

## FOLLOW MY LEADER

R. T. SOUTHALL

The profession of the mountain guide is a skilled and honourable one, but I hope no one will take it amiss if I put on nameless record two eccentrics of that calling. We shall none of us forget the two days I am going to describe.

Geographical details of the first must, for the best of reasons, remain vague. We had gone to a certain district to climb its most famous mountain, an imposing and steep rock peak, well-known to collectors of picture postcards. There was no very adequate guide book available, but I had an introduction to a man who kept a shop in the town, one of the best climbers in the country, with many very difficult first ascents to his credit. So in the afternoon, when we had settled into our hotel, we walked into the town to visit the shop. There we met B. He was small and agile. He told us that he was taking a party of four up the mountain by the ordinary route to-morrow, and if we cared to come along, he would be most pleased to show us the way. We had only the one day at our disposal, so although we had contemplated a more difficult route, we accepted his suggestion.

Next day, which was warm and sunny, we met B. with his party. There was a friend of his who also did part-time guiding. The comrade, as he was called, was a cheerful fellow, who looked like an overgrown schoolboy.

We made our way up a valley. Towards the end, at one side, stood our peak, looking most impressive. Near its foot we stopped by a peculiar little hut, which B. explained he had built, and here we had a rest before beginning the serious business of the day. The most important feature of the hut was a large overhanging rock, which served as the roof; side walls had been made with stones and moss. Inside there were two rooms. There was a door, some rough windows, and furniture. The hut had a huge chimney at the back, at least that was what I thought it was until B. explained that it was the winter entrance. Near at hand was a huge flat rock, surrounded by several small ones—the luncheon table, we were informed. Two of the girls in B.'s party were wearing skirts, but now, from inside the hut, he produced a pile of trousers. They chose a pair each and disappeared into the inner room. During the long halt B. was busy with a saw altering the door; his rucksack really did contain the normal type of ironmongery, and he had a splendid array of tools.

At last we were on the move again, scrambling up grass, and then scree to where the rock began. This was excellent and well endowed with holds, so that although steep, there was no need to rope up. But wherever there was an awkward move, there was B., standing below, ready to act as fieldsman should any become unstuck. We climbed an arête which gave access to a gully where we put on ropes for the crux of the climb. Up we went until we came out between the twin summits, and from the nick we worked in a spiral round the higher peak. The valley lay five thousand feet beneath our toes, but the summit itself was large and flat, and in the middle was a small hut of stone, wood and tin. I asked B. if this belonged to a mountaineering club. In rather a pained tone of voice he said it was his.

The ascent, though sometimes very exposed, had been quick—only ninety minutes. Now B. and his comrade set to work repairing the door, and making it draught proof with some tin. They also attended to some glazing, putting in place a large piece of glass brought up previously. Inside the hut was a bed, table and stool, with cooking utensils. I asked B. if he had spent a night there. "Not yet," was his reply. Against the southern side of the hut, B. had scratched together a little soil; in it were planted some of the most long suffering wallflowers and gooseberry bushes I have ever seen.

The wind became cold, and after an hour and a half, despite the wonderful view all around, I was glad when the hammering and sawing came to an end, and all the tools disappeared into the rucksacks. Going down to the gully, Harold remarked that a certain peculiar undercut hold was most advantageously placed. "It was meant to be," said B. As we descended, the mountain was given a thorough brush and polish so that it should look its best when next visited. Scree and stones were thrown from ledges, and when an empty beer bottle was found in a cranny, it was hurled into space with a suitable oath.

Back at the lower hut, there was another long wait while B. and his comrade started to unearth a huge boulder weighing at least two tons, and situated about a hundred feet away. It was shaped like an armchair, so in time B. and his friends will be able to relax in comfort after ample meals taken at the luncheon table. While the two guides wrestled with the furniture, we were joined by a black sheep which was quite in character with our day. As we ate the last of our packed lunches, we discovered it had a passion for paper bags. Clearly these had but whetted its appetite, so we looked in our rucksacks, and took out the rubbish. We were particularly pleased to get rid of all the bits of silver paper.

When we were on the move again, walking down the valley, our progress was slow. B. bounded on ahead with saw and pruners, and set about the small trees and bushes which tended to block the path. Eventually came the time to settle our affairs and to say goodbye. As we did so, I could not help thinking that what we gave B. was less a guide's fee than a subscription to the maintenance of a private mountain.

The second encounter took place in the Dolomites. After some ten days of guideless climbing, we arrived at the Vicenza Hut in the Langkofel group. We had lost our routes more than once, so as we were near the end of the holiday, we thought we should have a guide to lead the first rope in an ascent of the Langkofel by the Felsenweg. Having arrived in the afternoon from the Vajolet Hut, we asked the hut guardian about a guide, and he told us of a young man Paolo (as I will call him), who was out on the Plattkofel, but would be back later. Over supper we met Paolo, who struck us as a true child of nature. He looked tired, which was not surprising, as he had been up at the Vicenza Hut for two months, and he had been out every day during that time. He agreed to lead the first rope, and asked for 4,000 lire. An Italian-speaking friend asked him about our equipment, and he told us to leave boots and ice-axes behind, and go all the way in rubbers or rope-soled boots.

