

# One Hundred Years Ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

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*Photographs 44-47*

'A most dreadful calamity befell the inhabitants of some of the mountainous districts of Piedmont this last winter. After three days of incessant and heavy snowstorms enormous avalanches were precipitated on 18 January, from the mountain sides, carrying away houses, cattle, crops, granaries, and burying numerous victims under the ruins. The Mont Cenis Railway between the stations of Chaumont and Salbertrand was entirely blocked by immense masses of snow 6 mètres in height, which in their fall destroyed the signal-boxes on the line, together with the telegraph posts. For nearly a week a railway train was blocked on the line at Salbertrand, being unable to advance or return to Modane.'

The heavy snowfalls experienced in many parts of the Alps in January 1885 continued for some weeks and very little winter climbing was possible. However, two expeditions of note were recorded by Vittorio Sella, who completed the first winter ascents of the Gran Paradiso and the Lyskamm on 2 and 22 March respectively. Sella, who was accompanied by Samuel Aitken and the guides Jean Joseph and Daniel Maquignaz on the first climb and by his cousins Corradino and Alfonso, with Jean Joseph Maquignaz and P. Gugliermina during the ascent of the Lyskamm — reached by way of the S ridge or Cresta Sella — took a number of photographs on each occasion.

During the spring and early summer conditions steadily improved and for most of the season the weather throughout the Alps was magnificent, providing the best climbing opportunities for many years. After weeks of cloudless skies many of the great ridges were in superb condition and the records of some of the principal parties indicate that these opportunities were not ignored. During July and August Sella made many more ascents and took photographs from a number of peaks, including Monte della Disgrazia, the Finsteraarhorn, the Ruinette and the Dent d'Hérens.

In the Bernese Oberland the guideless party of Guido Lammer and August Lorria made the first recorded ascents of the Hinter Fiescherhorn, on 28 July, the Klein Grünhorn, on 13 August, and Kamm, the distinctive peak above the Konkordia hut, on 17 August. This party also climbed the Finsteraarhorn and traversed the Gross Schreckhorn, making the first descent of the NW ridge or Andersongrat. Other Oberland peaks climbed for the first time were the Finsteraar Rothorn, at the end of the SE ridge of the Finsteraarhorn, on 31 July, by S. Simon and E. Merian with J. Tischhauser, and the Nässihorn, between the Klein and Gross Schreckhorn, on 2 August, by Emil Burckhardt with Christian Jossi and Peter Schlegel. On 12 August Burckhardt and Otto Schifferdecker, with Schlegel, Joseph Rubin and Karl Schlunegger climbed the Grosshorn by way of the S ridge, the first time that the summit had been reached from this direction.



44 *Toverkop from the W*

*Photo: N. Saville*

Also in the Oberland an interesting expedition was completed by Moritz von Kuffner who on 31 July, with Alexander Burgener, Joseph Maria Biener and Anton Kalbermatten, made the first descent of the NE, or Mittellegi, ridge of the Eiger. Many competent parties, including that of J. Oakley Maund and John Baumann, with Johann Jaun, Andreas Maurer and Emile Rey 4 years earlier, had attempted to climb the ridge without success. After his ascent was checked at the foot of the big step on 29 July von Kuffner decided to try to descend the ridge and step and thus reach the highest point of the ascent, an expedient adopted later by Guido Rey on the Furggen ridge of the Matterhorn.

After reaching the summit by the usual route up the SW flank and W ridge the party 'passing along a narrow rock ridge with a great coping of snow on the left, gained at 9 the edge of the great rock wall which falls towards the "gendarme".' A flag was hoisted here which was seen from Grindelwald whence their progress during the rest of the day was followed with the closest attention. The first bit of the descent was not difficult, but matters soon changed, and at 10.45 they came to the first of the 'places on which we let ourselves down by the rope'. This proved, perhaps, the most difficult bit of the entire descent, as the foothold was very bad. Three in turn were let down holding on to the doubled slender rope (which was fixed to the rocks) and tied to a Manila rope, Burgener (the last man) helping himself by a rope which he had secured above, while the others held the end below. This process was repeated, and finally, after many difficulties, they succeeded in reaching, at 1.45pm, the deep depression in the ridge just W of the great 'gendarme'. It was late in the day before the party, with provisions already consumed and cigars broken to pieces, left the ridge and 'spent a wretched night without blankets or food, save a soup prepared by Burgener from the bits of tobacco, salt, pepper, candle, and dust, which he shook out of his knapsack, added to a little water.'

