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DAYS WITH FOUR GREAT GUIDES

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THE worthy Editor of the ALPINE JOURNAL has proposed that a series of articles entitled 'Days with Great Leaders' might appeal to its readers. He has suggested that I should delve in my memories to produce something that might be of interest.

I do this with considerable diffidence, as I must state frankly that judged by present day performances my climbing has been conspicuously devoid of real adventure; but as nearly the whole of my mountaineering has been carried out in the company of four guides who were certainly in the front rank of their profession, some of my reminiscences may be worth relating. Perhaps it is hardly necessary to explain that I belong to a somewhat early generation of climbers who were for the most part content with what were then known as first class expeditions and to whose minds the detestable word 'record' never occurred. Although they were keen enough to climb virgin peaks and make new routes when these came their way, wandering in the higher regions of the mountains was pure joy to them and they did not disdain to seek enjoyment in easier climbs. In my humble opinion, the man who cannot do this is no true lover of the mountains.

The first two guides to accompany me were both Grindelwald men, Ulrich Kaufmann and Christian Jossi (father of the well known and still living guide of the same name). Ulrich Kaufmann, who gave up guiding in 1894, is possibly little more than a name to the present generation and is best known to fame as having accompanied W. W. Graham and Emil Boss to the Himalaya¹ in 1883, and previously in 1881-1882 W. S. Green and Emil Boss to the New Zealand Alps.² He was a handsome, tall, slim man, very powerfully built, with the reputation of being the strongest man in the valley. He was a curiously taciturn fellow, but nevertheless of a most amiable disposition. He was a perfect

¹ *A.J.* 12. 25 sqq.

² *A.J.* 11. 1, 57, 129 (consecutive articles).

cragman and it was sheer delight to watch the effortless grace of his movements while climbing difficult rock. Ulrich had a strong sense of his duty towards his employers, which was well illustrated by a certain small incident which happened on my second climb with him and Jossi, during an ascent of the Eiger which, I may point out, was not quite so simple a climb as it is now. The face up which the ordinary route goes, was in those days plastered with ice slopes (which have now almost completely disappeared), necessitating a great deal of step-cutting. On the descent we were overtaken by a terrific hailstorm, the hailstones pouring down the mountain side like a rushing torrent. We were in the middle of an ice slope when we heard a loud crash above us, which proved to be a formidable fall of rock which swept past us only a few yards from where we were placed. Kaufmann, who was leading, ran up the steps to where I was standing and covered my head with his arms. Nothing hit us, but I confess candidly that my knees shook a little and my faith in the joys of climbing was momentarily somewhat shaken. I felt that Ulrich's action would have availed but little if anything had struck us, but was all the more impressed by his devotion, his first thought evidently being to protect his employer as far as possible regardless of the consequences to himself. I have come into close contact with a great number of the guides who have risen to the top of their profession, and I have observed that their calling seems to develop a certain nobility of character and an unselfish care for the safety and well-being of their employers.

Christian Jossi joined me owing to a rather curious accident. When I was still a youth I spent a holiday with two of my brothers at Spiez, where we amused ourselves chiefly by sailing on Lake Thun. An Englishman staying at the same hotel invited us to join him in a traverse of the Tschingel Pass from Mürren to Kandersteg. As none of us knew anything whatever of mountaineering in the higher regions, we accepted readily the invitation to join in what sounded to us a tremendous adventure. The expedition proved to be so enjoyable that I became definitely obsessed with a desire to do more and adopt climbing as a regular recreation. For various reasons I had to wait five years before I could carry out my intentions, during which time I devoured all the Alpine literature I could lay hold of.

One of the guides on the Tschingel Pass expedition was a certain Christian Jossi, and from what I read I gathered that he appeared to be somewhat of a celebrity in the Alpine world although, to tell the truth, I was not particularly impressed by his capabilities. However, as I had no friends in Alpine circles whom I could



Photo, Sydney Spencer.]

AT THE OLD GAMCHI GÎTE.

