

A First Season in the Oberland

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LAST summer I visited the Bernese Oberland for the first time, with Adolf Rubi as my guide, and was fortunate enough to do some half dozen varied and interesting climbs. The first trip that we planned was the northeast ridge of the Jungfrau, but owing to bad weather conditions (cold and high wind) we postponed it, substituting for it the traverse of the Mönch, up the southwest ridge and down the Nollen.

The southwest ridge of the Mönch is a straightforward, simple rock scramble, easily done in less than two hours. After a few minutes on the summit—it was cold, even crouching on the eastern, sheltered side—we started down the Nollen route. This lies down the hanging glacier on the northwestern face of the Mönch, the face that one sees from the Kleine Scheidegg. On the left and on the right are stupendous walls of ice formed by the breaking away of portions of the glacier as it advances, but approximately in the center is a huge ice bulge that leads down to and connects with the rock ridge between the Guggi Glacier and the Eiger Glacier on which stands the Guggi Hut of the S. A. C.

The first part of this route is a snow slope where the crampons held well, but when we looked over the edge of the steep ice, it seemed to me that I had rarely seen anything so terrifying—a smooth slope of hard ice, far too long and of incredible steepness. I was to learn, however, that one can rope down ice as one does down rocks, by cutting a piton out of the ice itself. First scraping away the surface snow down to the hard, solid ice, Adolf cut a semi-circular groove with the two ends pointing downwards, leaving a knob of ice about two feet across. The groove, through which the rope was to run, was some six inches deep. Obviously it is essential, when roping off from one of these ice pitons, to hold the rope close to the slope; lifting it up might easily cause it to jump out of its rather shallow supporting groove. We had 80 meters of rope and we cut five pitons in all, which made almost seven hundred feet that we went down in this manner. I went first each time, holding the rope in the regular fashion for roping-off, and running down on my crampons, and I was surprised once arrived at the end of the rope,

to cut a substantial platform to stand in while Adolf was coming down. I noticed, however, that Adolf invariably arrived long before my platform was finished.

Finally the slope became sufficiently gentle to allow us to walk down in an ordinary manner on our crampons. At the Guggi Hut some agreeable people gave us tea and we then continued down to the Eigergletscher Station where we took the train back up to the Jungfraujoch for luncheon. We had intended to spend the night there again and try the north-east ridge of the Jungfrau the next morning, but since the weather that afternoon looked a bit uncertain we finally decided to go down to Grindelwald, where I believe it rained for three or four days. We then left Grindelwald for Chamoni, where we also found it raining, and did not come back to the Oberland until the end of August. (In the intervening month I did just two climbs, the first manless ascent of the Peigne with Miss Marples, of London, and the first manless traverse of the Grépon with Madame Alice Damesme, of Paris.)

On August 28th Rubi and I started again for the northeast ridge of the Jungfrau under much better conditions. The route lies direct from the Joch over the Mathildenspitz. The first gendarme presents the most serious difficulty of the day. Adolf, following the route of the previous parties,¹ here traversed on to the north face, where the rock is loose and usually *verglaced*, and then worked upwards and back to the ridge, which he joined about one hundred feet above. When my turn came, and after I had done some ten or fifteen feet of the traverse, I glanced back and discovered a feasible route close to the ridge, right where I had come from. Back I went, and up it, joining Adolf's route directly by what was distinctly a short-cut. There is no real difficulty in my route—the holds are firm and adequate although neither large nor warm.

The next few hours provided good rock climbing—nothing overwhelmingly difficult, but some amusing and interesting pitches. The higher one goes the easier the climbing gets. About halfway up, beyond the difficult rocks, we met unexpected trouble in the form of large quantities of snow—not the good, hard snow that one can walk on or cut steps in, but breakable crusty snow into which we sank deeply with each step. Then came cornices, also formed of the same unstable stuff, that overhang first on one side and then on

¹ For the second ascent of this ridge, see *A. J.* XXXV, 169.—Ed. *A. A. J.*

the opposite, giving no very clear indication of where the shift in direction took place. In such cases, Adolf preferred to cut across the ice slope underneath the cornice. Sometimes they broke away.

Two weeks later, Rubi and I were on the Jungfrau again, starting off for the Gratisgrat, the ridge that goes down over the Silberhorn into the Trümmelbachtal. Some friends had just gone down it and found it interesting.¹ On September ninth we left the Jungfrauoch at 4.05 and at 6.40 we were on the summit of the Jungfrau. At 7.10 after a large meal, we started down the north-west face over a snowfield, the Hochfirn, and then continued down an easy rock ridge, following the regular route to the Silberlücke, which last we reached in forty-five minutes. From there to the top of the Silberhorn took another twenty-five minutes. We spent about a half hour on the Silberhorn, enjoying the really wonderful view and, I blush to admit it, eating again. Down the ice ridge on the farther side of the Silberhorn (the northwest ridge) we cut no steps at all, Adolf assuring me that the crampons would eventually hold if I just let them slide along far enough, but my personal opinion is that skating down a steep ice ridge on crampons is no sport for a timid woman.

