

## NEW YEAR IN THE RUWENZORI

JEREMY SMITH

ONE hundred years ago the map of Central Africa was a great white blank. A crude drawing of a giraffe and "Here be Pygmies" obscured the region of the source of the Nile, while the Congo basin appeared to be inhabited by ogres whose arms sprouted from above their heads. It was the beginning of an important period of exploration, when mountains so high that their summits bear eternal snows and glaciers, and enormous lakes, were discovered. Or perhaps one should say rediscovered, since Egyptian and Arab writers knew that the Nile rises in three lakes which in turn are fed by streams flowing from snowy mountains, the Lunæ Mons of Ptolemy. However, their reports were regarded as legends until Stanley was shown the snow-covered peaks in 1888, when he gave them the name Ruwenzori, the rain-maker. Several travellers explored the foothills and a few attempts to reach the summits were made before 1906, when the Duke of Abruzzi led a well-equipped expedition to the range and climbed all the major summits as well as mapping its higher regions for the first time. The Duke recognised six separate mountains carrying glaciers which he called after eminent explorers of this part of Africa; the three highest, Mounts Stanley, Speke, and Baker, form a *cirque* around Lake Bujuku where most parties make their base. Individual summits he named after members of European royal families, thus Margherita (16,794 feet) and Alexandra (16,726 feet) are the highest points of Mount Stanley and also of the Ruwenzori, while the summit of Mount Speke is Vittorio Emanuele (16,079 feet) and of Mount Baker, Edward (15,987 feet).

My own journey to Ruwenzori was one of bewildering rapidity. No sooner had I passed from the peri-arctic to the tropics than the climatic sequence was reversed in climbing to the snow-line. My companion was Tom Fletcher, a member of the Climbers' Club now living in Tanganyika. He met me at Entebbe and we drove westwards for 250 miles through Fort Portal to the native village of Ibanda, where we left the Land Rover and engaged fifteen Bagonjo porters to carry our gear to the Mountain Club's hut at Lake Bujuku. The exuberant vegetation of Ruwenzori has already received ample comment, especially from non-botanists such as myself. With the exception of man-eating orchids, every kind of vegetable unpleasantness is encountered: 20-foot-high elephant grass that slashes at the

skin as one forces a way through it, dense thickets of bamboo, thorns and nettles, knee-deep peat bogs, forests of tree heath and giant groundsel where our moulded rubber soles slithered on the moss-covered stems and roots, and perhaps worst of all was the thick shrubbery of *Helichrysum* that can soak one through at the very start of a climb.

Before I left Aberdeen I was kindly allowed to read as many accounts of the Ruwenzori as were available in the Cairngorm Club Library. I discovered that there is a relatively easy way to each summit, and that very few other routes have been made. Obviously there was abundant scope for new exploration. I learned also that there was still one unclimbed peak above the snow-line, the Great Tooth, an impressive rock pinnacle between the Elena and Savoia peaks which, according to Douglas Busk, rises 500 feet above the ridge and is festooned with icicles. His photographs certainly support his impression of impregnability.

It was dawn on Christmas morning that we set out across the Elena glacier to attempt the first ascent of the Great Tooth whose summit rose 1,500 feet above us. Our crampons bit like diamonds into paper as we traversed steep snow slopes and started up the *couloir* leading to the col south of the Tooth. It had been a bitterly cold night at our bivouac at 14,800 feet, but with the exercise and the strong radiation our numbed bodies quickly became overheated in a swelter of string vests and pullovers—an appalling lack of temperance.

One of the most striking phenomena of these equatorial snows is the development of huge cornices quite unlike those we know in Scotland. Freezing and thawing must happen every night and day in the year, and consequently the cornices become reinforced with icicles reaching enormous sizes and often overhanging 15 or 20 feet. Our gully was barred by such an ice curtain which at its lowest point was 15 feet high. While I belayed, Tom thrashed away at the icicles, showering splinters all about him, and after fifteen minutes we both stood at the col gazing westwards over an ocean of cloud and forest 12,000 feet beneath us which we knew continued uninterrupted far beyond the horizon to the Atlantic. We were just in time, for at once clouds began to roll up from the east and during the rest of the day we were in mist.

