

## STORM ON THE BRENVA

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In the two previous summers I had tried to set foot on the Route Major but each time the Mont Blanc weather had prevented me from doing so. This year we had been climbing in the Bernina and Bregaglia areas and were in good form as we motored along the Val d'Aosta towards Courmayeur. There had been several fine days and when we set up camp at Entreves the weather was ideal. It looked as though third time was to be lucky. Our plans were set in motion, food bought and allocated, kit sorted out and we were ready to go. We hoped to reach the Vallot Hut after our ascent and from there continue our way over the Aiguille de Bionnassay to the Durier Hut and so back to camp. Next day we set out for the Col du Geant (ascended by téléferique, of course).

It was a perfect day ; warm, cloudless, and with a slight breeze from the west. All seemed set for a successful journey as we made our way leisurely to the Col des Flambeaux from where we had a superb view of the Dent du Géant. It shows to its greatest advantage from here, a tall imposing needle rising into the cloudless sky. We were lazy, the view around was impressive, the skiers attractive. We drifted idly down to the Geant Basin. It was still a lovely day, but within half an hour we were enveloped in a thick mist.

As we descended to the snowfield in the Geant Basin, clouds soft, frilly and very delicate began to slip into the basin over the snow. It was as though a river of mist was flowing in and filling a reservoir. Gradually the level of mist came higher and higher, creeping over the snow, up the rocky buttresses, lapping the slopes on which we stood, until we too were caught in the tide of mist and buried in its oppressive silence.

Our journey through the large crevassed area around the Tour Ronde was now one of guesswork. All landmarks were hidden from us. Our route was determined by two things, one to continue downhill, the other to bear in a westerly direction. Weaving in and out through the vast crevasses was an eerie experience. The rope of climbers, formerly talkative, became silent, each separated from the other not only by a short length of rope but as though by some physical barrier within the mist itself. Looking back from the head of the rope I could not see the last man, and the others had a remarkable suggestion of impersonality about them. Knowing them as I do, this was a miracle indeed. This separation, the groanings of the ice settling deep underneath our feet, the sibilant sound that the mist and breeze made as they slid over the snow, and the silent line of climbers edging slowly

forwards stirred in me a weird but stimulating feeling, an inexpressible excitement. I wanted to rush onwards to our goal.

We moved on slowly and came to some tracks going in what we believed to be the right direction. After some hesitation we decided to follow them, which though not always a wise thing to do proved this time to be right and led us straight to the bergschrund below the Col de la Fourche. This was covered as were the slopes above by a great deal of powder snow which hampered our crossing. The soft snow above made us move carefully, a carefulness that appeared somewhat puerile when two Frenchmen passed us at a supersonic speed, clawing their way up, hands and feet all working like pistons.

The Col de la Fourche Refuge is one of the more primitive kind but has as a compensation for its discomforts the most superb situation. It is a metal shelter about twice the size of an Anderson shelter perched partly on the rocks and partly over space, and held to its uncertain base by wire hawsers. It is indeed an eagle's eyrie. Inside there is sleeping space for ten when everyone is crammed in tightly. Two feet of floor space is then left on which any cooking may be done. The doorway is doorless and all debris that is thrown out drops into the misty depths below.

The mists hung around us, obscuring even the snowfield below until at seven they slowly evaporated leaving the Brenva face free. For the first time I appreciated its magnificence. It is a massive apse-like amphitheatre with mighty rock buttresses heaving upwards, holding the ice and snow as though they were the windows of a great cathedral. The whole was a deep blue, translucent where the ice and snow shone, with the two tops of the mountain catching the last rays of the sun. It was a tremendous and inspiring view. Only across the Gussenfeldt Couloir and the arete above there still trailed a cloud, frail and iridescent. We watched until all light had left the summits, and then turned in silently and settled down in our cramped and uncomfortable quarters for about four hours' rest.

Activity started about eleven when the first parties began to make breakfast. Each followed the other as quickly as possible, anxious to be away by midnight at the latest. When I had looked out I found that the weather had again broken; long streaks of low cloud lay against the face of the mountain and squally gusts of wind rattled the refuge. It was obvious that Route Major was once again out. All parties came to the same decision, so there were three parties each now bent on going for the Old Brenva Route.

As is so often the case the British party was dilatory in getting going. Indeed there were suggestions of mutiny when the weather was seen which were only stopped by the simple method of my getting off down the couloir to the Brenva basin. We were much further behind the other parties than I liked in view of the weather's deterioration, as they were on the Col Moore before we had reached the Brenva Glacier. That late start was to cause us much trouble later in the day.

The conditions underfoot were ideal, and the crossing of the glacier to the Col Moore was beautiful and enjoyable. The bergschrund at the foot of the col was wide and the opposite slope steep, but the snow was solid and firm. Without too much trouble we got across. The ascent to the ridge of the col was cramponned on perfect snow at a good pace and from there we kept on the ridge until we reached a steep shoulder. At that point the route is to the left on to a broad rising belt of snow which is followed until the route must ascend or drop into the floor of the amphitheatre. It then goes to the right by broken and easy rock, and then follows a mixture of rock and snow until at the top of a rock point we were faced by the long horizontal arete so famous to all climbers.