In his account of the descent von Kuffner acknowledged that the problem had not been solved and many years were to elapse before the ridge was finally climbed. Even today, with the presence of a hut and fixed ropes the route, which is high and exposed, remains a serious undertaking.

A few days later George Yeld, continuing his extensive exploration of the Graian Alps and accompanied by Henri Séraphin and Joseph Jantet, joined forces with W. A. B. Coolidge and Christian Almer junior to complete a number of climbs in the Gran Paradiso area. On 11 August, after an unpleasant night spent fighting for possession of one blanket on a bed of rhododendrons in a forlorn cowshed, the party reached the summit of the unclimbed Testa della Tribolazione. Yeld and Séraphin also made, on 14 August, the first recorded ascent of the Grivoletta, at the end of the ENE ridge of La Grivola.

In the Mont Blanc range a notable achievement was the first ascent, on 31 July, of the Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey by H. Seymour King, with Emile Rey, Ambros Supersaxo and Aloys Anthamatten. This beautiful satellite of Mont Blanc has no easy route of approach and the Frêne side of the Col de Peuterey had been the scene of a fatal accident three years earlier, when F. M. Balfour and his guide Johann Petrus were killed while attempting to reach the summit.

Addressing the Alpine Club in the following February, Seymour King recalled that the approach by way of the Brouillard glacier was not without its difficulties.



