

KEEPING THE CHILDREN HAPPY

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The long grey lump with two summit bumps, a mixture of rotten rock, insecure seracs and long ice slopes that hems in one side of the Grenz Glacier is the North East face of the Lyskamm. Christian Kluckner and Norman-Neruda first climbed this face in 1890, and not until thirty five years later did Welzenbach reascend their route. Since then the lines of progress have proliferated across the face, but Kluckner's line still rewards in its simplicity; the almost plumb-bob ascent from the bergschrund to the East summit leaves little room for deviation or route finding, and the route retains its original merit of having the least objective danger on the face. Thus as one plods up this 3000 feet of fifty-five degree ice with its odd protruding rock one can do so phlegmatically, discussing the next days plans and pausing as one wishes; as the Guide Book says, the North East face does not make the most interesting route up the Lyskamm, and this is especially true when one has climbed the infinitely more enjoyable Cresta Nazo to the same summit the day before.

But all sorts of factors combine to ensure that you climb the same alpine peak on two consecutive days; the desire to venture out on to a face, to escape from ridges, to leave the known difficulties of warm brown rock to the unknown sweeps of snow and ice, to get out of other people's footsteps and create one's own. For two weeks we had followed the path of Christian Kluckner, whose flair for a line on a peak seemed hardly second to Colin Kirkus on a cliff in Wales. There are of course other reasons, the face is the nearest to a hut (if you cross a 4,000 metre col to begin with), it also has the dubious advantage of having an English translation, of being a Selected climb, and of having a classification; maybe soon it will be possible in the Alps to ascend via the Graded List.

And so it is 6.00 a.m., and I am sitting in the bergschrund which fortunately is filled with debris from the seracs above, and somewhere over the bergschrund Malcolm Cochran is sending down yells indicating that I must also partake of the climb. It's a fine day, no breeze, the chill wind of earlier hours has died away, the round of peaks behind Zermatt are well lit by the early morning sun. That wasted hour in the Gnifetti is forgotten; it is a pity we left the Glacier cream on the table in the hut, and that Malc has just lost his goggles down the Bergschrund. Still we had managed to leave the Gnifetti hut by 2.30 a.m., and reach the base of the face in three hours, having crossed the 4,000 metre Lysjoch, and descended the Grenz glacier. This had been one of our better ideas, for theoretically one would begin from the Betemps, but obscure beginnings are not unusual and familiarity with the Guide Book makes one no more inclined to follow it.

The dull easy plod up from the Gnifetti suited our tired and rather uncontrollable limbs; 20,000 feet of ascent in three days and now out again was becoming a little too much for a holiday. The weather was perfect, very cold, quite clear, the snow already frozen hard. The black shadow of the hut soon faded away, leaving only the little lights of Trinity le Gressoney deep down below us in the darkness as evidence of other life in a cold alien morning. We trudged up to the Lysjoch, two fading torches in the night, in and out of frozen footsteps tripping frequently and wearily cursing, on to the col as our torches finally flickered out. The stars lost their brightness, the thin diluted grey light spread about us and slowly the day awoke, the snow gained light, and in the uneven greys of dawn the hills held for a second an unnerving luminosity. We were two small figures dwarfed in a lunar landscape as we stood silently on the frontiers of the real world—and then suddenly over the col between the Dufourspitz and the Zugsteinspitz the cold harsh light of day cut through our illusions and opened up the view of the upper Grenz Glacier and the pink and gold light flickered on the summit slopes of the Lyskamm. It was time we were on the face before it lost its safe hard crust and the seracs began to bombard the lower ice slopes. 800 feet of slight traverse to the right, ice nearly all the way; almost 2,000 feet of rib, with a little steepening two thirds of the way up, and above a final snow field—this was the prospect.

Malc led the whole of the lower 800 feet, a slowly steepening slope, with the easier-angled beginning furrowed by serac debris. We moved easily upwards, sometimes together, sometimes independently. As the slope steepened so it smoothed out, and though some frozen new snow took us quickly up the odd twenty or thirty feet here and there, mainly it was platy ice, cracking open in thin conchoidal fractures. We teetered carefully upwards on odd crampon points in little nicks, way apart, now on one hundred and twenty foot lead-outs depending on dubious ice pegs, and now close together in little rushes. The ice slope leant gently upwards with the few odd rocks which formed the beginning of the little rib still far away, but by now these were lit gold by the searching rays of the sun sweeping down the face to meet us. Above, the ice changed through a fantasy of colours, and then suddenly we cast long shadows across the glistening fretwork of sparkling frozen snow and glistening ice.

