ice piton driven into the hard snow would not have held, the only alternative left to my guide was to cut with his ice-axe a deep groove, in horseshoe form, directly over the precipice. He placed the double rope inside this groove, and left the two ends hanging over the precipice. This method looked to me rather risky, but it was the only thing we could do, and it worked.

A similar obstacle had to be overcome a few minutes later; on this occasion, my guide was able to insert a steel piton into the ice at a suitable angle, and the rope could be slipped through a removable ring hanging on the peg.

When roping down, one descends in a sitting position, facing the ice-wall or rock, as the case may be. The

doubled rope comes down in front of the climber between his legs, is passed under and round one thigh (usually the right one), up in front across the chest, over the opposite shoulder and either down the back or round the neck and down in front. If the right leg is used, the left hand grasps the rope from the belay at face level, and the right hand grasps the descending free rope. The climber can easily control the speed of descent by releasing rope with movements of the right hand. This is the safest and slowest method, and I used it.

Whatever method is chosen, the climber should steady himself with outstretched feet against the rock or ice face, and make use of all of the available holds. Needless to say, the doubled rope must be long enough to reach a safe distance below.

Usually, when roping down, I find the first few yards a little complicated, but I soon begin to enjoy myself.

During the second roping down, I got somehow entangled in the doubled rope, but nevertheless got down safely. Fortunately, owing to the overhanging icefall, my guide was out of sight, and unable to see my antics.

We quickly reached the lower end of the Kien Glacier, and, at this point, it became necessary to make a traverse on a gently rising slope towards the Festi Glacier. Visibility was still very poor, and we found ourselves bogging in a web of snow-covered crevasses. The condition of the snow became worse, and we sank at each step up to the knee. To cross such a glacier, is a devilish thing! You never know when there may be a soft "Plonk!" and you are dangling on the rope a few feet below the ground above an abyss of undetermined depth. A traverse of this notoriously crevassed region is a hazardous business, but at last we came to the end of the Kien Glacier. We were now faced with a *Gegensteigung* which meant that we had to ascend again over rock for at least half an hour, in order to reach the Festi Glacier. Then followed another traverse over this also heavily crevassed glacier, until we reached the track leading down the glacier on the other side, the result of footsteps in the snow caused by the numerous parties ascending the Dom. At this time, the light snow turned into rain, but we were soon to emerge from the mist, and to reach comparative safety.

It was exactly 7.30 p.m. when we entered the Dom hut, and were safe at last. We had been on our feet continuously for nearly seventeen hours. I was warmly greeted, just like an old friend, by the hut-keeper and his brother who both remembered me well from previous visits. A doctor accompanying a section of the Swiss Alpine Club, present at the hut, gave my guide some sedatives, and suggested that he should return home immediately for a thorough examination.

On entering the hut, I was almost choked through the main room being contaminated by thick tobacco smoke. It is, of course, well known that during bad or uncertain weather, when alpinists are forced to remain inside the hut, *Tabakqualmer* and *Jasser* come into their own, but a new phenomenon has now arisen: I have observed this summer, when travelling in trains, postal coaches of staying in refuges that groups of men, mostly of the younger type, say 30 to 40, are reeling off popular songs, at a great pace, lustily and loudly, with complete lack of subtlety or musicality. The most popular song at the moment appeared to be "Scheiden tut weh". It was almost comical to see the fifty men staying at the

Dom hut (which can house more than 100 tourists) flogging this song to death, particular stress being laid by these apparently tough and silent men on the passage "weinen und scheiden". Yet, I could not help observing the next morning at 6 o'clock that these strong men were still in their sleeping quarters. The weather would have been good enough that morning for them to have a go at the Dom, as they originally intended, especially as it turned out to be a brilliant day.

We left at 6 o'clock in the morning for Randa; my guide was in great pain during the descent, especially when negotiating some steep passages, provided with fixed wire-ropes.

Of necessity, our climbing expedition came to an end at Randa. My guide returned home for a medical examination, while it was my duty to regain the Taesch hut with all possible speed. We originally intended to return from the Taeschhorn to the Taesch hut; we had left some equipment behind, and the hut-keeper must undoubtedly have felt some anxiety because of our failure to return. Nor did we warn him the previous day that we might descend in another direction. I was just in time, for the guardian and his assistant were about to set out towards the Mischabeljoch, believing that we might have been stranded there.

Shortly after my return to Zurich, I heard that my guide had received a spinal fracture, and that he would not be able to walk again before November.

This summer has certainly taught me one lesson: Never to undertake a dangerous climb in bad conditions or uncertain weather.

INTERNATIONAL TV MEETING AT MONTREUX

The Fifth International Television Symposium will take place from 22nd to 26th May, 1967 at Montreux. This meeting, which is now held every other year, will be opened in the presence of the Ministers responsible for television in Germany, France, Italy and Austria, invited for the occasion by Federal Councillor Gnägi, head of the Federal Department of Transport, Communications and Energy. The Fifth Symposium will therefore be an opportunity for discussing at governmental level certain problems facing television today.

[O.S.E.C.]

This meeting is not to be confused with the "Golden Rose of Montreux" Festival which will be held there for nine days from 21st April. The pick of the World's Colour television shows is to be screened at the contest, but none of these programmes will compete for the "Golden Rose" itself — the top international award for TV light entertainment.

HOLIDAY COURSES AND CAMPS IN SWITZERLAND

The Holiday Courses and Camps to be held in Switzerland in 1967 are listed in a booklet published by the Swiss National Tourist Office. Free copies are obtainable at their London Office at the Swiss Centre, 1 New Coventry Street, London W.1.



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