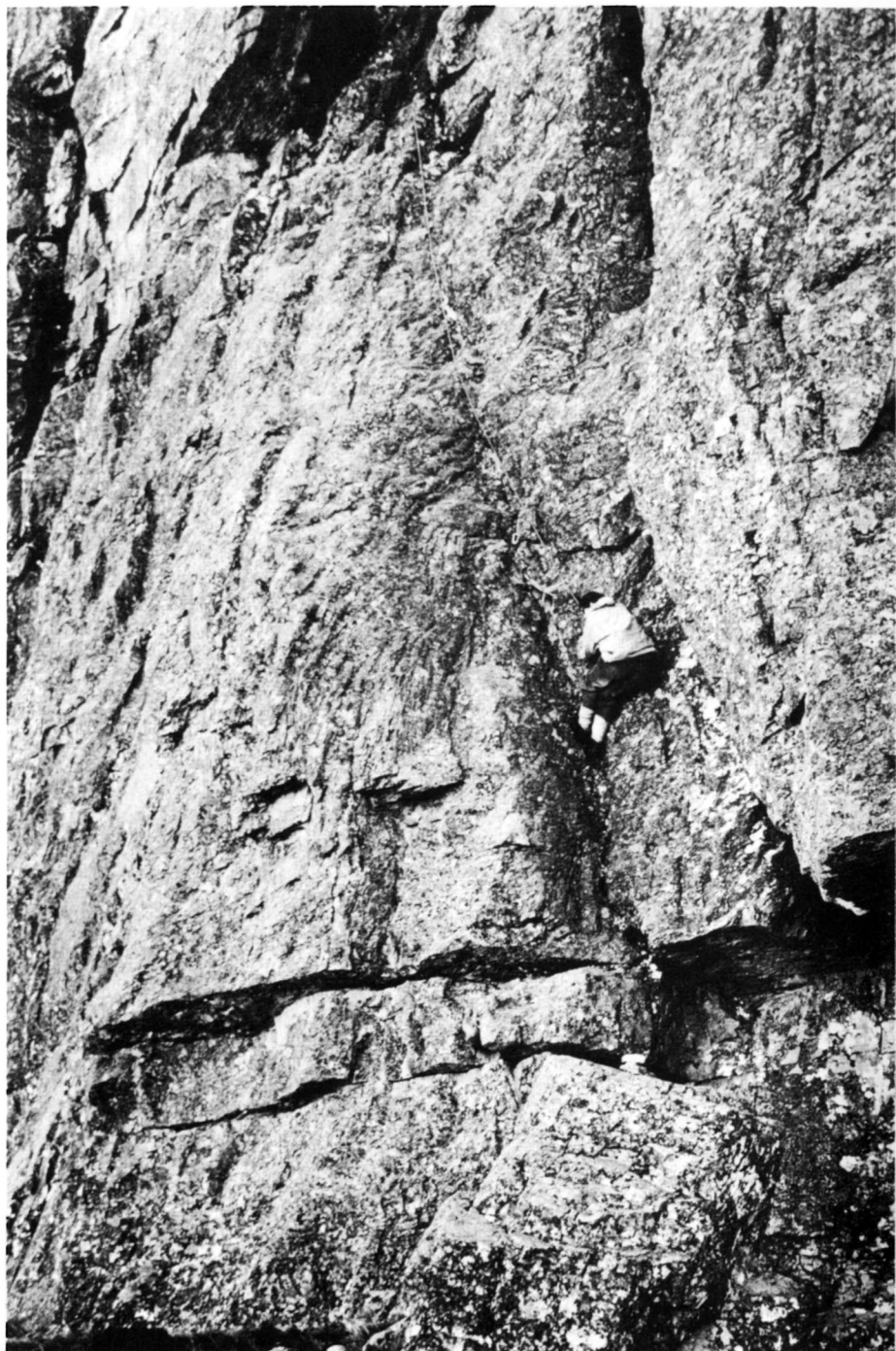
'The glacier was tremendously crevassed, and we had repeatedly to turn back and seek some other route, in order to turn a crevasse or avoid some towering serac. One of our porters, too, began to get alarmed, and kept beseeching us to turn back, assuring us that the only result of going further must be the death of the whole party. After an hour and a half of this work, we found ourselves at the edge of an enormously wide though not very deep crevasse, which it was impossible to cross except by cutting down the side of it and passing under a series of gigantic seracs, from which the ice was falling all the time, and then cutting up again on the other side. Here the last remnant of the porter's courage gave out, and just as we were in the most dangerous part, expecting every moment a block of ice from overhead, he prostrated himself in the snow, and burst into loud sobs; entreaties were unavailing, threats produced quite as little effect, and it was only on my ordering that the rope should be taken off, and the man left to his fate, that he was brought to reason.' After this unsolicited contribution to the proceedings the porter tottered feebly on, just before the expected block of ice landed on the spot where the party had been standing.

The following day, after bivouacking on the rocks at the head of the Brouillard glacier near Col Eccles, Seymour King and the guides descended with difficulty to the upper plateau of the Fréney glacier and climbed to the Col de Peuterey. 'Here we left most of our impedimenta and prepared for our final tussle with the enemy. From the summit of the col we cut our way up a short ice-slope and got on the rocks leading to the first *gendarme*; the rocks were rather rotten, but we were not long in reaching its foot, and continuing to ascend found ourselves obliged to cross a narrow snow arête leading to the second *gendarme*, and rendered very dangerous from a large cornice and the great steepness of the slope on either side. This was perhaps the most dangerous part of the whole expedition, or at any rate was so considered by Supersaxo. However, we crossed it safely, using every precaution, and skirting the base of the second *gendarme* again found ourselves on the rock arête leading towards the final peak. Keeping to the rocks we crept along until we reached a short ice-slope, up which we cut, and found ourselves on the last rocks below the snow summit. These rocks were extremely rotten, and I should say had never been disturbed since they were deposited there; luckily, however, they were not long, and soon we were on the last snow-slope. Here, all difficulties being passed, I took the lead, and in ten minutes more stood on the summit of the mountain.'

