

IN THE ÖTZTAL ALPS.

W. LAWSON.

THERE is no doubt that the cow-bell is romantic and makes a delightful souvenir, but like many other things its romance lies more in theory than in practice. Placed on the neck of a cow browsing outside your window at 4 o'clock in the morning, it takes on quite a different aspect. And this particular cow evidently found the grass outside the Hohenzollern Hütte to its taste, and the cow-bell clanged discordantly with just sufficient interval of silence to encourage vainly renewed attempts at slumber. The night had, in any case, been rather a restless one, our first night in an Austrian hut, and knowing that a long day lay in front of us, and that we were due to be called at 5 o'clock, the premature waking was far from welcome. I gazed out through the little window to the peaks outlined against the clear night sky, and the snow reflecting a faint, ghostly light. It seemed almost miraculous to lie here at last, to find that the hut existed in reality and not only in map and guide-book. The night journey to London, the day's travelling to Cologne, the early start and the long but interesting journey to Innsbruck, seemed already part of a distant existence, whose only link with the Hohenzollern Hütte was the hectic forenoon in Innsbruck, buying crampons, rope, haversacks and the like at the Sporthaus Schmidt, transactions which strained both my German and Herr Schmidt's English to the utmost. The journey by slow train and bus to Pfunds belonged to this new world, for city clothes were now left behind, and shorts and climbing kit had taken their place. The transformation was completed by the evening in Pfunds, spent in the inn common-room listening to folk-songs and tunes played on the zither, the performer inspired first by beer, and latterly by a discreet quantity of Scotch whisky.

From Pfunds to the hut the way had been steadily up-

hill, and a misty morning gave way to a scorching sun, and confirmed our suspicions that our packs were far too heavy. However, the beauty of the valley, the luxuriance of the flowers and vegetation, the glimpses of distant snow-topped peaks, counteracted the toil of the ever-ascending path, and sore shoulders were soon forgotten in the charm of the Hütte. My friend and I were the only occupants, and the hut-keeper and his wife were effusive in their welcome. The cutlet and roast potatoes were first rate, and in return we had infused a brew of real English tea which was sampled with great appreciation—the keeper declared it “suprafine,” and added: “Ah, the Colonies!”

As I lay, determined not to get up before the appointed hour, I heard him moving about downstairs, and just as the noisy cow-bell moved off to pastures new, and I fell into a deep morning sleep, his noisy knock and shout, and even more noisy tread on the wooden stair, announced 5 o'clock. Breakfast consisted of coffee, bread, and cheese, and we set off at 6 o'clock, after lengthy instructions regarding the danger of crevasses in the glaciers, the route to follow, where to fill our water-flask, and so on.

The morning was gloriously clear, with a slight chilly breeze, and we swung at a good pace along the excellent path, first over the meadow and then along the hill-side. Soon the path turned, and we waved a last farewell to the keeper. Ahead we could see the path running along the slope of the hill and ending in the snow-field, while we could make out quite easily the gap in the ridge which formed the pass we had to cross. The summit of the Glockturn, which was also included in the day's intentions, lay to the right of the pass, and the snow-fields terminated in the Glockturn Glacier. Although this is comparatively small, we were thrilled by our first sight of a glacier.

Still in blissful shade, we soon covered several miles, but where the snow began the shade ended, and we were then in the full glare of a sun now well up in the sky. As the hut-keeper had promised, footmarks carried on the track, but it was here also that he had warned us about the danger of crevasses, so we dutifully roped up with doubled

ropes, and also donned crampons. Progress was slow. Not knowing anything about the correct method of fastening on crampons, they were more often off than on; the doubled ropes dragged heavily; we carefully prodded the snow before putting a foot on it; the sun beat down mercilessly; in fact, a more comical picture of a couple of greenhorns on a glacier for the first time would be hard to imagine. We soon realized that in the steadily softening snow the crampons were merely a nuisance, and they were relegated to the rucksack after their first and last appearance on our holiday. In self-justification, however, I should mention that I was assured that if we had been a few weeks later, *i.e.*, in August instead of July, they would have been essential.

With confidence our speed increased, but it was a long trudge along the snow slope until at last we reached the pass. This is 10,000 feet, the hut we had left being 7,416 feet, and the Glockturn, which was now our objective, is 11,007 feet.

What a relief to unrope, get our packs off, and after a short rest set off unburdened along the ridge! The going was easy, first snow and then loose rock, and it was only on the final slope that the loose rock and soft snow, coupled with the precipice below, gave rise to the question of the advisability of roping up. The question was quickly answered—neither of us had considered it his particular task to bring the rope.

