The Great German School of Climbing: The Kaisergebirge

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WHOEVER goes from western countries to the Alps for a season's activity, usually thinks, first of all, of Chamonix, Zermatt, Grindelwald, perhaps of the Dauphine, or if the Eastern Alps enter his mind at all, of the Dolomites. The Austrian Alps are scarcely talked about at all.

But wherever in the Alps he is, he will always be likely to hear of some fabulous feat having been accomplished by an unknown German or Austrian who arrived there for the first time. The local guides will be mystified and probably attribute the success to luck or a crass disregard of proper cautiousness. In most cases, however, it will be found that these men have won their spurs beforehand in the Kaisergebirge, where the great majority of the best men of Germany and Austria spend their free days before they move on to greater conquests elsewhere.

The Kaisergebirge would perhaps not, naturally, attract much attention from passers-by. Their beauty is somewhat subdued. The only vividly striking thing, from a distance, is the contrast with the much milder slopes of the surrounding country. They are a short, massive range of clear chalk rocky mountains, not over 7,000 feet in height, extending easterly from Kufstein. Kufstein is the frontier station between Bavaria and Tirol, on the railway from Munich to Innsbruck, at a distance of only one or two hours from either of these cities. Only on a near approach does one realize their truly romantic and savage nature, with wonderful and terrific rock crags rising on every hand. Here, in the past twenty years have been performed some of the most difficult climbs. One will learn that nearly all of the best climbers of today have not only "come from there," as they would say, but that they continue going there. After more dangerous and always less difficult climbs on ice or loose rocks, there is nothing they enjoy as much as to return to their good solid "Kaiser" rock. They seem to have gained an affection for it.

But what makes that range of mountains particularly interesting, I think, is the fact that it seems to offer a particular kind of rock and of climbing that fits one to accomplish the most, not only in any other kind of rock-work, but even in any other sort of mountaineering, including ice-work.

Strange as it may seem, one of the reasons for this probably lies in the very thing which is most often held against "Kaiser" climbing: the use of artificial aid as an "assurance" and as a means of advance. A good climber, of course, will avoid any movement endangering the stability of his position on the rock. However, in passages of extreme difficulty, some risk always exists, and a "piton" gives a certain guarantee and feeling of safety, without which he could not go to the limit of his physical possibilities. If I wished to compare climbing to the feats of circus acrobats I could say that the "piton" corresponds to their net. As a means of getting farther where it would not otherwise be possible, the artificial aid also opens up rock faces with passages of extreme difficulty which would not be known otherwise.

Another reason for the "didactic" value of climbing in the Kaiser lies in the formation and nature of the rock itself. It can be classified somewhere between Dolomite rock and Mont Blanc granite, and contains elements of both. It has even some things in common with the very exceptional sandstone climbing of the "Sächsische Schweiz" south of Dresden. One finds in the Kaiser every kind of outside face climbing, of chimney and crack climbing, and of most kinds of "friction" climbing. But one peculiar and very typical formation is common—a series of small vertical ribs rather thickly placed beside one another, which are often not sharp enough towards the outside to be solidly held by the hands, nor towards the inside to solidly hold the feet. Yet they permit one to lean the back sideways against the most protruding ones and to place the feet at a convenient distance, against a neighboring one, as if one side of the body were in a chimney and working its way up with chimney technique. There are numerous places of this sort, of an easier kind in the famous east face of the Fleischbank, and of the most difficult kind in the southeast face of the Fleischbank and in the Foechtl-Weinberger route on the Praedigstuhl. Sometimes, as in the two last climbs, there is no one way of getting up, but only combined and continuous move-

ments—a most subtle compromise, as one might call it, between every kind of technique.

The last reason, for the value of the Kaisergebirge, lies in the fact that one can do, and observe being done, every kind of climb. The Totenkirchel alone has as many as sixty distinct routes, which makes it, of course, almost unique among the mountains of the world. They are so dissimilar and present such diverse features of interest, that one often has the impression of being on a totally different mountain and climbing by the only possible route. The sight of human beings and the sound of human voices in places which seem to be meant by nature to be absolute solitudes, may sometimes annoy one, but after all the beauty and grandeur remain unchanged.

The proper employment of the "artificial means" themselves, involves a technique of its own and is not easy to acquire. The work tends to improve one's sense of balance and to impart an increased skill in the handling of ropes. The classical maneuver which made the "direct west face" of the Totenkirchel and the east face of the Fleischbank famous, is the *Seiltraverse* or "traversing on the double rope"—a roping sideways instead of down. Just as in climbing of extreme difficulty, two ropes are required. It is essential, in order to avoid complications, that they be easily distinguishable from each other. One of the ropes is fixed through a "piton" in the usual manner for roping down with a double rope, and one puts one's self in the normal roping-down position. But, instead of letting oneself go down and pushing oneself away from the rock with the feet, one keeps close to the rock and pushes up against one side with the feet. This allows, as a help, the use of what one might call vertical foot-holds and hand-holds, and allows one to get across remarkably smooth rock faces with the slightest amount of friction. To avoid the danger of suddenly swinging around in too wide an arc, one usually places "pitons" at rather close intervals, and one must always have a "mousqueton" ("Karabine") ready in one's hand. There does not seem to be any logical reason for anyone who practices roping down to condemn the "double rope traverse" as a help of too artificial a nature.

I think it would be hard, in fact impossible, to find a region where more pleasure can be gotten out of rock-climbing, or where there is more opportunity to exercise and to learn. For a climber

already experienced in the Dolomites, or the aiguilles of Chamonix, who adapts himself easily to new kinds of ground and to new methods, I would suggest the following progressive series of climbs:

Totenkirchel-Heroldweg, or Suedostgrat, descent: Leuchs-variante.
Praedigtstuhl-Westschlucht, descent: Potzangkamin.
Praedigtstuhl-Nordkante, traverse to Suedgipfel, normal descent.
Totenkirchel-Klammerkamin, descent: Fuehrerkamin.
Totenkirchel-Piazwand, usual descent.
Fleischbank-Ostwand, descent: Fuehrerweg.
Totenkrichel-Schneiderweg, usual descent.
Totenkirchel-Westwand, usual descent.

If all goes well, and he has a companion with whom all goes equally well, he can try the Leuchsturm-Suedwand, the Dölfer-U, the Fiechtl-U and begin some of the "extreme climbs."

The best guide book is the *Fuehrer durch das Kaisergebirge* of Leuchs, although it does not contain the latest ascents, and the old scale of five degrees of difficulty is still used. Good information is available about the various routes on the spot.

For additional particulars concerning climbing in the Kaisergebirge consult *A. J.* xxxvii, pp. 279-300.—*Ed.*