

UP AND DOWN THE GUGGI

BY SIR JOHN HUNT

DAVID COX and I had been climbing in the Bernese Oberland. On 2nd August we were joined by Robin Hodgkin and, late that evening, descended from the Jungfraubahn train at the Eiger-gletscher station. The Guggi route on the Jungfrau had long attracted me ; in conditions which ruled out our intended traverse of the Eiger by the Mittellegi Ridge, or any serious rock-climbing above 3,000 metres, this fine ice climb seemed to us now to offer a possible alternative, provided we could strike a lucky break in the prevailing bad weather. The wind was blowing steadily from the west, the forecast was depressing, and local opinion did not share our optimism, but none of these pointers succeeded in damping it. In order to give ourselves the best possible chance, we carried provisions sufficient to enable us, if need be, to lay siege to the mountain for three days : this made a heavy carry as we crossed the glacier and mounted the steep slopes of shale and scree below the Mönch in the waning light.

It was dark when we reached the hut, which was empty. The barometer was falling and, outside, it was trying to snow ; everything seemed to point to our folly in having persisted against the advice of our friends in the valley. Yet we set the alarm clock for 3 a.m. hoping still for one of those dramatic changes which mountains sometimes produce. The Guggi Hut is snug and wonderfully well equipped and it was good to be there.

At 3 a.m. there was no change and we dozed off until 5.30 a.m. With the coming of daylight it was obvious that the bad weather would persist ; low clouds hung down the Eigerwand and heavy patches of damp mist trailed along the line of the valley below us ; the same moist wind was blowing from the direction of the Gspaltenhorn. It was going to be a siege.

We played for time, intending at least to make a reconnaissance of the lower icefall, which defends the great terrace below the Jungfrauoch on this side. Playing for time consisted of brushing up our crevasse escape techniques ; we draped ropes over the rafters and swarmed up them in Prusik loops. It was incredibly painful but easy to cheat. David needed a good deal of coaching from Robin and myself, which made us feel very superior. Thinking about these antics later, I have wondered whether they were prompted by a premonition of later events.

At 9.30 a.m. we started out into the clammy mist, descended the gully by the wire ropes and traversed the slabby slopes above the Kühlauenen

Glacier. From a distance it was so thick that we could not get an overall view of the icefall, and when we arrived beneath it, the angle of the fall was too steep to pick out the best line. But the reconnaissance proved to be interesting and valuable. This part of the route is reputed to be sometimes impassable and, even in this snowy year, we concluded that only one line, at one point as tenuous as a thin blade of ice which we crossed 'à cheval', was feasible. There were two exceedingly steep snow pitches and a lot of intricate route-finding. As we made height the weather closed down more and more, and at the rim of the terrace it was snowing hard : it had taken us five hours from the hut. In the circumstances, there seemed no point in pushing our explorations further that day, so we returned, stamping the track and hoping that there would still be some trace of it next morning.

All that night the weather continued to be hostile ; the hut barometer frankly veered backwards towards *Tempête*. At 5.15 a.m., though the glass was still falling, there were patches of sky showing through the mists, and we could even trace parts of the East ridge of the Jungfrau. Scribbling a note in the hut book to the effect that, if caught by worsening weather, we intended to escape over the Silberhorn, we started out.

Most of our track up the Kùhlauenén Icefall was still traceable in the new snow, and we made good progress to the terrace, and up the easy rocks of the Schneehorn ; to myself fell the entertaining task of cutting up a ten-foot wall of snow and breaking through the summit cornice. We had taken four hours from the hut and there would, in good conditions, have been plenty of time in hand. In the icefall there had been some sunny moments, and I had begun to rejoice at the perversity of the mountains in confounding the barometer. But at that stage in the climb we had not been able to see the outlook towards the west ; on arriving at the Schneehorn our hopes were quickly subdued. As we advanced across the Giessen Glacier towards the Klein Silberhorn the light became very poor and clouds were thickening over the Jungfrau. By the time we had negotiated the upper icefall and were climbing the short, steep slope below the Silberlücke there was no doubt that the weather prophets had been right, but we still hoped that we might just reach the summit before the weather completely closed in upon us. It was 1 p.m. when we arrived in the gap.

