

## CLIMBING IN AUSTRIA.

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BRUCK on the Mur, Steiermark, Austria, was an unknown quantity when we left Novara. The first lap of the journey from this old north Italian town was made by train, and took us to Udine in the wide plain south of the Austro-Italian border. Because we were much nearer the hills, we couldn't see the magnificent mid-winter panorama of the Alps from Mont Blanc in the west to Monte Rosa in the east which we had been able to enjoy from Novara. Our proximity to the frontier hills towering above us was, however, an exhilarating compensation. We stayed at Udine a few days before motor transport became available to take us over the Pass into Austria. The railway had been made impassable by snow, and it was better that we made the journey by road, since by rail much of the scenery is lost by the number of tunnels on the line. Having crossed the few flat miles of cold black orchards silhouetted against the snow which lie between Novara and the hills, we started to rise towards an apparently solid wall of rock. As we approached this, the course of the road became visible and we were soon between widely separated rock faces rising from the broad stony bed of a snow-fed river. The walls converged as we climbed above the water, which we crossed and recrossed, often over makeshift bridges whose predecessors had been destroyed as the Germans pulled out. Many parts of the river-bed were strewn with wrecked tanks and bridges, and railway engines half-submerged in the icy water were further evidence of the intensive bombing which the retiring troops must have endured.

For several miles the road wound upwards, and eventually—too soon—we arrived at the highest point and started the descent into Austria. Down we swept across opening country, past cosy wooden villages and icy streams, civilians and

troops gliding on skis across the easy slopes, and revelling in the brilliant cool sunshine, the crisp snow, against which dark fir trees stood sparsely, clean and sharp, and the deep-blue sky. Every colour was sparkingly clear and cheerful on its white background—a red figure sweeping down the slope, a brilliant yellow-sweatered skier flashing past the black trunks and deep-shadowed green of the fir-tree spires, and the smooth shadows in the snow. About four o'clock in the afternoon our trucks pulled into Villach, and we were sorry, from some points of view, that the journey had come to an end. Our stay there lasted only a few days in a pleasantly situated camp which had once housed D.P.'s. The place is overlooked by a fine mountain range to the south, the most prominent feature of which is the docked triangle of Predil. The last lap of our journey took us to Bruck, this time by rail. Again it was a beautiful day, and snowy Predil looked magnificent seen from the train, far away through snow-laden trees standing by the shore of the long Worther See which runs in an amethyst strip from near Villach to Klagenfurt 30 miles away. Onwards from Klagenfurt the country was open and flat, gradually becoming more and more hilly as we penetrated deeper into Austria, and always the pine trees perched thick on the slopes. Several fairy-tale castles were left behind, rising white from the top of steep rocky piles, their picture-book spires and turrets sharply outlined in the clear air.

By the time the train rattled into Bruck it was obvious that we had come to a part of the country where the hill-minded would not have far to look for enjoyment. It was surprising to find, however, on arrival in the unit, that no one had climbed even the nearest hill; but climbing fever proved infectious. Our first trip was a walk up one of the nearby hills with sledges. Sledging on this occasion was the object, as it could hardly have been called a climb. Among four of us we had two very small one-seater sledges, and the few people we passed on the way down seemed to derive great enjoyment from the sight of two large British soldiers perched on each of these things. Inexperienced as we were in the art of sledging, it gratified us to find that it took us

only twenty-five minutes to come down a slope which we had taken two and a half hours to climb. This twenty-five minutes included accident time as well, of course. Strictly limited seating accommodation accounted for most of the halts, which were necessitated when the person sitting in front deprived his passenger of his allotted portion of the canvas seat—roughly 9 by 4½ inches.

Rennfeld was the first high hill on our programme. It stands to the south of Bruck and is 5,200 feet. This involved a climb of about 3,900 feet, as Bruck is 1,200 feet above sea level. The climb was uninteresting and fairly exacting, as the snow lay very deep and soft beneath the pine trees of the higher slopes. We managed to keep to a fairly clear ridge towards the summit, however, and after four hours were on the flat top. Here there is a *Gasthaus* firmly fixed to the ground by steel rope stretched across the roof. The view to the north was very fine, and fortunately the weather was clear, for far away could be seen the Hochschwab plateau, snow-covered and precipitous, rising at the summit of the Hochschwab itself to 7,200 feet. Eastwards spread a wide patchwork extending beyond the horizon to Vienna, and to the west, hilltops undulated as far as the eye could see. Unfortunately Austria's highest—the Gross Glockner—is invisible from this point, but the Dachstein mountains away to the north-west could just be seen.

