

The First Ascent of Dungeon

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THE ascent of Dungeon Peak marks the close of the pioneer work in the Tonquin. All the peaks have been climbed and explorers, it seems, have visited every nook in the valley. Dungeon was the last unclaimed stronghold and with its fall the area has taken on a more sedate aspect. It is with regret that I observe this change for I like to think of the Ramparts as they appeared to me on my first view from the top of Maccarib Pass. Not all the emotions were due to the magnificent display of peaks nor to the beautiful contrast formed by the steep cliffs rising out of the rolling meadow. The two unclimbed peaks, Oubliette and Dungeon, added a touch of mystery and adventure to the view.

The southern end of the Ramparts ridge, with the peaks Redoubt, Dungeon, Oubliette and Paragon standing in that order from north to south, rises in a high wall above the valley on each side. On the outer or eastern face this ridge is particularly steep. To the mountaineer it has proved an effective barrier against attack on the peaks from that direction. The west side of the ridge is reached by a climb over one of the high passes or by a long journey around the north end of the Ramparts. Those who have made the journey have found the west cliff hardly less impressive. By reason of its secure position in the center of the ridge Dungeon remained unmolested up to the time this story begins.

The initial attack was launched in 1931 when a party including Hans Fuhrer, Walter Streng, Captain E. R. Gibson and the writer made an unsuccessful attempt to scale the west slope of the mountain. We had been on a trip arranged by the Edmonton Section of the Alpine Club of Canada and were in camp at Geikie Meadows with two days available for a try at Dungeon. Previously we had inspected the mountain from several points of vantage and had decided upon a route up the west side of Para Pass and along a supposed ledge across the slopes of Paragon and Oubliette. The following night we camped on the Bennington glacier at the foot of Oubliette. From here at the base of the cliff the outlook was very different. The slopes of Paragon

and Oubliette looked impassable, as the band of snow which marked the ledge was hidden from view. In fact, the whole course we had mapped out seemed entirely too precarious. Instead, a more direct route up the west cliff to the Dungeon-Oubliette col was chosen. It proved a tremendous task, thirteen hours of strenuous work which finally brought us to the top of the ridge in the broad col at the base of Dungeon Peak. Two square towers standing on the ridge blocked all effort to reach the upper slope of Dungeon. With the approach of darkness our thoughts centered on a safe means of retreat, which we found, most surprisingly, in the route previously discarded.

That trip along the ledge across the slopes of Oubliette and Paragon was a most fascinating experience as we circled around steep cliffs and into deep couloirs, anticipating a rebuff at each turn in the ledge. There were patches which at first sight in the dull evening light seemed impassable, but their difficulties mitigated as we approached for closer inspection. By seven o'clock we were standing at the top of Para Pass in view of the Memorial Hut in Penstock Valley below, defeated but not entirely without reward for we had found a feasible route to reach the upper slopes of Dungeon without too great a sacrifice of time and energy.

In August, 1933, Cyril Wates again arranged an exploring trip to the Tonquin for the Edmonton mountaineers. Captain E. R. Gibson and I were on hand, chiefly to have another try at Dungeon. The third member of our rope was Robin Hind of Calgary, whose congenial personality and general ability made him a very fortunate addition to the party.

Our plan was to make a traverse of the mountain, ascending from the southwest and descending the north ridge over the shoulder of Redoubt to Lookout Pass and down to the Warden's cabin in the meadows. This would be a long trip, taking in the entire length of the southern Rampart ridge. There was a question as to whether we could complete it in one day or whether it would be necessary to establish a camp at some point on the ridge. The latter course had decidedly no appeal for it involved the laborious task of packing supplies up two thousand feet of ice slope on the east side of Para Pass. If we were to make a one-day trip of it the route would have to be planned carefully to avoid all possible delays.

Two days before the try at Dungeon we had an opportunity to climb Oubliette, which lies not far to the south. It was a superb rock climb, one of the best in the area, and well worth the effort. Also it served ideally as a scouting trip, for we not only tried out most of the route from the Memorial Hut to the Dungeon-Oubliette col, but were in a perfect position to map out the assault on the Dungeon summit tower. With our glasses we searched out a likely course in a shallow couloir running up the center of the west face. Some difficulty would be experienced in reaching this couloir and two lines of attack were possible. The first made use of a ledge which ran across the west face a short distance above the col. If that failed, we planned to try a similar ledge a few hundred feet lower down. Although longer, the second course had more promise of success.

