

A HIGH-LEVEL ROUTE.

BY A. LANDBOROUGH THOMSON.

WE had been climbing from that delightful centre, Saas Fee, a little village set among meadows and pines before a great curtain of glaciers cascading from tremendous peaks. Itself nearly 6,000 feet above sea-level, it is surrounded by some of the grandest of the Pennine Alps. The precipices of the Mischabel rise directly above, culminating in the summit of the Dom, well known as the highest mountain wholly in Switzerland. Although the hotels provide every comfort, Saas Fee has the further advantage (as it must appear to the discriminating) of being accessible only on foot or on mule back; but the new road carrying the motor bus from Stalden comes gradually nearer.

The weather had been good, and we had enjoyed some splendid days. Perhaps the most memorable was a morning of brilliant visibility, when we stood on the narrow snow-crest that is the summit of the Fletschhorn (13,127 feet). The Simplon road on the farther side seemed almost beneath our feet, so little was there to arrest the eye in the drop between, but it was the distant view that held our gaze. To the north the whole chain of the Bernese Oberland, with the great Aletsch Glacier winding out of its centre; to the east, receding tones of grey against the light, range after range as far as the Engadine; south-eastwards some cloud over Italy; south and south-westwards the snows of the nearer peaks gleaming in the morning sun, with other Pennine heights showing behind—and beyond and above them all, 60 miles away, the huge white dome of Mont Blanc.

We now wished to do something different, a "walk"—the term is relative rather than literal—over the high passes to Zermatt and Arolla. For the first stage we had the choice of several passes leading westwards over the Saasgrat—that

notable ridge which, in 15 miles, has eight peaks of over 13,000 feet; chiefly because one of us already knew the more usual alternatives, we had selected the Adler. The pass takes its name from the finding of an eagle's feather on the summit during one of the early crossings, as described by Alfred Wills in his recently reprinted book. It has also been known as the Col Imseng, after the famous *curé* of the name who made the first passage in 1849.

Appropriately enough, our young guide was himself an Imseng, now taking the place of the father who had led us hitherto; and the porter was a still younger kinsman, our companion on various climbs. The amateurs of the party were the writer and his niece, the latter visiting the Alps for the first time. On the afternoon of August 4 we left Saas Fee, and followed the zigzag path up the hill-side to the south. After an ascent of some 3,000 feet the route traversed a precipitous face, which in places dropped sheer on the left of the path. Gentler slopes followed, and finally we had to put on the rope to cross a snow-covered glacier. This brought us to the Britannia Hut, at a height of 9,952 feet, on a spur from which our route for the morrow was in full view. The hut is a substantial affair, presented by the British members of the Swiss Alpine Club; but it suffers from overcrowding, largely because it is the sleeping-place for the Allalinhorn, the popular easy peak of the district.

For the most part, any night in a hut conforms with a familiar pattern. Outside, the fading view and the rapid chill; indoors, the dim light and the pungent atmosphere. Supper from one's own store of cold provisions, supplemented by hot soup and tea—the latter laced with the customary wine. Polyglot talk, and then much clumping of heavy boots on wooden stairs. Sketchy preparations for the night, as each one gets under a blanket on his or her numbered section of the common mattress—of a width here reduced to an uncomfortable minimum. At length, snores from some and wakefulness for others.

An early call was welcome, and by 4 o'clock we had breakfasted and were on our way. For a little it led down a rough path, which the guide's lantern but faintly lit.

Soon the glacier was reached and the rope put on. Walking became easy on the white firm snow, and we went forward at a steady plod. The night was clear and still, cold but not too cold, holding promise of a good day. So we were well content, and each mind followed its own thoughts as our bodies surrendered to the rhythm of the march.