The south ridge of the Great Tooth started with a 30-foot-high wall leading to a snow-covered ledge where stringers of ice dangled in the manner that sloppy icing sugar runs down the side of a cake. The



RUWENZORI CORNICE

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rock was a good quality amphibolite schist with excellent cracks and incut holds all the way, but try as I would I made no impression on the fringe of ice at the top of the pitch. It was exhausting work, for I was not fully acclimatised to this height, and the 20 feet that I repeatedly climbed and descended were indubitably strenuous. After half an hour we decided that we were getting nowhere so, descending for 50 feet down the west side of the col, we traversed on to the Congo face where a series of ledges separated by short walls suggested a route.

The first wall was disconcertingly difficult, small sloping footholds were reached with long strides or waist-high steps assisted by the bare minimum of finger-holds. If we were to be off the mountain by nightfall the climbing would have to ease off; and ease off it did. Although the pitches were still steep, they unaccountably became furnished with big incut cracks and spikes, allowing us to make fast time for 150 feet until an almost featureless wall blocked the way. Traversing along a ledge to the left I found a chimney in the back of a corner, the lower 20 feet bulging with ice. It was the only way, so while Tom belayed to a piton, I "looked at" the pitch—that is, I climbed up for 3 feet and promptly slithered back again. Without pausing to marvel at the poor frictional qualities of ice I reached up and placed a piton at arm's length on the right-hand wall, then, clipping in a karabiner, heaved myself up for 4 feet, jammed my left foot and shoulder in the chimney, got my right foot on the piton, and I was up. Tom followed equally quickly, and while he regained his breath I lowered myself on the rope to recover the peg.

A spectator might have detected an air of jubilation, for it seemed quite plain that no further difficulties separated us from our summit—that is, if a snowy pillar on the skyline was the summit. Unfortunately it wasn't; when we arrived there we were confronted by a 15-foot-high wall cut by a narrow chimney, a strenuous pitch of about Grade IV. With my left shoulder and hip wedged in the chimney, my right foot scoured the sides for rugosities to give an upward thrust; one last jerk and my left hand curled over a chockstone. Yes, it was quite firm; an awkward pull up, a struggle to change hands, a higher hold for the left, right foot on the chockstone, and I was back in equilibrium again breathing hard. Once again a bank of snow capped the pitch. I fumbled for my ice-axe which a minute before had been the object of my curses, and driving it into the snow, heaved up and found myself on a little snowy plateau. Fifteen feet away a rocky knob rose another few feet and must be the

summit. I shouted the good news to Tom, who quickly joined me, and four and a half hours after leaving the bivouac we stood together at the top. My aneroid read 16,090 feet.

"We sat on the snow and looked at the country far below us . . . we nibbled Kendal Mint Cake." I smiled as I read on my mint-cake wrapper how Hillary and Tenzing had spent their supreme moments. Here were we doing much the same, though only occasionally could we see farther than our toes. Through gaps in the clouds we saw the two nearest peaks, Savoia and Elena; the latter rose in a tremendous rock arête that looked so utterly splendid that we descended to the col separating us from it. Suddenly flurries of snow began to fall and our axes and crampons made a curious buzzing noise. Having read in a book by a well-known Scottish mountaineer that these were the symptoms of an oncoming storm, we decided to abandon our ascent of Elena, and instead traverse it on the Congo side to the col at its north end. Something went wrong with our route-finding, and instead of reaching the required col we emerged unexpectedly at the summit of Elena. We had inadvertently made its sixth ascent.

We were uneasy that we might not be trying something rather too ambitious when, a few days later, we were leading our three porters through a jungle of groundsel and *Helichrysum* to the foot of the north face of Mount Stanley, where we camped at the site chosen by the two Germans who first climbed the face in 1938. That the first ascent was made by Germans in the 1930's, and had required a bivouac near the summit, seemed to place the route in a class with the north face of the Eiger or Matterhorn. To make matters worse, conditions were about as bad as possible when, next morning, we saw that fresh snow had fallen during the night and that most of the face was enveloped in cloud. Anyway, in the event of emergency we carried sleeping bags, and plenty of food as well as pitons, spare rope for rappel loops, and such sundries that a serious route demands.

