

THE EAST OR BALTSCHIEDERTHAL FACE OF THE
BIETSCHHORN

BY J. P. FARRAR.

THE history of the ascents of the mountain by this route was treated by me at considerable length in 'A.J.' xxiv. 87-92. The whole subject, including some further information not available when my note was written, was reviewed by Dr. Coolidge in his 'Bernese Oberland,' vol. i. part II. (1910) pp. 83-89, with the thoroughness to which his work has accustomed us.

Dr. Coolidge's pages ought to be carefully studied, as they are an exquisite example of the precision and exactitude, amounting to a science, to which modern mountaineering criticism has been brought. Dr. Coolidge was able to shew with almost practical certainty from the statement of Hans Jaun, the leader of the party, that the line of ascent of Mr. C. T. Dent and the late Mr. J. Oakley Maund in 1878 was not by the S.E. arête, as I had concluded, but by the perfectly distinct E. arête or spur. As pointed out in my paper above referred to, the published topographical details of the first ascent are somewhat subordinated to the narrative, but they certainly warrant no other conclusion but that the S.E. arête had been followed. The acceptance of Jaun's statement of his 1878 route necessitates disregarding altogether Mr. Oakley Maund's words in 'A.J.' x. 22: 'We had reached the crest of the Bietschhorn which connects the Breithorn [now called Stockhorn] with the main peak and overlooks, almost overhangs, a branch of the Bietsch glacier some 2000 feet below.' These words can only mean that they were on the S.E. arête which overlooks the Bietsch glacier, since the E. arête only looks down on an arm of the Baltschieder glacier. When high up on the E. arête last summer I certainly could see over the lower part of the S.E. arête (some 500 yards or more to the S.) into the centre of the Bietschthal, but, stretch this fact as you will, it does not reconcile Mr. Maund's statement.

Although Jaun's statement was made to Dr. Andreas Fischer 21 years after the expedition, it was of such a character as most certainly to imply actual personal knowledge of the E. arête. The memory of a guide of the experience of Jaun would certainly be reliable on such a subject, and there is no reason to doubt the exactness of his recollection. Mr. C. T. Dent, to whom the subject has been referred, is of opinion, so far as his memory of an expedition made some 32 years ago serves, that the line as indicated by Jaun is the one followed.

The only other objection to this line, which objection however applies to the S.E. as well as the E. arête, is the description of the upper part as easy, whereas to within a short distance of the summit the E. arête requires unremitting attention.

There can be very little doubt that my conclusion ('A.J.' xxiv. 87) as to the line of the first ascent must be withdrawn in the face of the later evidence, and that Herr von Kuffner's second ascent followed—with minor differences, such as attaining the E. arête from the S. instead of from the N., and also possibly at a different point—the line of the first ascent of 1878. Thus the route by the S.E. arête still awaits its conqueror. From what I have seen of it, it will certainly prove to be hard and long. It is not the least valuable of Dr. Coolidge's examples to his followers in Alpine literature, that he has at last solved this very interesting problem.

It may be remembered that in 1907 my friends H. V. Reade, G. Gask, and I were foiled in an attempt on the mountain by this E. arête. Accordingly, to wipe out this defeat, in obedience to a well-established canon of the A.C., in the last week of July 1910 my friends the brothers Gask, Val A. Fynn, and I, with a young fellow Hieronymus Truffer, son of the old guide P. J. Truffer of St. Niklaus, who acted as cook and quartermaster, took up our quarters in two tents (which we had had built in *Sierre* in about 12 hours) close to the *Martigschüpfe* in the *Baltschiederthal*, some 6 hours above *Visp*. Our impedimenta, some 250 lb. in weight, were transported from *Visp* on the backs of three improvised porters—a barber, a pastry-cook, and a shopman—and on our own.

Two days of brilliant weather were spent in ascending 'In der Trift' to the ridge looking into the *Bietschthal* in order to observe the S. face of the *Bietschhorn*, which, plastered in snow with its serried rows of gigantic teeth, looked most uninviting. An exquisite sitting glissade of half an hour bore us down over slopes that had taken us several hours to ascend. The second day was spent in hunting up all the old bivouac places in the valley mentioned in my paper in 'A.J.' xxiv., and which carry one back in memory to the stalwart deeds of the pioneers of alpine travel. We were particularly delighted to find Mr. Dent's cave, so well described in 'Above the Snow Line,' p. 105, and our happiness was quite complete when I pointed out to my companions the bits of glass originating, as we verily believed, from the forgotten seltzer bottle which caused so much anguish 32 years ago to Andreas Maurer, who has long lain at rest under the shadow of *Grindelwald Church*, one of the *Wetterhorn's* many victims. This question of the history of alpine bivouacs is a fruitful and as yet absolutely untouched field for some budding alpine inquirer. Each has its history, and often great age and long periods of disuse may be inferred by the presence of old potsherds and the complete absence of empty tins.