Below the ice, we came on to a ridge of broken black rock, where we stopped to eat again and to survey what was before us. Our route lay down a long ridge, followed by snowfields, rocky slopes, a glacier, and finally a grassy knoll. It looked like a long distance to go and everything lay over unknown territory. Starting on, we followed the ridge pretty closely, not liking to get into the falling stone region to the left of us. The going looked easier there, but it was under a hanging glacier. When our ridge ended abruptly in steep cliffs, we did venture to the left, travelling as fast as possible, however, to a small rock-sprinkled snowfield down which we glissaded at our fastest pace. At 12.15 we arrived on a level with the col at the base of the Schwartz Mönch and continued down the north side where at first it was easy going over patches of snow, scree, and a little rock wall on to a small but much crevassed glacier. It seemed to me that we walked miles up and down and back and

¹ See *A. J.*, XLI, pp. 416-417. The route is shown on the illustration facing p. 417. We went down the ridge somewhat farther than the Amstutz—de Lépinay caravan before traversing. The curious name "Gratisgrat" is said to be derived from the fact that the gentleman (Swiss) who made the first ascent departed without paying his guides.

forth across it in all directions. Finally, at the lower edge we got off on to the pleasant grassy knoll that we had seen from far above. It was then only 1.25. We felt that we had done extremely well, that our troubles were over, and that all that lay before us was a gentle stroll down through flower-strewn grass to the river in the Trümmelbachtal and up the other side to Wengernalp. Little did we know that the stiffest work of the day was ahead of us. Continuing down the grassy knoll, we soon began to run into difficulties; the slope got steeper and there were bands of rock interspersed—rock not always easy to get down although we usually found a way somehow without the use of the rope. Finally we were stuck—absolutely stuck—by a tremendous cliff much too steep to climb down, and very much too long to rope down. We tried to go to the left where our knoll was bounded by a seething waterfall called the Lammlauinen, but this looked anything but practicable as a route of descent. Adolf left his pack and traversed to the right, frantically scanning every inch of the cliff for a route down. After about five hundred yards he met another waterfall, the Giessen, without having found a way over the cliffs anywhere between. To make a long story short—or, at least, shorter—we finally did get down, by choosing what looked like the best section of the cliff and roping off. I went first, cautiously and slowly, with forty meters of rope in my hand, searching diligently for a place to land—any bit of grass growing on the cliff, into which we could jam the pick of the ice axe, and where we could find something to fasten the rope to for the next stage of the trip. We could not afford to be very particular about what we used; at one place the situation looked desperate until I discovered a narrow rock embedded in the earth and apparently connected to more rock above and below; it was a simple matter to dig a tunnel around behind and thread the rope through it. Every now and then we would land on a more or less horizontal grassy patch that I supposed, of course, was the bottom, and while Adolf brought down the ropes—at the very beginning we had given up the idea of being tied together, needing all our ropes for *rappels*—I would wander off only to discover that we were at the top of a new series of cliffs. Finally, after nearly three hours of really strenuous efforts, and after seeing a large herd of chamois which I succeeded in photographing, we reached the bottom.

A few minutes' walking over old moraines and avalanche debris brought us to Biglenalp. At Wengernalp we caught the last train and dined that evening in Grindelwald. Adolf, always a conservative youth, remarked thoughtfully, that he would not care to do that climb "with a large party of slow people."¹

Another long trip was our traverse of the Schreckhorn and Lauteraarhorn on September 1st. We left the Strahlegg Hut at 2.10 a. m., and went up the southwest ridge of the Schreckhorn, (top at 8.45) a rock climb somewhat like the Meije, nowhere difficult, sufficiently firm, and yet not so easy as to be boring. As our route of descent, we chose the Lauteraargrat combined with the southwest ridge of the Lauteraarhorn direct to the Strahlegg Hut, which last had never been descended.