We had arranged to get up at 4.00 a.m. The five of us were downstairs a little after that hour. There was no sign of Paolo or the guardian. We waited, and were just about to go and wake them when they appeared, so we were lucky to be away by 5.10. We set out very light of foot; everything went smoothly, and we moved quickly. In time we found ourselves in the large amphitheatre formed by the upper cliffs of the Langkofel and Langkofeleck. The Felsenweg leaves this by the Untere Eisrinne, a deeply set gully across the face of the mountain. When we had scrambled into this, we were rather shaken to see, above the scree at the bottom some two hundred and fifty feet of ice. While we were looking at our feet, Paolo was strapping a pair of toe crampons to his canvas boots. I was in the middle of his rope, and after he had begun to move upwards, I soon had to follow. My rope-soled shoes made no impression on the ice at all, so sticking out one finger on each hand, and putting them into the top of the small holes made by the crampon spikes, I moved off on all fours.

But a hundred feet up, even this cat-like approach would not work. The fingers began to numb, and the angle steepened. Down each side of the gully, between ice and rock walls was a bergschund of varying width and depth. There was only one thing to do: drop

over the side and wriggle slowly upwards. If Paolo had a sense of humour, he must have thought it funny to see his five clients, little visible except heads and frozen hands, wedged down the bergschund, and trying desperately hard to make some upwards progress. Needless to say, we were in the Untere Eisrinne for a considerable time.

We left it by taking to a wall above the termination of the ice. The top brought us out on some scree, and after walking up this, we came to a steep section of several hundred feet of rock, ending on the main ridge between the Langkofel and the Langkofeleck. Just before gaining the ridge, we stopped at a tiny refuge erected by the C.A.I., crawled inside and had some food. There was a visitor's book, and we signed our names. Paolo politely added "Ottimo tempo," to which we made no comment.

The remainder of the ascent was airy without being difficult. We came out on the broad summit of the Langkofel exactly five hours after leaving the Vicenza Hut. As soon as we got there, Paolo lay out flat on the loose scree and went soundly to sleep. It was clearly not his wish to enjoy the wonderful view of northern Italy spread out all around. It did occur to me that if he rolled about in his sleep, he might well have joined the cows we could glimpse on the pastures, several thousand feet below.

When an hour and a half had gone by, we thought we had better wake up Paolo, who looked as though he would sleep until Judgment Day. We were all thinking of the Untere Eisrinne, and the fun and games waiting for us there.

So in due course we climbed down the wall to where the ice began. Two hours were to elapse before we emerged at the bottom. Our progress was so slow as to be pathetic.

The first two pitches were all right once Paolo had worked out a method of descent. He put a sling round a handy rock spike, and then in turn we tied on to the end of the rope. He then took a karabiner and clipped the sling and rope together. Peter went first. He turned round to face Paolo, grasping the rope in front of him with both hands. Slowly he walked backwards down the steep ice, while the guide let out the rope through the karabiner. There was another spike for the second pitch, and the same process was repeated. At the end of this we all ended up down a bergschund crack just large enough to take five; we were packed as tight as peas in a pod. Paolo experienced little difficulty in his crampons, however, there was no room for him in our crack, so he stayed on the other side of

the gully. Here, unfortunately, there was no useful projecting rock over which to slip his sling, so he drove a piton into the wall above his head. The karabiner was clipped into the piton, and off Peter went once more. He found a resting place at the side of the gully, and waited for Kenneth who was next. He was in mid-passage when the piton came out. Fortunately for him, it came out in slow motion, and a warning shout made Kenneth move faster than he had ever moved before, or since—to the gully wall where he found a hold to grasp.

When Michael went, Paolo jumped down out of sight into the bergschund. The rope was let out over the ice lip. Michael moved backwards quickly, and the friction melted the ice. Then while Michael was unroping, the rope froze hard in the groove it had cut. There was a further delay while it was chipped out with the piton hammer. This was the final straw, and after that we worked down the side of the gully as best we could, even if our hands got very cold grasping the ice edge.

During the last half hour the sky had been getting darker and darker, and no one was surprised when the typical afternoon thunder storm of the Dolomites broke loose. It started to rain, with thunder and lightning, and before long a steady fall of stones was coming down the gully. Most of these sped by so fast we barely saw them—there was just a sickening whizz. But Providence which had delivered us into the hands of Paolo must have considered that our souls had been sufficiently chastened for one day, and no stone was allowed to hit us. We went down as fast as we could. Life was getting too exciting.

There was an added complication now for the first rope. Paolo's rope was of cotton, and, once wet, it was impossible to coil in less than six foot loops. I had my nylon rope between Harold and myself. As we were all moving together, I was driven frantic trying to control one rope which would coil, and one which would not.

We had five minutes' rest at the bottom of the Untere Eisrinne, and then ran down the scree of the amphitheatre. The day had been a strain on my rope-soled shoes, and the scree-running was the final disaster. I suddenly realised that all I had on my feet were the flimsy canvas uppers.

Everything comes to an end sometime, and our day on the Langkofel did so at 6.45 p.m. when we got back to the Vicenza Hut. There we stood Paolo some wine while we settled our account with him. We considered that we had had a long day, certainly one which

was quite unique in its trials and humours, for which 4,000 lire seemed hardly adequate reward. So we gave him another 1,000 lire. This gesture pleased Paolo, and at once he asked whether we gentlemen would go with him in the morning to the Funffingerspitze. But perhaps fortunately for us, we gentlemen were going back to England.

