

A PERFECT ALPINE DAY.

(Being an account of a new combination traverse of Mont Blanc de Seilon and the Ruinette.)

BY J. H. B. BELL.

ON the afternoon of July 19, 1928, a party of four Scottish mountaineers were returning to Arolla across the Pas de Chèvres, after climbing the Pigne d'Arolla. We had done a good day and were resting on the col, when C. W. Parry drew my attention to the steep rock buttress which plunges down in a single uniform sweep from the summit of the Mont Blanc de Seilon to the level upper basin of the Seilon glacier. We did not know whether Mont Blanc de Seilon had ever been climbed by this route, but it certainly appeared to us to be quite feasible in the extraordinarily snowless summer of the year 1928. We made up our minds there and then to return to the attack in a few days' time. Information as to the history of the north face of Mont Blanc de Seilon was forthcoming later from the genial keeper of the bazaar in Arolla. Our friend, M. Metrailler, told us that the buttress had been only twice climbed, and on each occasion with the same Arolla guide in the leading position. The difficulties had been considerable, and on both occasions the party was forced to traverse to the left across steep snow slopes in order to avoid the upper impending rocks of the buttress. The actual climb had occupied six or seven hours, apart from the time taken in approaching the foot of the rocks. It was clear to me that the exploit was well worth while. With the optimism born of youthful energy, we even proposed to make an attempt to traverse Mont Blanc de Seilon in the southward direction, including the Ruinette as well. This mountain is frequently traversed, but always in a line between east and west, between the Col de la Serpentine and the Col de Seilon. The ridge connecting Mont Blanc de Seilon and the Ruinette is long and narrow, and is well decorated with gendarmes. We were told by the Arolla



1926.

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MONT BLANC DE SEILON.

The route described is the long rock rib which descends from the summit to the glacier, and is in the centre of the photograph.

guide, Antoine Georges, that he had just been over it a few days before with a client, and that it had taken them about four hours from peak to peak. Parry and I knew pretty well, therefore, what we were in for, but we each had considerable confidence in our combined ability to move fast over difficult rocks, and we resolved that if we should succeed in gaining the summit of Mont Blanc de Seilon by 11 a.m., we would consider ourselves justified in tackling the Ruinette as well.

During the next few days other climbing problems occupied us pretty fully. After returning to Arolla from the ascent of the Dent Blanche, we had an off day in preparation for our venture on the north face of Mont Blanc de Seilon. The weather was still perfect. About 2 a.m. on the morning of July 26 we left Arolla by the steep track leading in the direction of the Pas de Chèvres. The night was starry and beautiful. Looking across the valley we could see several points of light zig-zagging up the moraine of the Zigiore Nuove Glacier, apparently belonging to parties en route for the Pigne. At one bend of the track we stumbled over the sleeping form of a cowherd, who seemed to regard the path as the most comfortable site for a bivouac. We pursued our course steadily, and by 4.15 a.m. we were on the top of the pass. The descent of the little rocky pitch on the west side above the Seilon Glacier was quickly effected, and about 5 a.m. we sat down on a boulder and proceeded to put the cooker into action for our second breakfast. There was a beautiful, clear dawn, but it was mighty cold on the upper glacier. It is always curious, on an Alpine expedition, how warm and still is the air about 1 to 3 a.m., when one is starting out, and how bitterly cold is the sunrise and the two hours which follow it. Even in perfect weather I have usually found this to be true. We saw another party who had evidently passed the night at the Dix hut in the Seilon valley, and who were making for the Col de la Serpentine, probably en route for the Mont Blanc de Seilon. Lazily we speculated as to whether they would be likely to discharge any stones on to the upper part of our route from above. Suddenly there was a terrific crack in the glacier almost at

our feet. The sudden, loud noise was most disconcerting. I think we half expected at first that we would be swallowed up in a new-formed crevasse. On looking around, however, there was nothing out of the ordinary to be seen at all. Another report followed the first some distance off, and we were left to speculate on the peculiar habits of the Seilon Glacier, in relieving its pent-up stresses at such an unusual hour.

At 5.40 a.m. we packed up and ascended the easy snow slope to the base of our rock rib. There were only a few small crevasses to negotiate, and it was easy to establish ourselves on the loose rocks of the lower buttress. Once on the crest of the rib or buttress, we found that things went splendidly. The rocky edge was at a uniform high angle, but was well split up, thus affording plenty of good holds. We were not troubled with snow at all, as the crest of the rib was quite clear of it. Occasionally we came across sections of loose and rotten rock, but on the whole we made very rapid progress. Throughout this lower section we never used the rope at all, although there was one part nearly half way up where the rock was so loose that we had to keep very close together. Beyond half way the rock rib steepened considerably, and the climbing became much more interesting, although still of a nature to allow of rapid progress being made. At length we were brought to a halt beneath the vertical rocks of the upper section, where our predecessors had been forced to traverse out across the snow slopes on the left. This latter procedure we wished to avoid at all costs. Still it was quite clear that we could not negotiate the blank wall above us. The only solution was to try a short upward traverse to the right. Parry was in great form and took the lead. The traverse was very short, and then he led straight up what must be called an extremely exposed and difficult pitch. I joined him, and it was clear that the rocks directly above us were quite practicable, although still difficult. This steep and interesting part of the climb continued right to the top, and would probably be between 300 and 400 feet in vertical height. It was a wonderfully satisfactory finish, for it led right out on to the summit.

cairn. We had only halted once during the ascent from the glacier for about a quarter of an hour, and I think we were both surprised and delighted when we found that it was only 8.56 a.m. as we sat down to rest on the top of Mont Blanc de Seilon (12,700 feet). The reputed difficult rock buttress had only taken three hours of climbing time, and the vertical height was quite 3,000 feet. We had had no difficulties of any kind with snow or ice on the rocks. The other party from the Dix hut was still a fair distance off on the ridge leading up from the Serpentine Col. We had the summit to ourselves, enjoyed a sort of preliminary lunch, and set off for the Ruinette at 9.30 a.m.