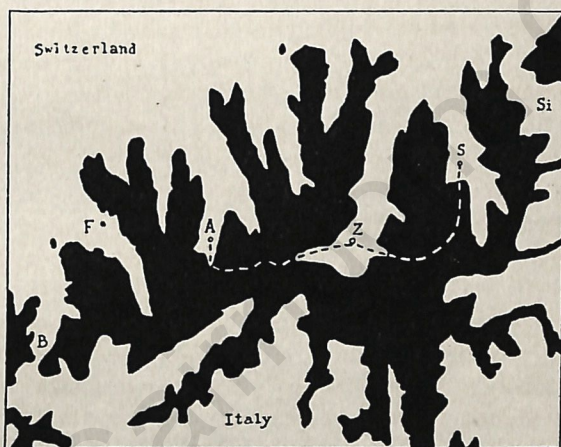
At first there were deviations, with various ups and downs, but after an hour or so we were on the wide surface of the main glacier and mounting steadily. Now we could see a dozen twinkling points of light, some ahead and some behind, that marked the position of other parties. Nearly all of these were bound for the Allalin, however, and presently we began to draw away to the left. Then the sky paled with approaching dawn, and the slopes grew gradually steeper, calling at this altitude for enough exertion to slow our progress. By the time we reached the snowy saddle it was full day.

We were now on the summit of the Adler Pass, at a height of 12,460 feet. On our left rose the easy slopes of the Strahlhorn, and on our right the precipitous rocks of the Rimpfischhorn. In the gap between we had a sudden view of the Zermatt peaks, from Monte Rosa to the Dent Blanche: in the middle stood the Matterhorn, from this distance and height only an incident in the landscape. Over a low part of the range, and across a corner of Italy, the Grivola and Gran Paradiso were faintly visible. Looking back, there was a foreground of glacier, some fleecy clouds in the valley below, and the Weissmies and its fellows beyond.

A cold wind on the top forbidding a halt of any length, we turned soon to the descent. The first part of this was an icy slope of exceeding steepness—a smooth white glacis falling sharply away for several hundred feet. This required step-cutting and caution. Our order was reversed so that the guide came last on the rope, and we moved one at a time—an occasional word of admonition, the chop of the axe, and the sizzle of sliding fragments. For a while we went in short zigzags, with special care at each turn in the steps, and then were able to make a longer slanting traverse to the right. Gradually the slope eased and the surface became

softer, so that we could go more freely as we neared the foot. (The condition of a section such as this is liable to great variation. If the certainty of a straightforward snow-walk be preferred, the alternative route by the Allalin Pass should be taken.)

We were now on comparatively level glacier, and were able to walk down the middle of it on firm snow. There were a few large open crevasses to be avoided, but most were hidden. Once or twice we heard the sharp crack in the air, like a passing bullet, which tells of a snow-bridge



B—St Bernard. F—Fionnay. A—Arolla. Z—Zermatt.
S—Saas-Fee. Si—Simplon.

settling a fraction under the strain of added weight. The sun shone brightly in a clear sky. Monte Rosa and the Lyskamm were massed magnificently on our left, while the Matterhorn was straight ahead and beginning to bulk more largely.

A little scrambling along the right bank enabled us to turn the ice-fall, when our tributary stream joined the main Findelen Glacier. We might here have taken to the moraine, but there was a theory that the ice—at this level bare of snow and with a rough gritty surface—would still provide better going. As it happened, a large transverse fissure forced us far out into the middle, with the result that we became

involved in a brisk twenty minutes of dodging and jumping crevasses or following narrow ridges between them. We were led at a rapid pace in this exercise, and as it was now a warm day we were well cooked by the time we reached firm ground. Here we unroped and shed superfluous garments.

There was now a path, gradually improving, and before long we passed the little wooden inn on the Fluh Alp, the sleeping-place if the pass or its adjacent peaks be approached from this side. As we descended, the Matterhorn loomed larger and larger, and by the time we stopped to lunch it completely dominated the scene. Early in a hot afternoon we reached Zermatt and found a welcome at the Monte Rosa. After Saas Fee this place seemed large and crowded. We watched one of the little trains arrive, as if it were a novel sight, and ate ices in the garden of a very sophisticated café. In the evening, when everybody promenades in the narrow street, a man drew music from a cow-horn ten feet long.

We made a late start next morning for a leisurely walk up the Zmutt valley to the Schönbühl Hut, the sleeping-place for the passage of the Col d'Hérens and Col de Bertol—a stage, or a recognised variant of a stage, of the classical "High-level Route" from Zermatt to Chamonix. The path ascended for a little through stone-pines, at one place noisy with nutcrackers—those spotted crows of the Alpine woods—feeding on the cones. Then it followed a steep hill-side forming the bank of a glacier almost hidden by its load of surface debris. Opposite impended the terrific north face of the Matterhorn, so close as to give us a much foreshortened view of the mountain. On our own side a gap at one point revealed the great rock peak of the Ober Gabelhorn, at the head of a short branch valley. Looking back we could see Monte Rosa and the way we had come the day before.