It is a curious effect of glacial erosion that the first few tens of feet of a face are often extremely steep and smooth. The north face of Mount Stanley was skirted by just such a line of walls and overhangs through which we had to find a route. Choosing the lowest point of the wall we forced a way up 30 feet of steep rock coated with an amazing luxuriance of partly frozen lichen and moss, and where soft snow lay as a trap on every tiny ledge. The pitch was so tricky that when we were both safely at the top we thought it would be prudent to rope up; whereupon the mountain leaned back and let us gain

200 easy feet crunching up hard snow. The next crucial problem was a 20-foot-high chimney lined with dull black *verglas* and blocked by a square-cut overhang; to the left were steep slabs plastered with snow which I hoped would be firm enough to allow a long traverse to a snowy ridge high up on the skyline. For a few feet the chimney was relatively holdless, and would have been very hard without crampons to bite into the layers of ice. Then a chockstone came to hand and there was easier climbing to a small stance where the traverse could be surveyed. Beneath a couple of inches of powder was shallow but quite firm snow with a fudge-like consistency. One of the good things about the Ruwenzori is that snow conditions are readily predictable. During our stay there were between 4° and 8° F. of frost every night at 15,000 feet, and always thawing during the day. Hence until about 10 A.M. a firm snow surface is guaranteed, and conversely a soft, soupy, waist-deep morass is inevitable during the afternoon.

"Only fifteen more feet." I was nearly across the traverse which, in spite of the fine quality of the snow, the high angle and exposure made a severe pitch. Tom's warning came as I made the last delicate step to easier ground, arriving on a sloping ridge of snow. I forced my ice-axe in as a rock-firm belay and watched Tom gingerly feel his way over the traverse which was none the firmer for my passage. When he was safely with me we each took a few coils of rope, leaving about 20 feet between us, and started moving together. What a paragraph of exasperation is summarised in those words "moving together." To prevent the rope dragging along the snow where it may trip one up, or from tugging rudely at one or both climbers, one is constantly having to take in or let out rope to maintain the right tension. At the same time both hands may be needed for climbing or manipulating the ice-axe. And finally one is deprived of the frequent rests afforded by moving singly. However, when all is said and done, it is the quickest way to move over easy ground safely.

At the top of a steep *couloir* we arrived at a snowy ledge stretching right across the face at this height. My altimeter read 15,310 feet, which meant that we were near the toe of the small hanging glacier, a prominent feature of the north face which once reached would provide a straightforward route for many hundred feet. Wisps of cloud were beginning to overtake us and soon made our progress quite blind.

A monotonous and rhythmical expenditure of energy must provide its own satisfaction to long-distance runners or oarsmen, and probably

to some mountaineers. Personally I find more joy in the intermittent effort required by a difficult rock or ice-pitch. The hanging glacier provided just the kind of climbing that I have described so distastefully; every time that my crampons bit into the hard snow was a compromise between haste and restraint, a wish to get it all over as soon as possible and yet to keep a slow but steady pace. At least we were gaining height fast and I could see no likelihood of our having to bivouac. We climbed in cloud, but now and then we could see the dim outline of a buttress over to the left; soon it would fall back as a *couloir* leading up to the east ridge of Margherita. The Germans had had difficulty with the cornice at the head of this *couloir*, but we were lucky in that it had broken away at one side leaving a straight snow slope to the ridge.

For the last few hundred feet we were again fortunate in being able to follow the tracks of a South African party who had climbed Margherita only a few days before. They led us through a wilderness of cornices which would have presented real problems in route-finding, and just four hours after leaving our camp we stood on the summit of Ruwenzori.

While it had taken the Duke of Abruzzi six months to reach this point from Europe, to-day it would be possible to do it in as many days. Inevitably this must distract from the glamour of the ascent, although, except for the ugly black survey marker at the summit, there can have been little change in the fifty years that have passed. Unlike the Duke and most of his forty or fifty successors, we had almost climbed through the cloud and could occasionally see the nearby peaks Alexandra and Albert, and westwards down the cascading séracs of the Margherita glacier into the Congo. But more often all was hidden in a dazzling blanket which the perpendicular rays of the sun pierced with astonishing ferocity. At the end of a lazy half-hour our peace of mind began to be disturbed by thoughts of descent. Since we carried our sleeping bags and food there was no need to return to the camp; instead, we traversed Alexandra and began the tedious descent of 4,000 feet to Lake Bujuku. The snow had lost its surface and, floundering in waist-deep morasses, both of us fell through snow bridges, experiencing the curious sensation of our feet kicking in space while our ribs were locked in wet snow. At the Elena bivouac our South African friends greeted us with hot soup before we groped over the last lichened slabs and waded the final sloughs of foetid peat to our hut. It had been a fine day's climbing, and, as it was New Year's Eve, end of a red-letter year.