8.30 a.m.; two hours on the face now, and above us the first rattles and rumbles from the ridiculous looking lumps of ice hanging out from the face on either side of our little rib. The climb should take seven hours or so, including two hours to the rib if the going is frozen snow, but it was not and so with 2,000 feet to go we were already behind the clock. Malcolm had been doing all the work, but he did not want to change over; it's his stretch to the rib and so be

it. I just plod up behind, slowly losing interest in the proceedings, for as long as I do not fall off there is very little to do besides making encouraging noises, watching the odd chunks of falling ice, and studying the distant brown lumps, the little rock triangles above Zermatt. I felt warm and lethargic, annoyed at beads of perspiration and the taste of stale fish in my mouth, but with interest rekindled as wandering eyes caught sight of two minute black ants slowly crawling up from the Betemps, and eyes crinkle into the first smile of the day as the ants pause, stop, gesticulate and point upwards at the face at us. Oh, pride!

An hour later we reached the rib, which is just a few rotten boulders frozen in the ice, but the change in colour, in texture, the feel of rock make them seem much more than that. Malc paused on the first few blocks and then slowly picked his way up the slope, every move judged, the maximum height gained for the minimum of effort, the eye picking out a line from outcrop to outcrop. The desire was to move upwards continuously from block to block, just the odd step cut here and there, following little edges of ice, feet sideways, crampons scratching in the quietness. Two hundred feet further up we found some bigger blocks and paused for the first time since the Bergschrund. We had a quick drink, took a couple of photos, discarded some clothing, and then set off again with a new rhythm. We would lead out one hundred and twenty feet and put on a psychological belay, and then whilst taking the rope in work out the line for the next 120 feet. Then the second would come up and the leader follow his mythical line, and as he tires so the second would lead the next 240 feet. The logic was dubious but the method was satisfactory. Higher, the rib became more coherent and gained some relief from the ice slope, and this kept us safe from falling debris. Eventually it became more rock than ice, and progress seemed quite fast, though for all our movement we seemed to gain little real height. Time passed, and we were back in the shade, completely involved in our little world, then some of the lower seracs came level and passed below us, and beyond them the view extended across the Lysjoch. Slowly we came level with one after another of the lower Monte Rosa summits. A small rock buttress barred the way, but a chimney-gully on the left formed a loophole, and above steep rock and two short but steep snow ridges brought us respectably high, high enough for the clock not to be a worry, high enough for food. The nauseating fish of early morning now seemed perfect, and the bone hard five day old brown bread a delight as it literally gave one something to get one's teeth into, the iced lemon water delicious, and these together with the rest shook off the lethargy of morning and at last we enjoyed the superb views north across the Zermatt peaks and the Oberland. We studied the little trains of black ants chugging up and down the glacier below, going up the *voie normale* on the Monte Rosa, to and

from the Margarita Refuge, and others beginning the East ridge of the Lyskamm. Before, we had been alone immersed in ourselves, and now we were in the populated hills surrounded by human voices. It was time to go.

Odd snow ridges connected together little towers of firm, dry, golden brown schist and yellow and pink gneiss; clean rough rock to scrape crampons against. Little icy slopes were climbed delicately at their oftened translucent crests; steps hacked viciously out of hard grey ice lying in permanent shadow, the body much more alive, the rocks steeper but somehow easier. No worries now; just the joy of climbing. A few last towers, a little overhang and then the last snows; the sun had weakened the frozen surface, and we rushed upwards, thankful to be spared a last 400 feet of cutting, to the few boulders marking the summit of the East peak of the Lyskamm.

Malc muttered, "Good training for the Ben", but it was no time for criticism. We finished off the rest of the liquid and hurtled off down the east ridge, sliding on and off as crampons balled up, and then running, jumping and tripping back to the Gnifetti. Our "third" got up from a supine position in the sun, put down her novel and brought the drinks; she did not look surprised when we said it was time to go home now. For they had done what they came to do, a reasonable route on a biggish face directed more or less north, and anyhow . . . as long as the children were happy!