After planting an alpenstock with an Italian flag and drinking the traditional bottle of champagne the party regained the bivouac site at last light and had to endure another sleepless night in freezing conditions before returning to Courmayeur.

In the Dauphiné a memorable expedition was completed on 26 July when the guideless party of Emil and Otto Zsigmondy and Ludwig Purtscheller made the first traverse of the E or summit ridge between the Pic Central of the Meije and the Grand Pic or Pic Occidental. Since the first ascent of the Pic Central 15 years earlier many parties had examined the ridge, with its four great teeth, but all attempts to reach the Grand Pic by this route had been defeated.

Writing to the Editor of the *Alpine Journal* Otto Zsigmondy described how, with the aid of crampons and very good snow conditions, the party quickly



reached the Pic Central by the normal route up the Tabuchet glacier. 'The weather being very fine at 9.55 we began the descent to the first gap in the arête separating the Pic Central from the first of the four rocky teeth in the ridge between that point and the Pic Occidental. This gap was attained very soon afterwards. The northern face of the two first teeth was covered with hard frozen snow. We crossed that face horizontally from one gap to the next; in the beginning, our crampons having just hold enough, we were not obliged to cut steps. The second gap was reached at 10.45. To get from this depression to the third was much more difficult; ice had taken the place of the snow, and the slopes had become extremely steep, rocks sticking out here and there. The third gap was reached at 11.15. The third and fourth of the teeth are square cut, rather "low massive turrets of rock." We had now to take to the ridge itself; having climbed an almost vertical wall of rocks we stood on the top of the third tooth, and at 11.45 in the fourth gap, from which we easily attained the crest of the fourth pinnacle. This forms a very thin wedge; its west face is a sheer precipice, some thirty or forty mètres high. We proceeded as far as it was possible, and were then obliged to lower ourselves down by means of our rope, the rocks being overhanging. We fastened a large iron hook into a cleft of the rock, and, passing the rope over it, came safely down into the fifth depression at the foot of the Pic Occidental.'

The ascent of the Grand Pic from the Brèche Zsigmondy, as it is now known, proved very difficult and the party did not reach the summit until late in the day, necessitating a cold night on rocks near the Glacier Carré before they could descend the Promontoire spur and return to La Grave.

The traverse of the summit ridge, still regarded as one of the finest expeditions in the Alps, was a remarkable feat for the period and Coolidge, whose party had made the first ascent of the Pic Central, added his own tribute. 'This expedition ranks with the most difficult and dangerous that has ever been made in the Alps; those who know something of the ridge thus conquered will marvel most at this brilliant *tour de force*, and will most heartily recognise the determination and daring which enabled the successful climbers to triumph where so many of their predecessors had failed.'

Sadly, however, this triumph was overshadowed by tragedy. Only ten days later, on 6 August, while the Zsigmondy brothers and Karl Schulz were attempting to reach the Brèche Zsigmondy and the Grand Pic by way of the steep and dangerous S face, Emil Zsigmondy fell and was killed. Otto Zsigmondy and Schulz, who had both wished to reach the summit by the usual route and who were both injured but saved by a broken rope, were left to make a nightmare descent to the Etançons glacier. It was particularly ironic that Emil Zsigmondy's book *Die Gefahren der Alpen: praktische Winke für Bergsteiger* had been published a few weeks previously.

In view of the exceptionally dry and settled weather it is not surprising that many new rock routes were completed. In the Mont Blanc range, on 9 August, H. Dunod and P. Vignon, with François and Gaspard Simond, F. Folliguet and J. Desailoux, made the first ascent of the highest point of the Aiguille des Grands Charmoz, recovering an ice-axe left further along the summit ridge by A. F. Mummery and his party five years earlier. On 2 September Dunod, with the Simonds and Auguste Tairraz, made the second ascent of the neighbouring



47 *The Meije: the summit ridge from the Grand Pic*

*Photo: Vittorio Sella, 1888*

Aiguille du Grépon, reaching the summit by way of the unclimbed SSW ridge, of CP platform fame. Further E, on 7 August, L. Kurz, with François Biselx, made the first ascent of the Grand Darrey, above the Saleina glacier.