The Silberlücke in bad weather is no place to linger. A bitter wind was blowing across it and it was snowing. We started along the rock ridge towards the Hochfirn, only to find unexpected difficulty. The rocks were plastered with ice and heavily frosted. For about half an hour David and Robin cast around, scraping off the icicles and the heavy frost fringes, but making very little progress, while I sat on a ledge to secure them, and the snow came on in earnest. This decided the issue.

We soon realised that, not only could there be no question of continuing ; there would soon be a serious problem in returning ; and the only choice of escape was to reverse the Guggi route, back to the distant hut. We turned about, hoping that our tracks would still be visible as far as the Schneehorn.

They lasted, in fact, only a short way down the upper Giessen Glacier. We were soon steering blindly, by compass, as we approached the icefall, trying vainly, with visibility only twenty yards, to recognise landmarks among the séracs and crevasses we had passed a few hours earlier. It was even difficult to be sure if we were descending or on level ground. Of necessity we were travelling dead slow.

Suddenly, David, who was leading, disappeared. At one moment he was there ; the next, there was a hole in the snow with the rope between him and Robin whizzing into it at alarming and fascinating speed. Before I had gathered my wits, Robin was pulled on to his back and was travelling fast on the hard frozen surface down towards the crevasse. It seemed inevitable that he would vanish within the next two or three seconds, and my mind was momentarily paralysed by the impending disaster.

But he did not disappear. Just as I had contrived to anchor my axe and get a few coils of rope round it, the tug came on to myself and I was dragged a yard or two. But at the same moment Robin, half-way into the hole, managed to get his body athwart it. All the rope was taut, with sixty feet of it now below the surface. The momentum of the drama ceased as suddenly as it had begun. A few seconds later I saw Robin disengage himself and roll over to the upper edge of the crevasse ; presumably David had made himself secure and eased the strain on Robin's waist, but the tension and anxiety remained acute.

The next thing was to discover the whereabouts and condition of David. As soon as Robin was securely placed, I moved cautiously towards him. From his position of vantage, he was able to indicate the line of the crevasse as I approached. From its edge, we peered into the depths. There was no sign, only the rope disappearing round a bulge some forty feet down. We shouted, and heard, to our immense relief, a faint reply ; he seemed a long way off but announced himself intact. We lowered his axe, which was at the very brink, and brought up his rucksack on the return journey. We then lowered both ends of the spare rope, each with a loop on it. Pulling alternately, we brought him to the surface with gratifying speed ; indeed, the whole incident cannot have lasted more than forty-five minutes. It was almost miraculous that, after a direct fall of sixty feet, David's only visible damage should have been a grazed nose and a loosened tooth.

I am no fisherman, but I did experience some of the excitement of landing a really big fish as we saw, emerging from the trap set for us by

the Jungfrau, a very snowy but unperturbed future President of the Climbers' Club.

The day was by no means over for we still had a long way to go, and in the very thick weather, time was against us. It was a great relief to get down the upper icefall; no less so, when our compass led us to the brink of the precipice to the east of the Schneehorn. The descent of the rocks, so simple when we had climbed them that morning, now seemed awkward in their snow-plastered condition; it was difficult to choose the best line, and David, we found, was suffering slightly from delayed shock effects. Although it was only 6 p.m. we considered bivouacking, but rejected the notion with so much relative daylight remaining.

Finding the point where our route emerged on to the terrace above the Kühlauenen Icefall was greeted as a triumph; the descent down the difficult ground, so familiar on this, our third acquaintance of it, was straightforward despite the failing light, the wind, and the falling snow. We chanced upon the wire rope leading up to the rock traverse at the edge of the glacier and knew we had made it. Robin's torch helped us through the next, exasperating hour, and at 10.15 we were back in the hut.

Next morning, with the new snow thick around our perch and lying half-way down to the Kleine Scheidegg, the Jungfrau unveiled itself gradually and looked down upon us, enticing but unapproachable, inviting us to come this way again.