To begin with, the ridge was very easy, crossing over a subsidiary top where the route to the Col de Seilon falls away steeply to the right. Almost immediately our ridge became very narrow and studded with gendarmes. We decided to cut out some of these by traversing a snow-slope on the right to just below the level of the next small col. At this point a little hard climbing and the cutting of a few steps enabled us to regain the crest of the ridge. On the whole we probably saved a certain amount of time by this manoeuvre. The character of the climbing was now altogether delightful and reminiscent of the Bidein section of the main Cuillin range in Skye. Most of the gendarmes could be turned on one side or the other, and we moved together fairly rapidly. Some distance beyond the col the character of the ridge again became different. We were on a snow-covered section, and it was necessary to be heedful of the cornices on the steeper side. The snow was in very good condition, however, and we met with no double cornices. Before us was another small col at the foot of the steep rocks leading to the Ruinette. The rocks were for the most part quite clear of snow and in good climbing order. Many of the pitches were interesting and delightful, but we could see well enough how difficult the climb would have been with new snow on the rocks. We encountered nothing so difficult as the final section below the summit of Mont Blanc de Seilon, and it was often possible for both of us to move together. Near the top we were obliged to traverse to the

right in order to avoid some impossible-looking gendarmes on the summit ridge. The traverse, though sensational in some respects, was really easy, and we gained the summit of the Ruinette (12,727 feet) at 11.42 a.m.

I think we were both of us rather surprised at the phenomenal rapidity with which the Ruinette ridge had been crossed. The rocks were certainly in remarkably good order during the summer of 1928. We felt entitled to a prolonged rest on the final summit for the day. There was plenty of snow around, and it was not long before the spirit cooker was in action. After our mid-day meal we lay down on the warm, rocky slabs on the southern slope and puffed contentedly at two excellent cigars which we had brought along to celebrate the expected achievement!

There was not a breath of wind on the summit. For clearness of visibility it was one of the most perfect days I have known in the Alps. Neither of us believed in the way some guides have of wasting the precious hour on the summit by going to sleep, though I expect the time passed with a like stealthy rapidity as we gazed dreamily across a sea of snowy summits to the legion of fleecy clouds advancing over the plains of Italy. It would be tedious to attempt to describe the view in detail. In the west we admired the magnificent Italian face of Mont Blanc, and endeavoured vainly to sort out the Aiguilles into their proper groups. Without rising from our position the eye took in the main group of the Pennine Alps, including the Mischabel-Hörner, the Monte Rosa group and the Matterhorn. The latter held a special interest for us, as we were contemplating an attack on the Zmutt ridge within the next few days. To the north the Oberland peaks were all clear, but although I had climbed amongst them a year or two previously, their outlines from the south-west were somewhat unfamiliar, with the exception of the Jungfrau and the Finsteraarhorn. We were knocking out the ashes of our second pipe, when one of us suggested that we had still far to go. I recollected a passage in Whympers' "Scrambles amongst the Alps," where he is quite surprised at the remarkable ease with which he succeeded in climbing the Ruinette from the Val de Bagnes. Our

route of descent lay in the same direction of the Col du Mont Rouge, but we knew that two Passes intervened between there and Arolla—the Col de Seilon and the Pas de Chèvres. It behoved us to be up and doing.

At a quarter past one we moved off down the south ridge. This was quite interesting, but after we had descended about six or seven hundred feet we decided that we might as well attempt to gain the level surface of the Glacier de Gietroz without proceeding as far as the Col du Mont Rouge. The way led down an exceedingly loose rib of red rock on our right. The descent could not be termed pleasant. The rock was abominably loose, and when we had got about half way down an avalanche of stones suddenly roared down behind us, causing us to jump aside hastily. Doubtless we had started the trouble ourselves. The rock had developed a sort of inner gully at this point, and we were quite safe as long as we kept out of it. At 2.30 p.m. we reached the level surface of the glacier, and set off up the gentle slopes towards the Col de Seilon. It was a stifling hot afternoon, and the upper glacier was so much denuded by the snowless summer as almost to simulate the "nieve penitente" of the Andes. On this unpleasant surface we stumbled and sweated laboriously until, as we approached the Col, we found ourselves getting bogged in a complicated system of crevasses. A wide detour to the right eventually landed us on the pass at 3.12 p.m. The descent to the north promised to be equally interesting. In the year 1926 there was hardly a single open crevasse between the Pas de Chèvres and the Col de Seilon. The snowless conditions of the year 1928 forced us to descend the icefall by a very tortuous course. Probably our first abandoned intention of keeping very close in to the left bank would have been better than our actual unsteady track down the centre. However, in due course we reached the "dry" glacier, which effectually belied its name, for the crossing to the foot of the Pas de Chèvres involved an interminable series of leaps over glacier torrents swollen by the efforts of the blazing sun of the afternoon.

We crossed the Pas de Chèvres at 4.20 p.m., and soon

descended to our favourite bathing pool. The cooker was again requisitioned, for afternoon tea this time, whilst we enjoyed an excellent dip in the icy stream. It was an ideal spot for the last halt of the day. We were back in the world of bright Alpine flowers, on a bank of greensward ornamented with anemones, gentians, and Alpine roses. The sun was so warm that even at six o'clock we could hardly be persuaded to continue the descent. We gazed contentedly at the peaks around us, and were overawed by none. We felt ideally fit, and on this, our last day in the Arolla valley, we were not minded to shorten the aftermath of what, both to Parry and myself, was the most perfect climbing day we had ever enjoyed.