We got down the Schrecksattel in thirty minutes, and continued straight on. One of the earlier gendarmes, a very small one, was quite good fun. "It is a good thing you like it," said Adolf, "because there are fifty more." To check up on the accuracy of this statement, I began to count the gendarmes, but when I got to twenty-seven and we had not progressed any appreciable distance along the ridge, I stopped and gave myself up to plain enjoyment. It was glorious weather. There is a stimulation in climbing at four thousand meters that is missing at low altitudes and it was really a very amusing ridge, with nice drops on either side. The climbing was not so difficult that either one of us could not go up first or down last any of the pitches and we of course saved a great deal of time by not having to shift positions. We stopped a half hour for luncheon between two of the gendarmes and admired the Schreckhorn—such a friendly mountain to have such an awe-inspiring name—and shortly afterwards, much to our surprise, found ourselves on the summit of the Lauteraarhorn. We had done the ridge in three hours and ten minutes from the Schrecksattel, or three hours and forty minutes from the top of the Schreckhorn, including our half-hour lunch.

At 1.30 we started down. Since Adolf had already come up the ridge, he had a very good idea of how the descent should be carried

¹ These very exacting expeditions on the Jungfrau are commented upon in *A. J.* XLI, 422, 423. By error they are there described as made on one day, whereas the dates were August 28th and September 9th, the ordinary route to the Jungfrau being utilized for the return from the first and for the beginning of the second.—Ed. *A. A. J.*

out. He went first and I stayed behind, watching with some curiosity to see if the rocks over which he put his *rappels* were going to come out; they all looked loose to me. A little after three we reached the bottom of the steepest part of the ridge and allowed ourselves food and rest. From here, although the climbing along the ridge was easy, there was still quite a lot of it and it seemed to me that the ridge got a little long near the bottom. The hut looked very good when I wandered in at 6.20. Adolf, who had been there quite a while, had a bountiful dinner prepared which we disposed of with speed and efficiency. Nobody even mentioned going down to Grindelwald that night and I fell asleep dreaming of the statement in Adolf's guide's book that "one could always count on Rubi to choose easy and short climbs suitable for a lady."

The climb that seemed the most exciting in anticipation, because of its reputation, was the southwest ridge of the Wetterhorn (September 6th). It had been done only once, on August 24th, 1928, by Mr. Samitaro Uramatsu with the Grindelwald guides, Emil Steuri and Samuel Brawand.¹ They had reported difficulty owing to loose rock and an unfavorable downward tilting of the strata. We decided, therefore, to be provided in case of retreat with plenty of iron pitons and extra rope and engaged Hermann Steuri to go with us as porter to carry all these impedimenta.

On the afternoon of September 5th, a brief thunderstorm overtook us just before we reached the Gleckstein Hut, and there was another shower later in the evening. The stars were out, however, at half past two the next morning, and all signs pointed to another day of that glorious, clear weather which we enjoyed for about three weeks last September. At 3.05 we left the hut and about three hours later we stopped at the farther edge of the Krinne Firn on the rocks of the ridge. Here we left two of our three ice-axes and two of our three pairs of nailed boots and continued in *kletterschuhe*. Although this seemed then an excellent idea, we were reckoning without our thunderstorms, for when we reached the ridge and glanced over, we saw the whole north face thickly plastered with fresh snow! However, we felt that there was no use turning back before we had to, and we therefore continued, traversing on the north face to regain the ridge above the first pitch. It was melting and little rivulets streamed down, adding a totally unnecessary difficulty to the climb-

¹ See *A. J.*, XL, pp. 380-382 for photographs and a description of the route.

ing. A little farther up, we found ice under the fresh snow and were obliged to proceed very slowly and carefully. Adolf's skill showed up particularly on the last two or three hundred feet before reaching the ridge, where a hard ice-glaze over loose rocks demanded very delicate climbing on the part of the leader. Shortly after eight, we were on the ridge, which proved to be everywhere covered with two or three inches of fresh snow. It was about time, we all agreed, to begin driving in the pitons and roping down. We knew that there was a "difficult pitch" ahead of us, which we should probably not be able to do under these conditions, but thinking that we might as well have a look at it anyway, we walked along up the ridge until we reached the gendarme in question. While Rubi turned to the right to do a little exploring, Hermann traversed to the left (north) and started up a long chimney which he reported was "ganz leicht." Before we knew it he was at the top. When my turn came, I too discovered that the difficulty of this climb had been somewhat exaggerated. It is true that the rocks were very rotten, and moreover, all the holds were covered and some of them concealed by fresh snow and ice, but they simply needed sweeping off a little. On the farther side of this gendarme a little snow col gave us a slippery piece of work, since we had to cross it with only one axe and in wringing wet *kletterschuhe*. From the other side of the snow col to the summit was straight-forward going and we arrived on top at 10.30. I was, of course, very glad that we had continued and added this peak to my varied and very enjoyable Oberland experiences.