In the Arolla district a number of first ascents were recorded including the Pointe des Genevois, the highest point of the Dents de Perroc, on 22 July by Adolphe Tschumi and William Kündig with Joseph Quinodoz, and the S ridge of the Central and highest peak of the Aiguilles Rouges d'Arolla by Tschumi and Quinodoz on 24 July. Two first ascents in the Dolomites are worthy of note. On 26 July G. Merzbacher, with Bonifacio Nicolussi, reached the summit of the unclimbed Campanile Alto di Brenta and in the Rosengarten group the highest of the Grasleiten peaks was climbed by Johann Santner, solo, on 23 September.

At the end of the season the summit of the Jungfrau was reached by a new route on 21 September when Fritz von Allmen, with H. von Allmen, Ulrich Brunner, Fritz Graf junior, Karl Schlunegger and Johann Stäger made the first ascent of the SW or Inner Rottal ridge. This ridge, which now has fixed ropes in its upper section, was one of the normal routes to the Jungfrau before the railway to the Jungfraujoch was constructed.

Outside the Alps the Hungarian explorer Maurice de Déchy made the second of his visits to the Caucasus. Devoting himself principally to photography and topographical work on this occasion he travelled without mountaineering companions, guides or an interpreter, exploring a number of glaciers and crossing three high passes along the chain.

In South Africa a remarkable climb was recorded in Cape Province when Gustav Nefdt, solo, succeeded in making the first ascent of Toverkop or Witch's Head (2202m) in the Klein Zwartberg range NW of Ladismith. This striking peak is crowned by a rock tower some 120m high and divided into two separate summits, and at the time the more difficult and slightly higher W summit was regarded as unclimbable. As Nefdt's assertion that he had left a sock on the summit was not believed he made a second ascent before a number of witnesses, helped two friends up the route with the aid of a rope and threw down the sock to the others below. The extent of the difficulties may be judged from the subsequent history of the peak; despite numerous attempts to emulate the feat more than 60 years were to elapse before the climb was repeated. Nefdt's extraordinary achievement, by a seemingly impossible route, encouraged others to explore the region and gave a considerable impetus to the development of South African climbing.

In conclusion, the present writer was interested, and somewhat reassured, to read the following extract from a contemporary account of mountaineering in 1885. 'Probably more mountains have been ascended in the past season than in any previous one. The number of mountains of all kinds, good, bad, and indifferent, was larger than it had ever been before and the holiday-makers filled every resort to overflowing. We have heard of a case in which two friends arriving at a mountain inn could obtain no better bed than the billiard table, and one was charged 5 fr. for sleeping upon it, and the other 4 fr. for sleeping under it. At another popular establishment visitors had to be quartered in the covered skittle-alley, in the laundry, and, worst of all, in the slaughter-house. The Engadin was even more crowded than usual, and Zermatt and the hotels on the Riffel were

crammed. So, too, Chamonix and the hotel at the Montenvert were more popular than ever, and the mountain inns at the Aeggischhorn and the Bel Alp could not accommodate all the applicants for rooms. Among tourists in general the passion for going up mountains seemed to be developed to a preposterous extent. Neither age nor sex was a safeguard against the epidemic. Old gentlemen, who in England rarely take more vigorous exercise than is involved in an ascent to the billiard-room of their club, insisted upon being dragged up snow mountains by stalwart guides, and spinsters of uncertain age were constantly demonstrating their vigour by planning excursions on the glaciers. Every schoolboy flourished an ice-axe, and even the minority of visitors who contented themselves with looking at the mountains from below seemed to think it necessary to make excuses for not doing what is now regarded as the duty of every visitor to the Alps. The ascents of all the most celebrated mountains were, we fancy, more numerous than ever before. The route up Mont Blanc became a well-trodden road, and the Matterhorn was ascended literally by scores of tourists.'

Perhaps things were not so different after all.