At length the path took to the ridge of the lateral moraine, and finally climbed in zigzags to the grassy shoulder on which the hut stands. A visit to this spot is one of the best ordinary walks from Zermatt, but it attracts only a small minority. The height is 8,860 feet and the situation magnificent. One can look right down the valley, or towards the

huge ice-fall at its head; or across to the Dent d'Hérens and the Matterhorn. One has here got behind the latter, so to speak, and sees it in unfamiliar form; the famous Zmutt *arête* is just opposite, the Italian ridge forms the skyline on one side and the ordinary north-east ridge—seen to be much less steep for most of the way than it appears from Zermatt—forms the other.

A minor attraction was provided by a marmot so tame that it came from the hill-side to be fed by hand: one often hears the whistling call, but seldom sees the animals. A pair of Alpine choughs was also, characteristically, in attendance. The hut itself was comfortable—smaller than the Britannia, but less crowded. The company was very different, consisting mostly of guideless experts, for the ascents commonly made from here are difficult. It included a German trio, two men and a woman, about to hazard an attempt on the ice-girt north face of the Dent d'Hérens. They left at midnight, armed with numerous *pitons* and such gear, but we never heard how they fared.

Our own departure was at a more reasonable hour, although while it was still pitch dark—only the faint gleams of starlit ice or snow, and the silhouette of black rock against less black sky. We crossed an arm of the glacier system without roping, for the surface was level and free from snow, and reached the foot of the Stockje, a rocky island amid the ice. We put on the rope and climbed this by a steep snow slope. A path of sorts led along the ridge and brought us to the upper basin of the glacier above the fall. We then mounted gradually over the snow in a wide curve to just below the pass. A snow bridge at a convenient point took us across the *bergschrund*, and a few steps—deeply impressed by other feet on earlier days—up a short steep section to an outcrop of broken rock. A few minutes of very simple scrambling then brought us to the summit of the Col d'Hérens (11,418 feet).

Here we were at once on the lip of a new region. Behind us the Dent d'Hérens and the Matterhorn were visible for the last time. The Dent Blanche rose on our right, and a low ridge flanked our left. Before us extended a great

snow-field of dazzling purity, with the shapes of unfamiliar peaks beyond. No living thing was in sight. By bearing to the right we could have descended to Ferpècle, but our object was to skirt round the head of the valley—losing as little altitude as possible—to our next pass. The going was good and the day perfect, so for some miles we had high-level walking at its best. In due time we reached the farther rim, at the gap which is the Col de Bertol (11,120 feet).

The Bertol Hut, the sleeping-place for this expedition if made in the reverse direction, stands on a steep rock a few feet above the pass. Ignoring it, we proceeded to the descent. The first short section was icy and fairly steep, but there were well-worn steps: below that, the slope of the glacier gradually moderated. It presented no difficulty, but the necessity for the rope was illustrated a few weeks later by the disappearance of the hut-keeper, presumably when descending here alone. We had a hint of danger of another kind at the very last, when a great boulder bounded down behind us and across our recent tracks. For a moment it seemed to be coming straight towards us and we began running for higher ground; but then it was diverted, and in the end missed us by a wide margin. This happened during our last minute or two on the rope, and an ordinary picnic party a few yards beyond had been, all unconsciously, just as much in the line of fire.

Presently we stopped for lunch on a grassy knoll commanding a wonderful view of Mont Collon and the Pigne d'Arolla, both quite close across a deep, narrow valley. An hour later we reluctantly resumed our way, following the path steeply down into the gorge and then by the side of the glacier to the village. Reluctantly, because our mountain holiday was over; and thoughts we had of lingering for a final day in so delectable a spot, or even crossing another pass to Fionnay, were soon dispelled by the discovery that every bed in Arolla was taken. So it was that we ended by racing six miles farther down the valley to catch the last bus where the road begins, and by spending the night so far from the heights as Sion.