From left to right, Ulrich Kaufmann, Christian Jossi, senior,
Christian Jossi, junior.



Photo, Sydney Spencer.]

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT : CHRISTIAN JOSSI, SENIOR, SYDNEY
SPENCER, HANS ALMER.

consult, I came to the conclusion that I could not do better than write to Theophil Boss, the genial manager of the Hotel Bär at Grindelwald, to ask him to engage Christian Jossi for me if possible, to which he replied that he had been able to retain him for the month of July. On my arrival at Grindelwald I was met at the station by a complete stranger who introduced himself as Christian Jossi, but by a fortunate accident I had secured the right man. This was the beginning of a partnership which lasted for 23 years, severed only by the outbreak of war in 1914. As, to my great sorrow, he died in 1919³ I never saw him again.

Christian Jossi has been generally recognised as one of the greatest icemen of all time and I think I am justified in saying that he has never been surpassed. His step-cutting was a revelation. Using an unusually light axe, he cut perfect steps at an amazing speed, always large as he once told me that they might be required on the descent, which would save time. I naturally had ample opportunity of observing Jossi's prowess as an iceman.

The way in which he threaded an unerring course through the complicated network of crevasses and séracs of steep icefalls filled me with wonder. I cannot recall a single instance of being obliged to retrace our steps. This was not accomplished by any kind of instinct but was the result of a careful study of the course which crevasses take. Jossi made no pretensions to any special skill on difficult rock, but he was always equal to anything which came our way and he did it with perfect safety provided he could take his own time about it. He had one inestimable quality — that of inspiring confidence whenever conditions became difficult.⁴

As to Jossi's personal character, I cannot say too much. He was the personification of unselfishness, and his lovable disposition and his increasing devotion to my comfort at all times created an unbreakable bond of friendship which never weakened in all the years we were together.

I had three most enjoyable seasons with Jossi and Kaufmann, spent for the most part in the Bernese Oberland when our

³ *A. J.* 32. 366-8.

⁴ Jossi's *Führerbuch* includes the names of such well known mountaineers as Hermann Woolley, Claude Macdonald, G. A. Hasler, Henry Speyer and Dr. Emil Burckhardt with whom he climbed for many years. He accompanied Woolley to the Caucasus whence they returned after a brilliantly successful season, Ailama, Mishirgitau and Dychtau being amongst their conquests. One of his most remarkable feats of step-cutting was accomplished on an ascent of the Wetterhorn by the Hühnergutz Glacier, when he cut about 2,000 steps without cessation, an astonishing performance without parallel. With Claude Macdonald he carried out several outstanding expeditions, the descent of the Eiger by the N. face and the crossing of the Lauitor and a traverse of the Schreckhorn being amongst the most striking.

expeditions there do not call for any special comment except for one expedition which remains fixed in my memory, when we made the ascent for the first time (which I did not know until four years later) of all three peaks of the Wetterhörner on the same day, including a new route up the Rosenhorn from the Rosenegg and a new variation on the Mittelhorn. The snow remained in perfect condition the whole day, and I know nothing more enjoyable than a day spent under such perfect conditions in the solitude of those wonderful snowfields of the Bernese Oberland. I made my first acquaintance with the Zermatt district by the traverse of the Zinal Rothorn from Zinal to Zermatt and the third ascent of the Matterhorn couloir on the Riffelhorn, and with the Mont Blanc region by the ascent of the Grand Dru and the traverse of Mont Blanc from Courmayeur to Chamonix by the ordinary route.

In 1895 Kaufmann was replaced by Hans Almer who remained in my service for eleven years. He and Jossi made about the most perfect combination imaginable of a superlative rock climber⁵ and a great iceman. Hans Almer, whose death was reported in December of last year, was a short sturdy fellow with remarkably small feet. Good tempered and full of humour, he was a welcome addition to our party.

In our first season, we settled down for a month at Montenvers, which in those days was a kind of Mecca for English climbers, and I found myself surrounded by a gathering of many of the best known mountaineers of the day. At first I was a little overawed, but during that month I made many lasting friendships. That was before the advent of the railway from Chamonix which appears to have destroyed entirely the peculiar atmosphere of that delightful climbing centre. I think it has never recovered the same popularity and charm.

