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Finsteraarhorn N-E Spur Centenary

The mid-winter wind numbed fingers as we fumbled with bindings, swapping skis for crampons. It had taken a day and a half to reach the Agassizjoch and now we had to commit ourselves to its far side, abseiling down into the remote cauldron of the Finsteraar glacier. Three hours later, at twilight, we were wading across its enclosed basin, searching for somewhere to bivouac. The silence was total, palpable, almost oppressive. Below us the glacier snaked its impassive route down to the winter fastness of Grimsel. Above, hanging in the sky over our heads, was the great wall we had come to climb.

I had tried to get here before, unsuccessfully. My companion, Dick Renshaw, had also been thwarted in the past, and for both of us the climb had become something of an obsession. It had a special magic: the compelling logic of the great rocky spur cleaving the face; the lonely isolation at the heart of the Bernese Oberland; the summit itself – the magnificent spire of the Finsteraarhorn; but above all it was the history of the route which drew us. This was no regular ‘tick route’ like the Walker Spur or the infamous Eigerwand; it offered none of that easy, off-the-shelf, impress-the-neighbours brand recognition; not many people had heard of it and it had only been climbed a few times. But for those who did know about it, the North-east Spur of the Finsteraarhorn was an extraordinary, futuristic, chapter in Alpine history. Two decades before Welzenbach began his great campaign on the Oberland’s other more famous north faces, long before the Schmidt brothers triumphed on the Matterhorn, before the Walker Spur attempts, before Roch and Greloz cut their way up the Triolet, before the Eiger and all those other great Nordwand dramas of the thirties, the Finsteraarhorn wall had already been climbed. In the modern guidebook, the North-east Spur is graded ED – a remarkable accolade for a route first climbed a hundred years ago, in 1904, by two great Swiss pioneers, the Grindelwald guide Fritz Amatter and his colleague from Berne, Gustav Hasler.

Seventeen years after the epic ascent, Hasler looked back on the experience in a paper read before the Alpine Club in London. After an opening swipe at that perennial old chestnut, the ‘last great problem’ (observing that there will always be last great problems ‘as long as any mountain in any part of the globe has an unexplored side, ridge or gully’) he gets down to business, mentioning Dr Emil Burkhardt’s attempts of 1871 and 1875, turned back by stonefall, and another Swiss investigation of 1897, which reported that the wall was ‘hopeless’. Then he praises the ‘first real attempt’ on July 31, 1902. And here, for a moment, we must leave Hasler, because this 1902 attempt was one of the great Alpine epics of the last century. It was also one of the greatest pioneering climbs attempted by a woman.



86. Gertrude Bell – alpine pioneer, archaeologist and a key figure in the establishment of the modern state of Iraq. (*Alpine Club Photo Library*)



87. Fritz Amatter, Hasler's redoubtable companion from Grindelwald. 'To him I owe the success of this expedition and a great day in my life.' (*Alpine Club Photo Library*)

Gertrude Bell was an indomitable traveller, archaeologist, oriental scholar and spy. The Baghdad Museum, looted so disastrously in the war last spring, was her creation. In fact she was a key player in the whole setting of the modern state of Iraq. On one occasion a sheik is reported to have remarked, 'if British *women* are this tough, what are the *men* like!' She was also a mountaineer, with a string of fine ascents such as the traverse of the Meije in 1899. She spent the 1901 and 1902 seasons in the Berner Oberland, with the brothers Ulrich and Heinrich Führer. Several climbs in the lovely limestone spires of the Engelhörner bear her name, but her greatest achievement – and the one that clearly impressed her most profoundly – was the unsuccessful skirmish with the Finsteraarhorn.

A day after descending from the attempt she wrote to her brother, telling him about 'the well known problem'. She goes on: 'The arête ... rises from the glacier in a great series of gendarmes and towers, set at such an angle on the steep face of the mountain that you wonder how they can stand at all and indeed they can scarcely be said to stand, for the great points of them are continually overbalancing and tumbling down into the couloirs' Undaunted, Miss Bell and the Führer brothers worked their way up the endless towers 'which multiplied like rabbits' getting progressively steeper until they were halted by 'a great tower leaning over to the right and made of slabs set like slates on top'.



