

One hundred years ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

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'The drive up to Grindelwald that evening, though cold, was most delightful, the stars overhead, the great peaks towering up ghost-like in the darkness, the dancing lights from all the little houses scattered over the snow-covered hillside, the swift, noiseless motion of our conveyance, and the jingling of the horses' bells, leaving an impression never to be forgotten.'

This description of a winter journey in the Bernese Oberland was recorded by W. A. B. Coolidge, who arrived at Interlaken on 11 January 1879, having received word from Christian Almer that the snow was in admirable condition. After making a number of training excursions during a fortnight of indifferent weather Coolidge held a grand consultation at Lauterbrunnen. 'The question was whether we should go up to Mürren for the Schilthorn or return to Grindelwald in hopes of at last accomplishing the principal object of my journey. A sudden glimpse of the blue sky radiant with sunshine made us adopt the latter course, most fortunately as it turned out.' On 27 January after climbing for nearly 10 hours Coolidge, with Almer, his sons Ulrich and Christian and Friedrich Deutschmann, made the first winter ascent of the Gross Schreckhorn. The party arrived at the summit at 4.35pm without Coolidge's field glass 'which escaped from the fingers of one of the party and was immediately dashed into a thousand pieces' and Almer's hat, which was later recovered. The climb was difficult, particularly along the main ridge from the Schrecksattel, and Coolidge, who 5 years before had made the first winter ascents of the Wetterhorn and the Jungfrau, was delighted. 'Our success caused the greater astonishment, in that we had not revealed our intention before starting save to one or two persons; and I think I may fairly say, without boasting, that the Schreckhorn is the most difficult peak which has as yet been conquered in mid-winter—a triumph which I certainly owe to Almer's unequalled skill and thoughtfulness.'

Throughout the Alps the weather experienced during the early part of the climbing season was little better than that of the previous year. D. W. Freshfield later recalled that 1879 was an exceptionally snowy year and Coolidge wrote that climbers would not easily forget the enormous quantity of snow in the early summer. Coolidge, who arrived in the Dauphiné at the beginning of July, made the first ascent of Le Pavé on the 19th of that month with Christian Almer and his son Christian. The climb was made by way of the W face and serious difficulties were encountered due to the amount of snow on the rocks. 'As the peak is shut in by the higher summits of the Pic Oriental of the Meije and the Pic Gaspard, the distant view is confined; but this is compensated by the extraordinary and marvellous glimpse of, so to speak, the internal topography of the Meije. The aspect of the great S wall, the apparent insanity of attempting to reach the Glacier Carré even by the route now usually followed, and the curiously insecure appearance of the Pic Central of the Meije, combine to make the view from this point one of the most remarkable in Dauphiné.'

A few days later, on 25 July, Charles and Lawrence Pilkington and Frederick Gardiner succeeded in making the first guideless ascent of the Meije. Addressing the Alpine Club later in the year Charles Pilkington recalled that the climbing became progressively more difficult as they approached the Glacier Carré. 'This last



105 *The Schreckhorn* (Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office)

piece of the wall will always remain in our minds as the most desperate piece of work we have ever done; the rocks so far had been firm, but now, although far too steep for loose stones to lodge on, were so shattered that we dare not trust them; at the same time we had to be very careful, lest in removing any we should bring others down upon us.'

The climb was completed without incident and after spending an hour and a half on the summit of the Grand Pic the party descended to pass the night on the Glacier Carré in a large india-rubber bag. 'The moon was half full, and shone upon us as we lay, making everything look very beautiful. We could see the snow just in front of us, and then, far away through the frosty air, all the mountains on the other side of the Vallon des Etançons, with the silver-grey peak of the Écrins behind, its icy ridges standing out sharply against the clear sky; and deep down in the dark valley below was the signal fire of our porters. As this could only be seen by sitting bolt upright, we got tired of looking at it, and the last link connecting us with the lower world being broken, we felt our utter loneliness.' After a difficult descent from the Glacier Carré all 3 members of the party were delighted to be met by one of the porters, complete with an iced bottle of champagne.

The first guideless ascent of the Grand Pic, only the fourth time that the summit had been reached, was a fine achievement even for such a strong party. Writing later on the subject of guideless climbing Coolidge noted that 'like the party of 1876,¹ they waited till all was favourable for their enterprises, they took all possible

¹ Arthur Cust, A. H. Cawood and J. B. Colgrove, who made the first guideless ascent of the Matterhorn on 23 July 1876.



106 Ridge of the Aiguille du Chardonnet (Photo: C. D. Milner)

precautions when on the way, they knew each other well and so could reckon confidently on each other in case of an emergency, and they had carefully studied their intended route beforehand so as to be quite clear on the subject.'