After making three or four ascents which included the fourth traverse of the Charmoz from S. to N. and a perfect day on the Aiguille Verte, we made the traverse of the Grépon in company with H. E. M. Stutfield and his guide J. B. Perruquet. As up to that time it had been done only twelve times, it was still regarded as something a little out of the ordinary and it was still necessary to find the way. It was new to all three guides. Hans Almer, who led throughout, found full scope to display his extraordinary skill as a rock climber.

⁵ Hans will always be remembered for his extraordinary feat in climbing the celebrated Fontaine chimney on the Dent du Requin, an exploit which, as far as I know, has only once been repeated. (See *A. J.* 39. 105-7.) For portrait of Hans Almer, see *A. J.* 51, facing 268.

After a short visit to the Graians, we wound up our season with a somewhat thrilling adventure on the Dent Blanche, on the summit of which we were caught by a terrific blizzard. We had to make a distinctly hazardous descent of the slabs in a howling gale and blinding snow which had already covered the rocks to a depth of several inches, and it was necessary to find every foothold before making another step forward. Fortunately there was no ice on the rocks. I thought that Hans showed distinct signs of alarm, but Jossi treated the whole affair as an ordinary occurrence: a definite example of his power of inspiring confidence to his companions, and I can honestly say that I felt perfectly safe in his company.

I spent eleven seasons with Jossi and Hans in various districts. Four expeditions remain prominent in my memory.

In 1896 we went to La Bérarde in Dauphiné, where amongst other climbs we made a successful ascent of La Meije in company once again with Stutfield and Perruquet, with the addition of Christophe Turc. Our intention was to cross the peaks to La Grave. As the arête proved to be in the worst possible condition, when we had gone for a little way along it Stutfield decided to abandon the attempt and we returned to the summit. Jossi and Hans hated the idea of giving it up so soon and we made up our minds to make another attempt. Stutfield and his companions started their descent to La Bérarde. We got as far as the Brèche Zsigmondy, where we regretfully decided that it would be foolish to persevere any further and we returned once more to the summit. Here we had to wait for a while until we were certain that the other party was out of the line of fire from any stones we might accidentally send down. This made us late in starting on our descent and we were overtaken by darkness before we reached the Glacier Carré, but we decided to continue a slow descent as best we could by the light of our lantern. We crawled down the Grande Muraille with the greatest caution, which, however, appeared to me to be easier than I had expected, possibly because one could not see what lay ahead. We arrived safely at the Pyramide Duhamel where we made a prolonged halt for a long deferred meal as we had eaten nothing since leaving the Brèche Zsigmondy. I may mention that I habitually ate very little whilst climbing, and on this expedition, which lasted for 28 hours, my sole nourishment consisted of twenty-four ginger-nut biscuits. Quite sufficient, the proof of which lay in the fact that when I arrived back at La Bérarde I was perfectly fit and not in the least tired. We then continued our downward path, descending the Grand Couloir by moonlight. I was much impressed by the accuracy with which

the guides hit off the exact spot at which the couloir is quitted to traverse to the Promontoire. Neither of the two men had been on La Meije before. We eventually set foot on the Glacier des Etançons just at the break of dawn about 3 A.M.

I imagine that the impressions produced by different mountains on people's minds vary to some extent. Personally I have been the most impressed by the great faces such as the N. face of the Grandes Jorasses, the S. face of the Matterhorn and the S. face of La Meije. I had the feeling of a climb on the grand scale on the last named and there was not a dull moment on it. Although the Petit Dru cannot be classed in the same way as a great face, the ascent of it produced the same effect on my mind. The Grépon may explain what I wish to convey. It is undoubtedly a hard climb, every minute of it the height of enjoyment, but the sense was of something rather sensational than that of being on a really great peak.