Going very carefully we skirted the loose stones and soon stood on the summit where at last we could see in all directions. The sky was perfectly clear, and in every direction we could see as far as perspective would allow us. It was only afterwards, when on most occasions a heat haze obscured the distant view, that we realised how amazingly fortunate we were in this, our first view from an Alpine summit. Our gaze turned naturally first to the south-west, where the Swiss Alps lay, and we quickly supplied the mountain masses there with names to satisfy the most thirsty imagination. Soon we turned our attention to the Eastern Alps, which lay all around us, and we settled down to study

the map and pick out our future routes and peaks. Our map had seemed at first a hopeless puzzle, with large white and blue areas signifying snow-fields and glaciers, but with practice it was becoming wonderfully clear and simple. The Gepatsch Glacier, which we intended to cross on the morrow, immediately attracted attention, stretching rather like a long, dusty road from the high snow-fields into the valley, and following it we could pick out our route over its upper stretches of snow to the rocky peak behind which is perched the Branderburger Haus, at a height of 10,000 feet. For almost an hour we lay, unwilling to leave so glorious a view behind, but there was still a long way to go, and at 3 o'clock, after draining the last drop from our water-flask, we reluctantly started the downward journey, and later, even more reluctantly, shouldered our packs. The descending snow-slopes were quickly covered, there being no fears of crevasses on this side, according to our hut-keeper friend, and our next halt was at a glacier pool where, taking our courage in both hands, we had a dip. Dip is the correct word, for short though the duration of the dip was, it took us quite a time to attain normal temperatures again. Perhaps it was the effect of the shock that made me leave my scarf behind, or perhaps it was to celebrate our bravery that I left the Cairngorm Colours at the side of that pool. After the soft snow the stones and gravel of the moraine were far from welcome, and we trudged patiently on, picking up here and there the guiding splash of red paint, until at last we came back to the luxury of vegetation. It takes a few miles of moraine slopes to make one really appreciate what a refreshing sight grass can be.

The path was now quite clear, and we felt a homely feeling descending the valley at the side of the noisy stream. It was only an upward look that reminded one that this was not some Scottish glen, although a closer look at the stream would have revealed that in place of a clear Scottish burn ran a muddy glacier torrent. At last the Gepatsch Haus was visible amongst the trees, but fate had a nasty trick up her sleeve for us and, lulling us into ignoring the clear markings of the map, she lured us along what seemed the

rightful path, then suddenly confronted us with a fringe of broken cliffs, below which ran the road up to the hut, if the imposing Gepatsch Haus could be given such a title. After several futile attempts my companion adopted the wiser course of retreating, and took the correct but circuitous route down, while I, goaded by the proximity of the end of our journey, persevered until at last, by throwing down my pack in front of me regardless of consequences, I was able partly to scramble, partly to slither down. It was practically dark at 8 o'clock when we thankfully put our packs on the floor of the Gepatsch Haus, and already most of the inmates had retired.

Our first consideration was food, and our meal was ordered. Next, we unashamedly booked a place on the *mattrazen lager*, or common bed, in spite of the surprise of the chambermaid that the wealthy English should not want a room for themselves. I should mention that these Austrian huts are almost like mountain hotels, and can offer accommodation in the form of bedrooms, or the common sleeping-room. The latter is generally a long room at the top of the house, and down the whole of either side runs the *mattrazen lager*, which is simply a long bed on which the thrifty mountaineer, of either sex, can obtain a place for approximately one shilling.

By the time we had changed, our meal was ready, and as we were the only remaining diners, we were entertained with the company of the waitress, who was delighted to meet the Englishmen, while I was equally pleased to exercise my German. As usual, we had to complete the register and produce our passports, and, also as usual, the photographs thereon gave rise to much amused comment, favourable and otherwise.

Soon we crept up to bed, well satisfied with our first day's climbing—it would have taken much more than cow-bells to keep me awake that night.

Selo H.P. Film, Zeiss G1 yellow filter, 1/100 sec., f22, 11 A.M. September. The sun was behind the thin cloud in the upper left-hand corner. Snow-bridged crevasses at Grünhorn Lücke (11,000 feet) between the Aletsch and Fiescher glaciers.



September 1938

SNOW

R. L. Mitchell

And next morning the noise of the departure of our bedmates passed unheeded in our blissful slumber, so that we rose to the sight of the sun already shining and doing its fell work on the snow.

Breakfast was a rush, and the long trudge up the moraine by the side of the Gepatsch Glacier was accomplished before the morning shadows had left the path. After a few miles the glacier itself had to be crossed, just below the ice-fall, and this we did in some trepidation. A little planning to find a route over the maze of crevasses at the edges was required, and at times our feet felt far from secure on the wet ice, but no real difficulty was experienced. The lower part of a glacier is bare ice and crevasses are plainly visible, so that there is very little danger—it is in the upper part, where the ice is covered with snow and the crevasses frequently completely concealed, that care is essential.