For several weeks after we did Rennfeld our activities were held up, strange though it may sound, by as much work as could be coped with, and by the general difficulties which seem to arise on attempting to get a day or two off. However, in a few weeks the work slacked off, and week-ends became more feasible. One Sunday evening a couple of us took a walk over one of the little hills which surround Bruck, and having crossed the summit and descended the other side, found ourselves on a narrow road by which stood a very inviting *Gasthaus*. We walked into the low, dark-beamed parlour and sat down. The curiosity aroused by our entry was evident, and a few rustics gathered round the two other small tables, eyed us suspiciously before returning to their cards and tall glasses of beer. We bade them *guten*

*abend*, which seemed to surprise them, and they puffed their great china-bowled and knobbly pipes with renewed vigour. We were struck by the homeliness of the place, which was old and mellow and very clean, and went back the next Sunday. We were recognised immediately, and this time one of the older men approached us rather timidly. He was bald, but his wrinkled and friendly brown visage was bedecked by a very large and tangled black moustache. Clad in his best Sunday tweeds, adorned at the seams and edges of the lapels and pockets of the jacket by brown piping, and with a broad brown stripe down the legs of his trousers, he seemed to be a part of the place. His coat buttons were carved in the shape of edelweiss from deer-horn, and the hat hanging on the wall had a *Gamsbard* of gigantic proportions stuck in the back, surrounded by his badges and ski-ing medals. He asked us if we would like a game of cards. Between us we were able to tell him that we didn't know the game they were playing, but would like very much to learn, and they soon thawed out and were most hospitable. By the end of the evening we had arranged to meet one of them who would take us at the week-end to the Hochschwab, where he intended to put in a couple of days ski-ing.

Two more of the unit were recruited, and as soon as work was finished on Saturday we borrowed a truck and set off. Fortunately for our climbing expeditions there was no check on the unit transport at that time, as the whole unit was only eleven strong and without any interfering sergeant-majors. Two days' rations and changes of socks were our only load, as we had been told by our self-appointed guide, if such he could be called, that we would spend the night in a hut called the *Sonnshienhutte*, where bedding and cooking facilities were provided. The weather had been perfect for several days, so a change of clothes was considered unnecessary considering the reliability of the climate. Our rucksacks were negligible in size compared with the unavoidably heavy loads required for a few days in the Cairngorms. We picked up Franz a few miles up the road, and the truck took us 23 kilometres to Tragoss-Oberort, which is a picturesque village having as a background the



EBENSTEIN AND GRASERWAND

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cliffs of Pribitz which drop practically vertically into a perfectly clear little loch known as the Grüner See. Here I met, quite by chance, a blacksmith who had made the crampons for one of the Himalayan expeditions. He showed me a post card with a photo of the expedition on it, written by Dyhrenfurth, thanking him for the satisfactory results which had been obtained with these spikes. Among the other trophies which he kept wrapped in a much-worn piece of oiled silk were several certificates obtained at exhibitions, and letters from dozens of Alpine climbers. Each had to be carefully inspected and admired before we could go on.

We climbed above the loch between the cliffs of Pribitz on the right, and Zirbeneben and the Zellerwart to the left, and in an hour were in an open grassy valley about 3 miles long and a mile wide. About half-way along we started to climb on a good path above the flat bottom and were soon well up the right side with fine views opening both in front and behind. The path continued to be very easy going as it doubled across the face of the pine-clad hillside. As we rose, the wall of the hill above grew steeper and steeper until it was a sheer cliff face fringed with trees at the top. Magnificent views of Hochturm and Griesmauer opened out as we rose, displaying their snowy precipices finely illuminated by the evening sun. It took us three hours to reach the top of the climb, where we found a wide snow-covered plateau—the Sonnschienalm—dominated by two heights—Ebenstein (6,910 feet) and Graserwand (6,361 feet). The plateau is about 5 miles from west to east and of slightly less breadth. Its farther end is covered with very old and beautiful pines on an undulating descent to the loch lying at the foot of the cliffs of the Graserwand-Sackwiesensee.