In 1898 we found ourselves once again at Montenvers. We made the ascent of the Blaitière by an unconventional route, as instead of taking the usual route by the Rocher de la Corde, Jossi proposed that we should go straight up the great snow wall between the Central and N. peaks. The snow was in good condition but petered out about two-thirds of the way up, the remainder having to be surmounted by continuous step-cutting. I am not sure that going up an ice slope at a slow pace with one's nose almost touching the ice in front was quite my idea of unadulterated enjoyment, but I do know that Jossi was in his element and enjoyed every minute of it. I did not discover until some years later that this route had never been done before and I am quite certain that Jossi and Hans were not aware of its novelty. I believe that it has not been repeated since, but this is probably because it is not a really attractive or reasonable route.⁶

In the same year we carried out a successful ascent of the Petit Dru which had not been done for three years. Jossi and Hans were very keen to break the spell and proposed that we should make the attempt, to which I gave a willing assent. We accordingly started for the Charpoua *gîte*. The existing hut was not erected until some years later. The passage through the glacier and up the rocks thence to the shoulder offered no difficulty. There was a good deal of ice on the rocks which were streaming with water, which made the climbing a good deal more difficult, but Hans who led was given full scope for a display of his extraordinary skill as a rock climber. He looked like a fly crawling up the steep rock faces, and under the difficult conditions it struck

⁶ See *A. J.* 37. 195.



Photo, Alfred Holmes.]

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Spencer Couloir

MONT BLANC, BLAITIÈRE AND MIDI FROM THE CHARMOZ ARÊTE.

[To face p. 190.]

me as an amazing performance. We reached the summit at the late hour of 3.15 P.M. Jossi and Hans were naturally jubilant at the success of the venture. Half an hour later we started on the descent with the certain knowledge that we should be benighted on the mountain as under the existing conditions our progress would be rather slow, and darkness closed in just as we reached a snow patch at the top of the great N. wall. We had no lantern, as the guides had forgotten to take it out of the rucksack which was left behind on the rocks below the shoulder, but Jossi proposed that we should continue a slow descent.

Although there was no moonlight, it was not a very dark night, and the guides said that as the rocks were light in colour they could see quite well where to go. I agreed willingly as I did not relish the boredom of sitting for long weary hours at one spot and I felt that the time would pass more quickly. So the slow and careful descent was resumed until we reached the shoulder where the arête of Les Flammes strikes the main peak. Here the guides said that, as the rocks were now black in colour, they could no longer see their way and that it would be better to wait for daylight. We wedged ourselves side by side between two rocks. None of us being in the least degree sleepy, we passed the time chatting. Our provisions had been exhausted some time before and as our clothes were wet through from the water running on the rocks, the tobacco and matches in our pockets were sodden and we were unable to indulge in what would have been a really enjoyable pipe. It was a lovely night, and from our eyrie we could see the Montenvers hotel which was brilliantly lighted up all night. We naturally wondered why and learned on our return that it had been nearly set on fire. A chilly American lady staying in the hotel had kept a fire burning continuously in her room, which proved to be more than the old beams under the hearthstone could stand. Dawn broke at about 3.40 when we resumed a leisurely descent, making a long halt at the spot where we had left the rucksack, and we eventually reached Montenvers about midday just in time to stop preparations for a search party which was to go out to discover what had become of us.

The fourth climb I wish to refer to, was the ascent of the Dents des Bouquetins by the E. arête from the Col des Bouquetins which had been made only once before by E. C. Oppenheim and Gerald Arbuthnot. On this occasion Frank Bergne joined our party. This route takes one up by a long series of excessively steep slabs with very little in the way of hand- and footholds. Hans Almer led all the way and once more displayed his uncanny power of sticking like a fly on smooth rock faces. As far as the

rest of us were concerned, the moral effect of the rope undoubtedly made all the difference, but all the same each of us knew that it was no place for a slip as it was doubtful whether we could have been held.