By this time the weather was breaking and we were in a cold, wet and clinging mist. We stopped for a second breakfast, which was not enjoyed by anyone as we all became chilled in the raw atmosphere. The mists were thickening and rolling down the mountainside. I was becoming worried about our time as one of the members was beginning to feel the effects of altitude and we were slower than I had expected. The arete looked very menacing as I stood on the end ; I was able to see the far end, but that was all. Engulfed in mist the arete now looked very narrow, and with the drop on either side swallowed up in cloud the sides seemed perilously steep. Setting out along it I found the snow still in good condition and the crampons bit into it with satisfying certainty. It was quite as narrow as foretold and in the mist gave the appearance of great steepness. Each step was placed carefully in front of the other and there was nowhere to put the ice axe which was carried as a tightrope walker carries his pole.

*" Nowhere to fall but off,  
Nowhere to stand but on."*

It was crossed safely. Our route was now along the edge and towards the left of the rocky ridge that runs directly upwards from the arete. This area was crevassed to a considerable degree but covered by a firm coating of ice and snow which allowed us to move directly upwards, though the sounds under our ice axes were uncomfortably hollow.

At this point Bob took over the step cutting to give me a rest and we moved steadily upwards to the Col della Brenva and the area of seracs. The wind became increasingly severe, powerful gusts shook us, enveloping us in cold waves of snow, stinging our faces and freezing our hands, clad though they were in wool and windproof gloves. When we reached the col a great and continuous blast of air swayed us as we stood hesitant and wondering. Should we go on or beat a retreat? The snow was soft and thick, and around the seracs it had drifted thigh deep. It seemed that any further progress must be slow. The visibility was nil; whiteness was everywhere, above, below and all around. It would be wiser to go down rather than suffer this continuing refrigeration. Thirty feet down below the col we would be out of the worst of the wind.

There is a bewitching quality about the mountains. They have the enchantments of the Sirens in their behaviour, enticing one to take that extra step that an overwatchful prudence advises against. I have often noticed that when indecision holds sway, when discretion suggests go back, and comfort says let's get out of here, there is a momentary relenting, an enticement to go forwards, a flicker from their come-hither eyes that sweeps us on. So it was on this occasion.

On the col a retreat would have been sensible, but no sooner had I said that we should go down than the wind dropped, the snow spume ceased to envelop us, the sky appeared blue above us and the sun sparkled on the great snow shoulder before us. No longer did I think of going down. With yelps of joy we rushed forward, ploughing thigh deep into the soft snow ahead of us. For ten minutes all was well; progress was made, and a quick compass reading was taken by Tommy. (He was in the R.A.F. and it was assumed that he could navigate. In the final reckoning he proved he could.)

Ten minutes went by and we were committed. The spell had worked and the mountain again took control. The wind was fiercer, colder; the air was filled with driving icy spicules that rattled on our anorak hoods, long fronds of ice stood out from our eyebrows and our head coverings. Even as we made them, our steps were wiped out; there would be no track to follow back. Amidst it all a grey line of pilgrims, doubled on the wind, went slowly up to their summit. A large bergschrund loomed menacingly in front, as black as Styx and just as wide, the last barrier before the summit. It was crossed and on we went. The rounded and flat top was invisible, so when we no longer climbed upwards we decided we were there. Now for the run down.

The wind was wild and wanton and the snow battered at our eyes rendering us almost blind. My memory of the ordinary route made me hesitate, for it was broad and gently curving, a slope from which it would in these conditions be easy to stray. A small error in compass work would lead us only too quickly amongst crevasses and icy slopes. Better men than I had perished up her in such a storm.

Looking back, not a step of our route could be seen and even here as we stood our footmarks were lost in a minute. We had taken our compass bearings, so it seemed wiser to go back the way we had come. From the col we had a much more difficult way, but it was well defined ; on it we needed care, but it was signposted by landmarks we had seen that day. Down we went, over the bergschrund within feet of where we had climbed over, into the seracs, past familiar shapes and a recognisable bend of yellow snow. Another step forward and I took a header into a snowdrift. We were at the col.

Mont Blanc can play with us at her will. Once more she put her tongue out at us. For twenty second the winds dropped, and the clouds disappeared. Above us a faintly blue sky scarfed by whipping chiffon clouds surrounded us, and the seracs around us sparkled like jewels while above, as remote as Jove himself, the pure white top spun before our eyes. A sigh of relief was choked in our throats as the gale and snow enveloped us again. A hundred feet down we were out of the chilly wind. Slowly and steadily we descended the long snow slopes, cutting most of the way, on to the arete, down the ridge to the terrace, over Col Moore and down and over the bergschrund on to the Brenva Glacier. Here all was calm and peaceful ; lit by the full moon the amphitheatre of ice and rock gleamed mysteriously. Some of the mountain's mysteries we now knew, and on these I pondered as I crossed the Brenva Glacier to the couloir that led up the refuge on the Col de la Fourche.

Twenty-three hours after leaving it we returned joyfully to its discomforts. As we crept in the day's climbers were setting out. A few brief words and a cup of coffee were all that was exchanged between us. Thankfully we sat down and undid our frozen boots. Happily we lay back on the damp mattresses and massaged our feet.