88. Finsteraarhorn from the east. The N-E Spur rises from the obvious claw foot. The Hugiattel is the first big step right of the summit. The Agassizjoch is on the extreme right. (*Stephen Venables*)

They had reached The Grey Tower, about 750m up the face. Smooth and undercut, it blocked the way completely. Ulrich Führer tried to escape out to the right, but drew a blank. Then he tried a gully on the left, but was deterred by 70° ice. In any case, it was now mid-afternoon and snow was falling fast, building to a full-scale alpine storm. The only option was to retreat 'down the terrible arête'.

Three days later Gertrude Bell told her brother, 'I shall remember every inch of that rockface for the rest of my life.' They had to bivouac in a violent thunderstorm, with the rocks fizzing and crackling all around them. 'It was a curiously exciting sound and rather exhilarating – and as there was no further precaution possible I enjoyed the extraordinary magnificence of the storm with a clear mind – it was worth seeing.' On 1 August they rose stiffly at 4am to spend the next 16 hours descending continuously, much of the way in 50ft abseils on their cut rope. Finally at eight that evening they crossed the bergschrund in pouring rain. Wet matches refused to light the lantern for a descent of the Unteraar glacier, so the team had to endure another bivouac in the open. Miss Bell consoled herself 'by thinking of Maurice in South Africa and how he had slept out in the rain and been none the worse'.

Two years later Gustav Hasler and Fritz Amatter arrived to try the now notorious face. For Hasler 1904 had been a good year, starting with the first winter ascent of the ice rib on the Aletschhorn, now known as the *Hasler Rib*. Then came a new route on the north-east face of the Mönch – 50° ice, in the days when that kind of thing was extremely unusual, and a descent of the Eiger's still unclimbed Mittellegi Ridge. Now, on 7 July, he and Amatter arrived at the Finsteraarhorn. By way of reconnaissance they climbed a new route up the right hand side of the wall, reaching the great step north of the summit called the Hugiattel, after Franz Joseph Hugi, the Swiss scientist involved in the mountain's first ascent.

In Hasler's estimation it was a dull and rather dangerous route: 'I do not think it has been repeated and, quite frankly, it doesn't deserve to be. It gave us, however, some insight in to the expedition which we had in mind.' That expedition started a week later on 15 July when Hasler and Amatter left Grimsel, walked all the way up to the Unteraar Glacier and at 9.30 in the evening reached the split foot of the famous spur, bivouacking a short way up the foot's left claw. They spent the night making tea on their spirit stove and watching the ceaseless flickering of summer lightning. Above them the spur rose 1050m to the summit. Hasler was just as impressed as Bell. As he was to explain in 1921 to his London audience, the distant impression of a continuous rib is completely false: 'Once at grips with it, you find ... a super-Cyclops laying about him in a blind fury couldn't have broken up its continuity more.'

Hasler and Amatter left the bivouac at 3.30am on 16 July. They carried ice axes and two 100ft ropes, but no crampons, nor scarpetti (rope-soled climbing shoes), preferring 'the firm edge of the [nailed] boot'. They moved

fast up the interminable towers and gullies until, at about 2pm, they found a tangled length of rope marking the site of the high bivouac two years earlier. A little further on they found a rope sling, marking the 1902 highpoint. Beyond it was a little col and above that the Grey Tower. 'Perpendicular, monstrously smooth, there was no question of frontal attack on that obstacle.'

In Hasler's estimation the only way round was to the left. 'Down that icy gully I lowered Amatter on the rope ... then watched him work his way up the most impossible slabs I have ever seen, or wish to see. This particular place seemed to really extend him: he had for once in his life to climb all out.' Hasler slid down a spare rope that was left in place, and then climbed up to join Amatter 'on a suspicion of a ledge without a belay of any sort'. They had got past the Grey Tower but it wasn't all over yet. 'That day these awkward rocks were in many places glazed, as rocks at that height are almost bound to be. The whole thing was a great strain, for we could never see whether some other time-devouring obstacle might not be ahead of us. We seemed to have spent an eternity since leaving the Grey Tower – in actual fact it was just under three hours – when a series of blood-curdling yells from Amatter made me sure that he could see his way through.'