Christian Jossi was also with me on many visits which I made to the Alps in winter, when we had also the delightful company of my old friend the late Hermann Woolley. We climbed several minor peaks and with Jossi and that fine guide Adolf Schaller, father of the well known man of the same name, I made a successful ascent of the Dom. I should mention that from 1899 onwards excepting two seasons, the party was reinforced by the addition of Percy Somers, a delightful companion and a thoroughly sound mountaineer.

In 1907 Hans Almer's place was taken by Rudolf Lochmatter, one of the celebrated band of brothers who helped to bring fame to St. Niklaus as the home of great guides. In previous years, I had frequently met Rudolf on the mountain when he, with my old friend Josef Pollinger, was employed by A. B. Thorold and Austin Clover successively.⁷ I was greatly attracted by his personality and we became firm friends. Rudolf, who had become one of the outstanding figures in the world of guides, met with a deplorable accident in 1900 when blasting rocks for roof slates, owing to which he lost his left hand. This naturally put an end to his guiding career, for a time at any rate. I saw him several times in the succeeding summers and was much impressed by the fortitude and patience with which he bore the terrible misfortune which prevented him from pursuing his activities amongst the mountains which he loved so well. In 1906 he asked me whether, in the case of our needing a porter at any time, we would give him the chance of accompanying us. As it happened, our association with Hans Almer had terminated and we were looking out for a second guide for the following year; and I proposed that, subject to Jossi's approval, he should go with us in that capacity. I accordingly consulted Jossi, who unhesitatingly said that he would much prefer to have Rudolf with us rather than most guides with two hands. And in 1907 Rudolf entered our service.

It was a joy to witness his intense pleasure in being able to resume his life amongst his beloved mountains. We never had cause to regret our decision. Before his mishap, Rudolf was

⁷ Colonel Strutt in his masterly article in the preceding number of *A. J.* makes an error in stating that Arthur Thorold and Josef Pollinger were usually accompanied by Alois Pollinger, jun. Rudolf Lochmatter was their invariable companion and was one of the party to make the ascent of the Grands Charmoz from the Mer de Glace.

considered one of the finest exponents of rock climbing of that time, and after he joined us he climbed with such ease that we forgot entirely that we had a one-handed man in the party. Jossi, who was quite devoid of any feeling of jealousy, invariably asked Rudolf to lead and frequently he even did any required step-cutting with the help of a strap which fastened the shaft of the ice-axe to his left wrist. His best climbs were carried out⁸ before he met with his accident. Although we did a considerable amount of good work while he was with us, I had a natural feeling of responsibility towards his family which set a certain limit to what I was willing that we should undertake. At first I had a certain difficulty in making Rudolf see my point of view.

He was an unusually good looking fellow with dark curly hair and blue eyes, slight and graceful in figure. As to his personal character and disposition, it is difficult to find words which express adequately my feelings towards him, and to say that my life has been made richer by the friendship of such a man is no exaggeration. It was a real grief to me when he died in 1923 at the early age of 48.

I should like in conclusion to say a few words about guides of the first class. I have come into contact of personal friendship with a great number of them. I have always been struck by a certain highmindedness and dignity which is generally characteristic of the guides of that rank. They are necessarily fully aware of their own capabilities, but I have usually found them very unassuming, not to say modest, in their general bearing. I doubt very much whether the amateur can ever be quite the equal of the really first class guide. I shall always feel that it has been a privilege to be on terms of friendship with men like the Lochmatters, Pollingers, Josef Knubel, Alexander Graven, Hans Brantschen, Adolf Schaller and his brother Hermann, the Biners, Otto Furrer, the Gentinettas, Siegfried Burgener, Fritz Amatter and many more too numerous to name, and last but certainly not least Christian Jossi and his son, to whose names I would like to add some of the older generation such as Ulrich Kaufmann, Christian Almer, Melchior Anderegg, and that grand old man Peter Baumann and Eccles' guides Michel and Alphonse Payot. With other great guides such as Alexander Burgener, Emile Rey, Pierre Blanc, I had only a passing acquaintance and I never had the luck to meet Christian Klucker.

⁸ See *A. J.* 35. 98.