The evening was deepening the blue of the eastern sky as we started across the snow towards the light of the hut. Behind us an unbelievably brilliant sunset silhouetted the jagged black cone of Griesmauer against the fathomless blue ice of the sky, across which seemed to trickle streams of molten copper, their glowing vapour swept upwards by an unfelt breeze in graceful wisps across the darkening heavens. The spectacle faded as the sun sank from the approach of

evening. We found the house to be a weathered and solidly built timber dwelling, compactly able to house about thirty people. An accordion, ever popular with the people, was playing in the wooden-benched dining-room, whose walls were hung with photographs of the surrounding hills. Having been made very welcome, a meal was soon brewing and we were shown our room. Here we found, much to our surprise, short but comfortable beds, and several very good blankets. The roof sloped low over our heads, and through the small window could be seen the last shadow of Griesmauer. Supper was very pleasant, accompanied by the music of ski-ers and climbers as they sat outside in the cool evening air singing their native Styrian songs, cheerful and sad. As we lay in our four-bedded room, warm between soft blankets, I thought of the last night I had spent in the hills, and hoped that it would not be long before I could smell the peaty Shelter Stone again and the dewy tweed as we lay on a mattress of heather.

In the morning we rose with the light and made, and ate, a good breakfast with a relish which made us feel rather ashamed under the envious eyes of the civilians, who nevertheless look remarkably strong and healthy. It had been decided the previous evening to ascend the western side of the Graserwand, which is mainly a steep scramble, but which also provides some quite stiff pitches, cross the saddle linking the hill to Ebenstein to the west, and climb this before coming down its long ridge to the plateau. So at 7 o'clock, with about six hours in hand, we set out while the snow was still crisp on top, and without much difficulty reached the top of the Graserwand by 10.30. Our party included Franz and a friend, and a girl we met at the hut who had given a fine display of ski-ing the previous evening. Unfortunately some mist was blowing up from the north-east, and by the time we had gone half-way along the crest of the saddle it was thick, swirling up the face of the hill and pouring over the ridge. A sheer wall looming up in front of us was all that could be seen of Ebenstein. Our plan had originally been to traverse to the right of the summit rock which now confronted us, and to make the final ascent from

the west, where the going is a bit easier. As the weather showed no sign of clearing we decided to forgo the idea of climbing Ebenstein altogether and to descend to the hut again. We couldn't afford to spend valuable time, which we might need, in the event of our being delayed by mist, even on the shorter route. So on that particular occasion we missed the very impressive panorama which can be seen from Ebenstein on a clear day, and which we came to know pretty well through subsequent trips.

The slope on our left which we had to negotiate was very steep, but there was not much snow, and there were clear patches all the way to the bottom. We kept to these because we had no ice-axes, but the two Austrians and the girl decided to cross a long steep patch of hard snow, as the going appeared to be rather smoother on the other side. When they were about half-way across the belt the girl's foot must have struck a patch of ice and she fell. Being unroped and without an axe, according to the haphazard fashion of these parts, she could do nothing to stop herself sliding. We stood helpless, and had just to watch her slithering down faster and faster. She had enough presence of mind and, fortunately, the ability to steer herself towards a protruding rock about 250 feet down the slope from the point at which she had fallen. Impact with this would at least be less than if she were to continue another 1,000 feet to the rocks at the bottom. As she hit the rock she was flung clean into the air, to fall to a standstill in a 10-foot cleft on the other side. She was very lucky not to have been badly hurt, but, as it was, she escaped with a nasty cut on her leg and a bad shaking. She managed to get back to the house without much difficulty, and after having lunch we all set off on the return journey to Tragoess.

The descent was made by another route, and the path took us to the southern side of the plateau, sharply down the face of a steep wall which formed one of the sides of a level-bottomed bowl in the hills, and through a narrow "klamm" to the village. The truck was waiting, and by half-past five we were back in Bruck, having completed a trip which formed the basis for many future week-ends.



Infinite variety is the attraction of the Hochschwab. The Sonnschienalm, sun-bathed and pine-covered, contrasts strikingly with the dark and treeless scree and shadow of the northern aspect of the massif. Westwards, peak upon peak, piling until they appear only as faded spectres looming on the horizon, are offset to the east by contours resembling, in places, those of the Cairngorms. Magnificent as this Austrian landscape is, clean and sharp and spacious, the feeling of wild remoteness so keenly stimulated in us by our own hills is rather unfortunately dimmed by the proximity of the *Gasthaus* at almost every vantage point, and by the great number of people whom one sees. Nevertheless, we spent very many thoroughly enjoyed week-ends in these hills, and were introduced by them to many good friends.

This year, "fresh fields and pastures new"; we hope to be able to arrange a few expeditions in Carinthia, and also in Salzburg and the Gross Glockner. Let's hope we manage Glencoe and Ben Nevis too.