

Alpine memories

EDITH A. MURRAY

1974 was my Jubilee as member of the Ladies' Alpine Club which, this year, has amalgamated with the Alpine Club. My first climb was a true example of beginners' luck since my sister, the late Dr Maud Cairney, and I chose the Jungfrau (4,166 m), a snow peak, to begin on to see if we liked climbing. We knew that boots were of the first importance so we invested in Carter's hand-made alpine boots and stout sticks with spikes. Our boots were a joy from the start. We set off by train via Paris in the summer of 1922, paying a quick visit to the Louvre where we caused not a little surprise, clattering over the polished floors in our nailed boots. The train decanted us at Fiesch from where we had a three hours' walk up to the Eggishorn Hotel. The mule-post took our luggage. We were invited to hitch on to the mules' tails, but they set off uphill at such a terrific pace that we soon dropped off! At Eggishorn we found several members of both Alpine and Ladies' Alpine Clubs who were very kind to us and initiated us into practice on the huge Aletsch glacier. The weather was fine though extremely hot. Our expedition was organised, the hotel finding us a guide and young porter. The lower slopes of the long glacier were all clear of snow with a well marked trail winding through the wide crevasses. The ice-mills, with their rushing waters below, were particularly impressive. The Concordia Hut was very full and stuffy. During the night there was a storm and cries for help were heard out on the glacier. Men went out to bring in a distressed couple who had lost their lantern and their way; the girl was rather shocked but soon recovered with hot tea and hot bottles under her blankets.

The climbers were early astir but we made a later start, following the others out into a clear star-lit night. Already many parties were well up on the great snow fields with their lanterns twinkling back at us as they dispersed in different directions; it was a magical setting for a first climb. After some time we found that we had a passenger who asked permission to tie on to our rope. As daylight came we made out a large bearded man with an alpenstock and rather battered boots. He was a cheerful addition to the party and spoke several languages, but, as the gradient grew steeper, he untied to await another party going up to the Joch. It was intensely hot as we laboured up the sticky wet snow. We were climbing the shoulder of a large hollow when an avalanche came down on the opposite side. Up on the

'Sattel' the guide began to fuss, warning us to go carefully as the steps were not holding. The great Bernese Oberland summits were all around with the Alps of the Valais beyond, which, later, we came to know so well. In our preparations we had not known of an anti-sun cream and, in this hot sun and fresh snow, lanoline melted. After a blissful hour on top, we started down. My inclination to sit was sternly repressed as we crept back along the ridge trying not to look at the awful depths below. Once we were on the homeward side, the tension eased. Suddenly a heavy blow knocked me on to the back of the porter who went first on the descent: this was my sister, who in turn had been dislodged by the guide when a step broke under him. Away we all went, rolling over and over in the deep snow for about 200 feet. Luckily the slope eased off and we managed to stop. I was at the bottom of the heap with the rope round my neck and the guide was frantically feeling for any broken bones, but no one was injured. We were having a rest and some tea when the 'Herr Professor' arrived and a furious argument followed as he had been waiting around to see us safely down. Henceforth our ways separated and we ploughed wearily back to the hut for another night, our faces badly burnt. On reaching Eggishorn we segregated ourselves for a couple of days. When we emerged the other climbers gave us sensible advice and the names of a family of guides in Saas-Fee who became our life-long friends. En route for Saas on the mule-path, under borrowed umbrellas to protect our faces, we met an ascending family. On seeing us, they stopped dead and exclaimed 'Mon Dieu! C'est affreux!'

During the rest of that season and the next, we climbed around Saas and Zermatt, and then went on to Zinal. In 1925 we were at Arolla where among other climbs we did the Aiguille de la Za by the face. On its top we met G. W. Murray, climbing with his sister, and this eventually led to the breaking up of the Cairney Sisters' partnership and the start of the Murray one. In the meantime we were held up by weather at Bricolla before making the ascent of the Grand Cornier by the south arête, an exciting climb necessitating progression 'à cheval' in places and in others by friction, with disastrous effect on our clothing. There was one sensational jump where the landing was on a downward sloping slab. I was never much use at jumping, a fact which Alfred Supersaxo, who had climbed with me throughout the years, well knew. Laughingly he said: 'Jump, I will catch you'. So, shutting my eyes, I took a wild leap. Our descent to Mountet by the Durand Glacier was in a very bad condition, so we had to make an extremely steep staircase in the ice, cutting steps for an hour to

and fro in a zig-zag, a slow process moving one at a time. Théophile Theytaz from Ayer was Maud's guide and a great personality, so when the local inn-keeper of Mountet saw our party approaching, he always came to meet us with a bottle of hot tea laced with wine, an endearing gesture. The Zinal Rothorn, in perfect condition, provided further training and we were able to leave our axes at the end of the ice ridge, climbing the dry, sound rock unimpeded. A cold, north wind blew, so we climbed fast, taking four hours from Mountet to spend about four minutes on the summit with chattering teeth.

The Dent Blanche by the Viereseelgrat had long been our secret ambition. It had been twice climbed by women, twenty years before, and, that year, by Mlle Michel of the S.F.A.C. with Théophile. He now suggested that we should try, and brought along his two brothers, also guides, making us a strong party. We climbed in two ropes of three with Alfred at the head of my rope and Théophile leading. As the inn-keeper overslept, we were half an hour behind schedule and it was 2.30 am when we swung out across the glacier at a great pace to make up for lost time. It seemed to be too warm but we hoped to reach the top before the worst happened. We arrived on the ridge just as daylight permitted us to do without lanterns. The rocks were not difficult but rotten, and the utmost care was needed to avoid dropping stones on the rest of the party. In spite of this we had numerous mishaps, fortunately none serious. After some hours we all had a somewhat battered air. The wind was gusty and cold but we mounted rapidly and were attacking the formidable cornices before we realised it. They were fragile and broken, often on both sides, with large holes through which one could look down thousands of feet. Somehow we all got over them and arrived at the summit in eight hours twenty minutes, a time with which the guides were greatly delighted. After an hour's rest on top in gathering and ominous-looking clouds, truly thankful for our good fortune, we descended by the usual way in thickly falling snow, arriving at the Schönbühl hut at 6.0 pm, a weary but happy band, to a great welcome. This marked the end of our climbing programme for 1925 - my first year as a member of the Ladies' Alpine Club.