On the morning of August 13th the party, Gibson, Hind and I, set out at 5.40 from the Memorial Hut for a try at the traverse of Dungeon. My Canadian companions had generously granted me the honor of leading. The sky was clear and a pink glow on the surrounding peaks presaged another perfect day. I might explain here that for the past week the weather had been ideal, clear and warm with hardly a cloud in the sky. Fresh snow which was visible a week before was now gone and the winter's drifts on the upper ledges were reduced to a minimum.

We made rapid progress up Para Pass and along the ledge on the west slopes of Paragon and Oubliette for our packs were light and the route was still fresh in our minds from the trip two days before. By ten o'clock we reached the point where the route leaves the west face and follows a narrow ledge across the north cliff of Oubliette. This was the only part of the route of ascent which had not been viewed while making the Oubliette climb, and curiously enough it was here that the first trouble was lurking.

There had been no serious difficulty at this point in 1931, but since then a rock slide had carried away part of the ledge, which now ended at a deep hole not more than one hundred feet from our immediate objective—the Dungeon-Oubliette col. Several yards from the end of the ledge a square-shaped buttress jutted out from the north wall of Oubliette and extended upward thirty or forty feet. The corner where the buttress met the main cliff offered a possible means of ascent, very much exposed and somewhat dubious at the upper end. To search for another way around

would consume hours of valuable time. Obviously the thing to do was to have a try at the route ahead. Without doubt the dark hole below and the gloom of the north wall magnified the difficulties for the route went well enough with the aid of some rock splinters left wedged in the cracks by the rock slide, and a shallow niche which was climbed chimney fashion. From the top of the buttress a short descent on the other side brought us to the Dungeon-Oubliette col. That short passage, requiring an hour, was the first of a series of setbacks to schedule which were to be a source of worry before the day was over.

At the northern end the ridge of the col rises in two tower-like blocks to meet the cliffs of Dungeon. Just above is a broad ledge, the upper of the two routes we had mapped out to the couloir in the center of the west face. Unquestionably this ledge was the shortest way to the couloir. The real difficulty, however, lay in the cliffs leading to it. In 1931 this same cliff had turned us back but we hoped that a more thorough search around the base of the towers and along the cliffs on the east side of the ridge would reveal a point of weakness. By noon we had found nothing in the way of a feasible route to the ledge above and decided to abandon the search in favor of the longer course lower down on the west face.

The broken cliffs on the west face offered little resistance to our descent to the ledge two hundred feet below. Farther along we reached a point which had caused us some concern when viewing the route from Oubliette and our fears were not without reason. At a sharp bulge in the cliff the ledge narrowed down to nothing more than a crack. By this time we were in the proper frame of mind for such a passage. There was no thought of turning around to look for an easier route. That had been tried for the last hour or more without much success. The situation called for a piton, which when driven into a crack higher up and farther back in the cliff gave the necessary security and moral support to encourage a try. It was blind climbing for we could not see around the bump. Gibson's long arms searched out a few good handholds which enabled us to edge our way around to the ledge beyond.

This brought us to the base of the cliff which had been selected as a possible means of ascent. It was a miserable looking pitch, not at all inviting. The rock was badly shattered by the action of

frost, and the cliff was plastered with a scale-like formation which seemed on the point of falling off. The ascent was a slow, tedious task, feeling and testing each slab for a secure handhold. Huge pieces came down at the slightest touch so that a diagonal course was the safest way to clear the route without endangering myself or the rope. At the top of the cliff there was another problem, finding a way through a mass of broken slabs projecting out over the edge.

On the ledge above we stopped for a breathing spell and a bite to eat. This was the ledge we had tried to reach before by a direct route from the col. The progress of the last four hours was far from encouraging. We had advanced probably five hundred yards along the ridge but had gained not more than two hundred feet in altitude.

The couloir which was the key to our route up the west slope was now directly above. It was a ragged cleft with brittle walls, a series of narrow gullies widening into deeper cavities of decay. The ascent was unimpressive but required constant vigilance against loose stones. Farther up we arrived at a steeply inclined ledge which had been singled out during the scouting as a likely prospect. It did not fail us for it led us out of an uncomfortable situation in the couloir to firmer rock on the west face which eventually brought us to the base of the summit tower.