At 6.30 they were on the summit. The first of the great modern north walls had been climbed. Two years later, it was repeated by V A Fynn and H Brüderlin. They encountered dangerous stonefall, whereas Hasler and Amatter had experienced none. Nevertheless, Hasler, in his 1921 address to the AC, stated, 'Even after seventeen years I must say that I still consider the face a very serious proposition, not to be undertaken lightly.' More emphatic was the impression of the American climber Miriam O'Brien, who made the third ascent in 1930, guided by Adolph Rubi. In *Give me the Hills*, she wrote: 'It is the only climb I have ever done which I cannot think about with pleasure. Not that it was the only occasion in the mountains when I have been frightened, but it was the occasion when I was most badly frightened, and for the longest period.' And, in case you feel tempted to dismiss this as mere female subjectivity, listen to what Adolph Rubi had to say in the *AJ* about one section above the Grey Tower: '... conditions so bad that it approaches the limit of possibility, and for over 100 metres was just flirting with death.'

Stirring stuff for someone like me, whose early alpine dreams were fed by books and distant views of the great summits. The exquisite shape of the mountain itself intensified my fascination with the North-east Spur; the infrequency of its ascents – perhaps only 10 or 20 before Dick and I set out in 1983 – was an added attraction. As for the tales of apocalyptic rockfall, they made our winter ascent, when everything would be firmly frozen in place, eminently sensible.

So we arrived on that March evening, far from our fellow men, with no mobile phones to call up help in an emergency, and bivouacked at the foot of the spur. Then for three days we committed ourselves to the wall. On



89. March 1983: Day 3. Dick Renshaw leads the first pitch of the day, outflanking the Grey Tower, first led by Amatter in 1904. It was here that Gertrude Bell and the Führers turned back in 1902. (*Stephen Venables*)

the first day rock and mixed pitches led into a big couloir on its left, southern flank, before we bivouacked in a snowcave back on the crest of the spur. Day Two greeted us with wind and scudding clouds. Rarely have I felt more small, vulnerable and isolated. It was one of those moments when everything hung in the balance: do you embark on a long, arduous, disappointing retreat, or do you trust the weather man's promise that this would just be a blip in an overall spell of fine weather, and continue upward?

We chose the latter, the weather man was proved correct, and the climbing – once we had fought our private battles with numb fingers and hot-aches – proved increasingly enjoyable. It had everything from frozen rubble to solid granitic perfection, slabs to chimneys, fluffy powder to shining verglas. And always there was that winter magic of silent white mountains stretching far, far to the east, to the Bernina and beyond to the far reaches of Austria.

On the evening of Day Two we reached the little col where the spur is suddenly blocked by the great uprearing of the Grey Tower. It had been climbed direct in 1967, but to me it looked every bit as smooth and repellent as Hasler had promised. As for Amatter's crafty little evasion to the left, *that* too, in the flat twilight, looked almost equally horrible. In the morning the sun cheered things up as Dick descended a few metres down the gully, cramponed into the 70° ice runnel Amatter had tackled in nailed boots, protected himself with a modern ice screw, then, as the ice petered out, edged further left onto a rib of shattered gneiss.

That exquisitely delicate mixed pitch set the tone for the day. On one pitch (number five I think) I clipped into an old knifeblade peg – the only sign we found of any previous visitor on the entire route – before nicking my way up a scarily thin bulge of transparent verglas. Dick asked if it was the hardest ice pitch I had ever led and I said it probably was. Higher up there was a memorable tiptoeing dance up tiny stacked bricks, then the wall steepened and steepened, hanging ever more dramatically over the abyss – an immense, titanic jigsaw of gneiss blocks, all holding each other miraculously in place, and allowing us the occasional luxury of a peg or a sling or a nut, to protect the next few metres of breathless balancing, trying always to push and not to pull. Dick led the final, loosest pitch – our fortieth since starting the route three days earlier – as the winter landscape faded to grey then black. I cowered beneath an overhang as occasional bricks flew past, then followed up into the darkness to join him for a final, luxuriously flat bivouac on the summit ridge.

It took another two days to descend the normal route and ski out to the Rhône valley, completing a fantastic winter adventure. Any winter journey through remote mountain country is special, but this one had at its centre some wonderful climbing and the chance to marvel at an extraordinary piece of Alpine history.

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