Towards the end of July the weather became more settled and conditions began to improve. In the Pennine Alps on 30 July C. Socin with E. Peter made the first ascent of the Pointe de Bricola while on 18 August Alfred Barran and F. Corbett, with Johann Petrus and Joseph Langen, reached the summit of the Grand Cornier by way of the unclimbed SW ridge. Other ridges climbed for the first time included, in the Bernese Alps, the SW ridge of the Aletschhorn on 6 August by L. Liehti with Anton Kummer and a porter and, in the Mont Blanc range, the W ridge of the

Aiguille du Chardonnet on 1 August by P. W. Thomas with Joseph Imboden and J. M. Lochmatter.

Also in the Mont Blanc range, first ascents were made of the Aiguille de Talèfre and the Petit Dru: the Talèfre by F. J. Cullinan, J. Baumann and Gerald Fitzgerald, with Emile Rey, Laurent Larnier and Joseph Moser on 25 August and the Petit Dru on 29 August by the Chamonix guides Jean E. Charlet-Straton, Prosper Payot and Frédéric Folliguet. While the guides were climbing the Petit Dru Cullinan and Baumann, accompanied by Rey and Moser, completed the second ascent of the Grand Dru. C. T. Dent's account of the first ascent² was carried on the climb and found very useful.

Other peaks climbed for the first time were the Punta dell'Argentera, the highest point of the Maritime Alps, and, in the Dolomites, the Cima di Canali and the W summit of the Drei Zinnen or Tre Cime di Lavaredo. The Argentera was climbed on 18 August by Coolidge, with Christian Almer and his son Christian, the Cima di Canali by C. C. Tucker with Michele Bottega on 30 August and the W summit of the Drei Zinnen, also at the end of August, by G. Ploner and M. Innerkofler.

Two further climbs are worthy of note; on 12 August Paul Guillemain and A. Salvador de Quatrefores with Emile Pic made the first ascent of the NW face of Monte Viso, and in the Zermatt region on 13 August G. A. Passingham, with Ferdinand Imseng and Louis Zurbrücken, succeeded in forcing a route up the formidable, unclimbed W face of the Weisshorn. Passingham noted that the party was greeted by a continuous barrage of stones that 'hummed and howled through the air in a very disagreeable and spiteful manner.' This route, which ends on the N ridge a short distance from the summit, is both difficult and very dangerous; not surprisingly, few parties have repeated the climb.

On the day after Passingham's climb an unfortunate accident occurred when W. O. Moseley and W. E. Craven, who had climbed the Matterhorn from Zermatt, were descending the NE ridge with their guides Peter Rubi and Christian Inäbnit. Moseley, who insisted on unroping, slipped and fell; many readers will have negotiated the Moseley Slabs³ on their way to the summit.

In September the Matterhorn was the scene of two important climbs which were both completed on the same day; the first ascent of the NW or Zmutt ridge by A. F. Mummery, with Alexander Burgener, Johann Petrus and Auguste Gentinetta, and the ascent of the unclimbed face by William Penhall, with Imseng and Ludwig Zurbrücken. Both Mummery and Penhall had already climbed the mountain and both were certain that a route could be made either on or near the ridge. Penhall had hoped to make an attempt in August of the previous year but his plans had been thwarted by bad weather; now, on learning from Imseng that Passingham was about to turn his attention to the problem, he hurried back to the Alps, reaching Zermatt at the end of August.

Mummery, who had completed a successful preliminary expedition including ascents of the Fletschhorn and Portjenhorn with Burgener in August, later recalled that his previous experience of guides 'had been chiefly, if not exclusively, with men who were eager to start on any attempt, no matter how desperate, and who were far too polite to inquire whether their employer knew anything about the art of climbing. At an early stage in the proceedings, however, these men had invariably developed a most touching, but none the less most inconvenient, affection for

² On 12 September 1878.

³ Above and below the Solvay Hut at approximately 4000m.



107 Matterhorn from below the N face of the Dent d'Hérens (Photo: AC collection, B. R. Goodfellow)

their wives and families, and were compelled by these most commendable feelings to discontinue the ascent.'

On 1 September Penhall and his guides, after reaching the last of the rock teeth on the ridge, bivouacked at the foot of the snow section, intending to complete the climb on the following day. During the night, however, the weather deteriorated and the party was forced to descend; on the way back to Zermatt they met

Mummery and Burgener heading for the mountain.

During the evening conditions improved and after a bitterly cold bivouac Mummery and his party started to ascend the ridge on 3 September in perfect weather, using steps cut by the other party 2 days before. After negotiating the teeth they were faced with the prospect of either climbing an unpleasant-looking slope of ice and rotten rock or retreating. 'For three-quarters of an hour Burgener examined this slope without being able to see a way across it, and unpleasant doubts were being expressed when a distant jodel attracted our attention, and, far away down the mountain, we spied three dots, whom we at once and rightly guessed to be Penhall and his guides.'