The Gepatsch Glacier is the biggest glacier in Austria, and the ice-fall presented an amazing collection of fantastic ice towers and shapes that filled us with admiration and awe. On the other side of the glacier stands the small Rauhekopf Hut, perched on an outcrop of rock, and here we thankfully removed our packs and sampled the rather sickly lemonade. The courteous suggestion of the hut-keeper that we should stay overnight seemed ridiculous, as it was only 10 o'clock, but many times during the next few hours I regretted our refusal.

Our route to the Brandenburger Haus lay over the snow of the Upper Gepatsch Glacier, snow now well softened by a blazing sun. For miles around us it seemed to stretch like a white desert, fiercely throwing up the heat the sun was beating down upon it. Its treachery was early revealed when my foot went through the snow to emptiness beneath, and left a hole down which I caught a glimpse of the blue, icy walls of a crevasse. As we plodded on not a breeze disturbed the shimmering air, not a cloud gave us a minute's respite from the glare of the sun. We soon stopped even cursing the weight of our packs, and our whole energies became concentrated in propelling our feet along the track of footmarks in front of us. Resting seemed out of the

question. To sit down meant sinking in soft snow; to stop meant that we became still more conscious of the weight of our packs.

At last the Branderburger Haus came in sight, and very, very slowly we crept nearer. Over the snow ran ski-tracks, a sight that put bitterness in my soul as I ploughed along sinking knee-deep at every step. It was only 2.30 when, like a couple of drowning men, we put our feet on dry land and pulled ourselves up to the house, but it seemed to me as if I had lived through a complete existence since I first set out over that snow.

As I already mentioned, the Branderburger Haus stands at 10,000 feet, and there is a sense of non-reality in finding at that height a large barrack-like building where a bed can be booked and almost any kind of dish chosen from an elaborate menu. For us there was nothing unreal, however, about the meal when it arrived or about the bed, when after an orgy of dutiful post-card writing we took our places on the *mattrazen lager*.

We had decided to spend two nights at the Branderburger Haus in order to enjoy a day's climbing with no packs to carry, and the early hours of the following morning saw us marching carefree and packfree at the tail of quite a large procession wending its way over the crisp snow to the *Fluchtkogel*. There can be few more exhilarating sensations than that of walking along hard snow in the brisk air of early morning, and this morning was particularly fine with the sun just gilding the tips of the higher peaks. The *Fluchtkogel* itself is just a fairly steep snow climb and the only awkward thing about it was the way the steps had been churned up by those in front. There were about six parties in front of us, all, I think, accompanied by guides. The latter marched steadily ahead, the rope tied round their shoulders and grasped by one hand, their attitude being generally that of one leading an unwilling mule uphill. They were, however, always very obliging and on the summit one of them pointed out the various hills to us. He also praised our climbing, but in this I am afraid he was not altogether without ulterior motive, as he pointed out to his

patrons that only our great experience enabled us to dispense with the services of a guide, and we earned his approbation by explaining that we climbed practically every week-end in our native mountains. From the Fluchtkogel we intended returning over a rocky ridge from which rise several sharp peaks, so, after a short rest, we bade the guide farewell and half ran, half glissaded down the slope to the ridge. Soon we found that we had tackled much more than we bargained for. The ridge went up and down in a heartbreaking fashion, so that after having climbed for quite a long time the actual distance covered appeared negligible. It consisted mainly of piles of loose stones set in precarious positions and requiring great care, but there were quite a number of good pitches. The sun, however, was now almost overhead, and the rocks were becoming sufficiently warm to make our hands feel dry and hard, so that when we came to a convenient snow-gully we decided on the advantages of discretion, and descended to the snow-field. In leisurely fashion we returned to the Branderburger Haus to spend the rest of the day chiefly in observing our fellow-guests. The most surprising feature was their age—there were more middle-aged and elderly people than young people—and I admired the pluck they showed in facing the trudge over the snow to reach the Haus. One young fellow, I remember, had heard of Aberdeen and of its football team. The waitress, too, I particularly remember. She seemed to spend the whole day leaning against the wall close to the hatch to the kitchen, and beside all the red and burnt faces hers was a greyish-white, only occasionally relieved by a wan smile. On one occasion, after vainly trying to guess the meaning of most of the menu, I decided on an omelette and potatoes, and without a trace of surprise on her features, or the suspicion of a smile, she brought me a large jam omelette and a dish of roast potatoes! Severally, if not jointly, they were excellent.