From here on the west face, the summit pinnacle was a forlorn spectacle, a peak crumbling into decay. We made our way up to the ridge between two towers, not daring to loosen a stone for fear of starting a general rock slide. The fragile crest of the ridge seemed scarcely able to sustain our weight as we climbed to the summit, a broken mass on the right. It was a fitting culmination to the route we had followed. The time was recorded as 3.20.

There was a real joy in stretching out on the broken mass after having pushed on steadily for almost ten hours. The exacting nature of the climbing on the loose rock had been a strain both mentally and physically. We were glad to sit in quiet and take our just reward in the magnificent view. Presently we were aware of a brisk wind from the northwest. Heavy banks of mist poured over the top of Geikie and raced up Bennington glacier. Soon we were in the midst of a pelting hail storm. Fortunately it did not last long but it was a warning to be on the move.

Our intention had been to make a traverse of the mountain but it was four o'clock now, a rather late hour to start a new route. However, none of us had any desire to return by the route of ascent, so we decided to continue with our original plan in hopes of finding better conditions on the north ridge. In this we were not to be disappointed for the rock was firmer and less broken up. Our descent progressed without difficulty over two or three small peaks until we reached the last pinnacle at the Dungeon-Redoubt col. At this point a short steep couloir offered a path of least resistance to a broad ledge on the west face. Further progress down the west face was impossible as steep cliffs lay below. A short distance to the north along the ledge we found a tremendous couloir running down the entire length of the west face. It was cut deep into the mountain with steeply inclined sides converging into a narrow trough which was filled with snow except near the top, where the walls were almost vertical and coated with ice.

We stood for a moment at the top of this couloir considering the next move. There were at least 2,000 ft. of cliff to descend; the weather was still threatening and the time 5.30. It would require steady progress to get us off the cliffs before dark. Our original plan to work out a route over the intricate mass of shattered cliffs on the west shoulder of Redoubt appeared possible but it would be long, slow work. The 1,500 ft. of snow slope in the lower end of the couloir seemed to be the answer. Could we reach it by descending along the upper south wall of the couloir and complete the task before darkness set in? The decision was yes. It may not have been a wise one considering the conditions but I doubt if any other choice could have given as good results.

Wet, decayed rock, narrow ledges, mud and moss were our lot on the south wall. After a tortuous descent of two or three hundred feet we were willing to admit our mistake. The ice in the couloir was a possible way out for we were now below the steepest part of the sluice. A short, steep cliff which separated us from it loomed up as an awkward problem. Roping down was out of the question for the decayed rock was unfit for a piton or a sling. Slippery ledges above and ice below contributed to the difficulties. Actual contact with them proved that they were

more psychological than real. A few tense moments brought the party to safety in the couloir below.

Our change to the ice had not been a false move. Along the north wall a ridge of rough ice made a safe avenue of descent while the center was smooth ice, torrents of rushing water, and slush. Soon the snow was reached, at first thin on hard ice, then deepening to a secure footing. As the surface became firmer the tension eased and the pace quickened. The snow in the lower couloir proved all we had expected of it, a safe rapid means of descent down the remaining fifteen hundred feet of slope. It was eight o'clock when the party reached the bottom of the couloir.

We were off the cliffs and in reality the climb was over. However, there was still a long journey before us to shelter at the Warden's cabin, with possibilities of trouble until we were over Lookout Pass. We would push on in the remaining hour of daylight until darkness made further progress unsafe.

A monotonous trudge over scree and broken rock brought us breathless to the top of Lookout Pass. Then followed a furious session of step kicking down a long snow couloir, which offered a safe path and brought us to the meadows as darkness fell. By midnight we had completed the remaining three miles to the Warden's cabin, glad to curl up in blankets on the floor after more than eighteen hours on the route.

In spite of treacherous rock and four long hours of drudgery at the end, our trip over Dungeon was a worthwhile adventure. There was a large variety of difficulties which called for skill and ingenuity and left little room for dull moments. Future parties might find a more attractive route to the summit by way of the northwest couloir which we used on the descent. The upper part of the couloir could be avoided, possibly, by taking to the west slope of the mountain at the top of the snow. Such a route would be quite free from the dangers of climbing on loose rock.