Penhall, who 'noticed Mummery on the arête just at the highest point we had reached two days before', had been persuaded by Imseng's promise of better weather to start again after table d'hôte and was by this time on the Zmutt side of the W face well above the Tiefenmatten Glacier. For a time, with Mummery's party delayed at the gap beyond the teeth, the outcome seemed uncertain; soon, however, the Penhall party had themselves lost a valuable 2 hours by moving too far into the centre of the face.

Eventually Petrus and Burgener managed to overcome the difficulties on the lower part of the ridge and, with Mummery and Gentinetta, began the detour on the W face. 'After some steady climbing we reached a point from which it appeared possible to work on to the Zmutt arête, but Burgener was somewhat doubtful, and on my telling him that Carrel had traversed this slope by a "corridor" higher up,⁴ he preferred to take that course.

We soon gained the ledge, and found no difficulty in following it to the fault which bars access to the ridge.' While this fault was being investigated Mummery 'had time to look along the ledge which winds like a pathway round all the inequalities of the mountain to the southern arête. It appeared to be quite free from snow and ice, and would not, I fancy, have offered any very serious obstacle to our traversing it.' It was later reported⁵ that Mummery told J. P. Farrar that the 'Galerie Carrel' 'was so easy that one could stroll across it with an old umbrella!'

After climbing the upper part of the ridge Mummery and his guides reached the summit at 1.45pm; the Penhall party, after scaling the edge of the W face to join the upper ridge, arrived only 1½ hours later.

Both climbs were outstanding even allowing for the fact that each party included some of the best guides of the day. While Penhall's very dangerous route has since attracted little attention the Zmutt ridge has remained one of the great classic climbs in the Alps. Mummery's route was repeated on 6 September when J. Baumann, with Petrus and Emile Rey, reached the summit at 8.45am. Baumann recorded that 'the actual climbing did not occupy more than 4¼ hrs., and I am of opinion that this ascent by the Zmutt arête will in future become the favourite way of crossing the Matterhorn for those who appreciate a good and not too dangerous rock climb.' This has not proved to be the case, the slab section requiring dry and settled conditions to be really safe.

After returning to Zermatt where they enjoyed 'the rewards of the faithful' Mummery and Penhall mounted a combined expedition; on 7 September, with Burgener and Imseng, they made the first recorded ascent of the Dürrenhorn. Further along the chain on 22 September Arthur Cust, with Jean Martin and Pierre

⁴ On 17 July 1865.

⁵ By Sir Edward Davidson.

Beytrison, made the first ascent of the highest point of the Mitre de l'Evêque, between l'Evêque and Mont Collon.

Towards the end of the year Edward Whympfer, accompanied by J. A. and Louis Carrel, sailed from Southampton to begin his expedition to the Andes. After arriving at Guayaquil in Ecuador an interpreter was engaged and preparations went ahead for an ascent of Chimborazo.⁶ By the end of December the party had established its second camp at approximately 5060m.

This account of the events of one hundred years ago is concluded with a tribute by Coolidge which appeared in the *Alpine Journal* for August 1879. 'I regret to have to ask space to record the death of a famous mountaineer, the dog Tschingel, which occurred at Dorking on 16 June.

Tschingel was purchased in the Lötschthal when a puppy by Christian Almer in September 1865. She made her début as a climber by an ascent of the Torrenthorn from the Maing glacier, and a few days after crossed her first glacier pass, that from which she derived her name. For several years she lived at Grindelwald as the watch-dog of Almer's house, and in July 1868 passed into the possession of Miss Brevoort⁷ and myself. In order to follow us she had perforce to climb peaks and traverse passes, and she acquitted herself so admirably that for nine summers (1868 to 1876) she was our constant companion in our Alpine campaigns. Her list of "grandes courses" amounts to no less than fifty-five, besides numberless excursions in winter and summer on glaciers and up to bivouacs, beyond which it was not judged prudent to take her. Among her more remarkable feats were Mont Blanc, Monte Rosa, Finsteraarhorn. Aletschhorn (twice), Nesthorn, Jungfrau from Wengern Alp, Jungfrauoch with descent to Wengern Alp, Eiger, Wetterhorn, Mönch from Wengern Alp, Ochsenhorn and Joch, and Grand Combin.'

Tschingel also accompanied the Coolidge party on several first ascents, including those of the Râteau and the Grande Ruine, and 'in no one instance did she ever make a false step, and very rarely required assistance.' Certainly her list of ascents is remarkable and there is something endearing in the recollection of the small dog who climbed so many high mountains.

The present writer is glad that Tschingel's feats entitle her to be remembered as one of the great pioneers.



⁶ 6270m.

⁷ Coolidge's aunt.

108 Tschingel (reproduced from *Alpine Studies*, W. A. B. Coolidge)