On July 29, 1910, accordingly, Val A. Fynn, George Gask and I, heavily laden for all emergencies, left our camp at 1 A.M. to settle our account with the *Bietschhorn*. Going at a good pace we passed the *Hobitzo* chapels at 1.45, put on our crampons at 2.40, and after 10 minutes' halt reached v. Kuffner's bivouac rocks ('A.J.' xxiv. 89) at 3.58, breakfasting till 4.13. The snow was splendidly hard,

and making fine progress with our crampons we gained at 6.18 the E. arête at exactly the same place as on our previous attempt ('A.J.' xxiv. 90). The Bergschrund gave us no trouble. The arête is gained immediately above, not below, the broad tower with the mathematical profile of my note above mentioned. My friend Herbert Reade, whose enforced absence owing to official duties was a great regret to us, has well described the remainder of the climb in a very amusing paper in 'A.J.' xxiv. 293 *seq.*: 'Some Oberland Climbs in 1907.' We proceeded, after eating all we could, at 7, and keeping on or quite close to the ridge, with a 20 minutes' halt reached at 10.10 the point at which we had turned back on our previous attempt. At that time we estimated our distance from the summit at about half an hour. We were sorely mistaken.

The upper portion of the ridge still requires unremitting care and on two occasions we were forced off the arête on to its N. flank for considerable distances. We gained the summit finally up easy snow at 12.50 noon. Fynn had led us throughout in a masterly manner. Our intention was to descend the W. arête, but by this time the weather was thick and it was snowing. Moreover there seemed to be 2 to 3 feet of snow piled up on the arête. After a short consultation we decided to face the ills we knew of rather than adventure ourselves on the W. arête in its then apparent condition. Accordingly at 1.20 we started downward in our old tracks. There was fortunately no wind, but it snowed continuously and made the searching out of the right traverses most tedious, as the snow covered everything. We crept steadily down and passed at 5 the snow col whence it would have been possible to traverse to the right into the head of the couloir had not the deep new snow forbidden such madness. Still hampered by the continuing snow our progress was necessarily very *pénible*, and it was not until 9.30 P.M., after an abortive attempt by the ever enterprising Fynn by quitting the ridge for its left or N. flank to gain the upper snows at the N. foot of the E. arête, that, much to our joy we regained the little gap at the foot of the broad tower whence we had started at 7 A.M. It was not very dark. Visions of our comfortable tents were soon extinguished by the disappearance of Fynn up to his neck in the snow banked up against the arête; in fact he asserted there was no bottom to the snow at all, and that it was like whipped cream. Accordingly we hauled the great man up again on to the rocks. A rope's-length lower down was the Bergschrund we had passed in the morning, so it did not take us long to decide to stay where we were till daylight. Although no doubt the snow in immediate contact with the rocks would be the softest and most watery, still it is not good to look for the upper lip of a Bergschrund in the dark under anything like such conditions. At the same time I confess that I have no longer any interest in testing how much discomfort and cold I can stand in an impromptu bivouac. My friends huddled together, after very improperly cutting a good rope and tying themselves up again, on what I believe was a very

comfortable spot, offering the greatest facilities for a quick descent in every direction. I myself remained at the other end of the rope seated on a very narrow ledge with my feet dangling over space and my back against a very unstable rock. It was unsafe to balance oneself for a moment in order to put on any other clothes or fresh stockings, nor could one put one's feet in the sack. Under such circumstances the best way is to stuff all spare clothes under one's coat over the stomach, and to lodge the rucksack on one's feet to minimise radiation.

The snow fell intermittently all night, but the lowering clouds prevented any excessive radiation. At the same time I should have been quite willing to undertake, in exchange for immediate transport to a warm bed, to spend my future summers at Margate, forswearing for ever the folly of mountaineering.

My friends hailed me at intervals all night, under the quite mistaken impression that I might topple off, and malice more than once prompted me to delay my reply so that I could measure their care for me, or possibly their anxiety not to be involved in my descent, by the increase of anguish in their tones. However, I played wolf too often, so that their tones eventually partook somewhat of invective, even of abuse.

We got off at 4.40 A.M., cold and stiff, slid over the Bergschrund in the still soft snow, and, going at a furious pace, forgot our discomforts and were soon busy evolving fresh plans. We were not sorry to get to the first water, as all we had had to drink since the previous morning was a pint of black coffee and snow. We regained camp at 7.30 to meet the warmest welcome of Sydney Gask, who had spent a great part of the night, a couple of hours above the camp, watching for our return.

Thus we settled our score with the Bietschhorn.

PROFESSOR PARKER'S ATTEMPT ON MT. MCKINLEY.

PROFESSOR H. C. PARKER, of Columbia University, has had the kindness to forward a copy of his article 'Our Expedition to Mt. McKinley' which appeared in the 'Metropolitan Magazine' for December 1910. It will be remembered that the first attempt to climb the mountain was made in 1906 by a party led by Dr. Cook, and of which Professor Parker and Mr. Belmore Browne were members. The attempt was made from the S. side and was abandoned 20 miles from the base of the mountain. Dr. Cook claimed to have made the ascent with his guide Barrill after his companions had left him; but in an article 'Sleuthing on Mt. McKinley—how the Parker-Browne expedition compiled the case against Dr. Cook,' which Mr. Belmore Browne published in the 'Metropolitan Magazine' for January last, it is shown that credence cannot be placed in Dr. Cook's narrative.