The walk next day to the Breslauer Hut had one outstanding feature—we came again to green grass and the sight of trees. After a couple of days spent in the perpetual black and white of rock and snow, it was with a sense of

relief that we came again to restful green. The route lay across a shoulder of the Fluchtkogel and thence over the Guslar Glacier and moraines to the Vernagt Hut, where we rested and admired the very fine view of the Vernagt Glacier. The remainder of the journey was by a good path running high up along the hill-side and providing, in addition to the usual scenes of mountain ranges, refreshing glimpses of the wooded valley far below. By 1 o'clock we were at the Breslauer Hütte, and by 2 o'clock we were lying, well-fed and contented, basking in the afternoon sun. Towards evening it became dull, and eventually the rain started, so that we were driven to join the large crowd in the hut. As it is the starting-point for climbing the Wildspitz, the second highest mountain in Austria, the Breslauer Hut is a popular one, and there was evidently going to be many people on the hill next day. I was able to borrow a guide-book, and ascertained that there were two routes—the tourist route, on snow all the way, and the Partsch Weg, which followed a ridge commencing just behind the hut, and continuing on rock all the way to the summit, crossing Oetztaler Urkund on the way. This route had formerly been a popular one, and furnished with artificial “steps,” but these had been now removed, so that it was no longer a tourist route. We met a young Berliner in the hut who also intended climbing by this route with a guide. I asked him why, when he was employing a guide, he did not tackle a more difficult way up the mountain. Had I gone to the expense of a guide I would have made sure that I was taken up something providing very good value for the expense, although incidentally I discovered later that the guide's charges increase very greatly with the difficulty of the route. The Berliner, however, informed me that he was taking the most difficult way, and when I tried to explain what I meant by pointing out some of the steeper ridges on the mountain, he drew the distinction that these were not “ways.” His attitude was typical of that of the German climbers we met—they never considered leaving the recognized routes, and appeared generally to have a horror of rocks, always climbing on snow where

possible. But one must admire their enthusiasm; an enthusiasm shared by every age and every class.

In spite of the previous evening's rain, we set off in a clear morning along the Partsch Weg. The usual procession, led by guides, was already wending its way over the snow, bound for the tourist route, and our Berlin friend and his guide were ahead of us. The ridge was narrow but not difficult, and although we were roped we moved together, except in one or two places. As we got nearer the summit a heavy mist came down, and we were quite glad to have the benefit of the footmarks of our predecessors as we climbed up the final slope over loose rock and boulders well sprinkled with freshly fallen snow. Only our friends were at the large cross which marks the summit, the main party having just left, and soon we were alone in the thick mist, which, in addition to wiping out any hope of a view, made lingering on the top too cold to be advisable. It had taken us three and a half hours to do the climb, and it was still only 8.30. My main feeling was one of amazement to find myself at a height of 12,520 feet, with the day's climbing done, at an hour at which, in a normal state of mind, one would only be having breakfast.

We descended rapidly by the tourist route, and once, when we arrived at a sort of cross-roads of footmarks, used our compass for the one and only time on our holiday. As we got lower the mist turned to heavy rain, so that we were very wet by the time we reached the Breslauer Hut again, but with a change of clothing and a second breakfast we soon recovered our good spirits. We had intended spending a second night at this hut, but by midday we could no longer resist the temptations offered by Vent, the little village some 6 miles away, and we packed and set off. The way was steadily down-hill, over rough pasture land, frequently too steep to make pleasant walking, and the rain was still falling steadily. A compensating feature, however, was the sight of the weary climbers toiling upwards to the hut.

We soon found a comfortable hotel in Vent, and in the evening the weather cleared sufficiently to induce us to take

a look at the outskirts of the village. Not far off lay a tree-encircled pool which reflected the distant glaciers and peaks, now softened by the sinking sun. The first part of our holiday was finished. To-morrow would see us on the way back to Innsbruck, and as we sat by the pool we felt well satisfied with our first venture in the higher mountains.

Our plans had all been carried through without a hitch; we had found that we could soon use a map with the same confidence as we did at home, and, of course, the weather conditions had been ideal.

Taking into account the excellent paths, the splendid, well-situated huts, and the not very difficult character of the mountains, there can be few places more suited for an introduction to Alpine conditions than the mountains of the Austrian Tyrol, or, to give them their more imposing name, the Eastern Alps.

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“ The stillness and solitude here are profound, the rushing of the streams on the mountain sides only making the general stillness deeper. Standing at the entrance in the early morning, after a few hours spent under the (Shelter) Stone, we have enjoyed the gloomy and weird-like view of the scene around us, the loch resting quietly in its natural hollow at our feet. Such a scene would almost make the thoughtless think.”

—A. I. M'CONNOCHE in “ Ben Muich Dhui.”