
History



T H Somervell *Kampa Dzong*
1925. Pencil and bodycolour
Exhibited at the Redfern Gallery 1926
Private collection

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'Friends for a Lifetime'

A personal tribute to Anderl Heckmair
who died in February 2005, aged 98

*'First we were opponents, on the wall we became partners
and afterwards friends for a lifetime.'*

These were the words Anderl Heckmair used when he gave interviews or spoke to audiences. The course of the climb up the north face of the Eiger during the July days of 1938 is known to the readers of the *Alpine Journal*, therefore I shall concentrate on anecdotes of Anderl Heckmair to whom this tribute is dedicated. Even if you have not the faintest idea beforehand of the person's character, when you climb together for days under extremely difficult conditions, nothing can be hidden. Every weakness and all merits of the necessary comradeship will be revealed.

Though Anderl and his partner Wiggerl Vörg were much better equipped than myself and Fritz Kasperek, the Bavarians shared with us Austrians a conviction of the necessity for speed whenever possible. This was especially so while climbing the Spider, when suddenly a storm broke upon us with lightning and thunder, and communication became impossible. Heckmair and Vörg, who were already on the upper part of the open ice field, feared for our lives. They gave Kasperek, who had been hurt on his left hand by a stone, the rope and safeguarded both of us to the uppermost brim of the Spider.

Here we found a ledge as broad as a boot on which to bivouac. It was already the third night on the face for Kasperek and myself and the second for our friends. Wiggerl melted snow for hot coffee and the pot went shuttling back and forth, hanging from a snap link on the 3m-traverse line we had fixed between us.

Anderl had to keep his 12-pointer crampons on so as to get some kind of a stand in the ice. With his head resting on the broad back of Wiggerl he fell asleep. And no wonder, for the ramp had turned out to be more difficult than it looked. It took us several hours to overcome just two overhangs. It was typical of Anderl that after falling twice from an ice bulge to the belaying Wiggerl he simply got furious. The rebuff could not stop him, he immediately balanced himself up the ice-covered overhang and tackled the obstacle again.

The night was an ordeal in wet clothes. Fritz and I pulled the Zdarsky-sack over us. Through the little window in the tent-sack I could see that the weather was bad. There was an occasional small snow slide, which made a gentle swishing sound. But I wasn't worried about the weather. I was possessed of a great feeling of peace. Though the bivouac was the smallest endurable in terms of room, in spite of that it was the best. The reason was the rest, the peace, the joy and the great satisfaction that next day we would reach the summit. Of course I thought also of my ropemates and felt assured that they too were happy. Anderl slept the sleep of the just.

At dawn the rocks were white and it was still snowing. We lightened our rucksacks by throwing down the precipice that part of the equipment which had become superfluous. Among it was a whole loaf of bread. It was the point of no return. Anderl was leading and it became his day. All four of us were fit and confident but Anderl was the best. Thinking back, our euphoria might have been due to the fact that we were capable of producing the pain-killing endorphin. But this kind of morphine, as well as the word itself, was unknown to us. All we felt was a happy confidence.

We were all on one rope and knew that there was no other way but to go on. Again, as on all parts of the wall, the so-called Exit Crack turned out to be difficult. After one rope length I waited an endless time for the call to follow. I was on a small knob while 30m above stood Vörg, safeguarding Heckmair as he grappled with icy rock and snow-slides in the mists and driving snow. We couldn't see either of them.

Still no order came from Vörg to come up. We could here voices and short, muffled cries. What could have gone wrong up there? Then we could only hear a murmur of voices. At the same time a snow-slide came down on us. That was nothing unusual and we were quite used to it by now; but this wasn't white snow. It was stained red with blood. Definitely blood, because the next thing to come down was an empty bandage cover, followed by a small empty medicine bottle.

'Hallo!' we yelled. 'What's happened?'

No reply. We waited for what seemed an age, racked with doubt and anxiety. Then, according to schedule, another avalanche came down with savage force. Not till it had passed did we obtain relief in the shape of an invitation to move on up. Vörg was hauling on the rope so hard that it took my breath away. But I understood what this manhandling meant. No longer was there time to climb pitches neatly according to the rules. Time was now the watchword, if we were to escape from the face. And evidently something had happened up there to cause great delay.

When I reached Vörg's stance, a great weight fell from me. They were not seriously hurt. Vörg had a blood-soaked bandage on one hand, but Heckmair was already a whole rope higher up, on a tiny, exposed, rickety stance. Later on, he reported in his dry but lively way how Vörg came by his injury:

'The point of the ice-piton on to which I was clinging for dear life only went a little way in and so did the pick of my ice axe. Suddenly the piton came out, and at the same moment my axe gave way. If I could only have straddled, I could have kept my balance. But with my legs crossed, there wasn't a hope.

'I shouted, "Look out, Wiggerl!" Then I came off.

'Wiggerl was looking out all right. He took in as much rope as he could, but I bore straight down on him – not through thin air, for the gully was inclined, but in a lightning-swift slide. Just as I fell, I turned face outwards so as not to go head over heels.

'Wiggerl let the rope drop and caught me with his hands, and one of the points of my crampons went through his palm. I did turn head over heels, but in a split second I grabbed the rope-piton, which gave me such a jerk that I came up feet first again. I dug all 12 points of my irons into the ice – and found myself standing.'

As Heckmair bandaged Vörg's hand he urged his partner, who was deathly pale, to 'pull himself together, because it was now or never'. Anderl recalled:

'Just then a little phial of "heart drops" came to hand in the first-aid bag. That devoted woman Dr Belart of Grindelwald had made me take it along in case of emergency, remarking: "If Toni Kurz had only had them along, he might even have survived his ordeal."

'We were only supposed to use them in the direst need, though.

'On the bottle it said ... "ten drops". I simply poured half of it into Wiggerl's mouth and drank the rest, as I happened to be thirsty.'

(Quotations from: Andreas Heckmair, *Die drei letzten Probleme der Alpen*, Bruckmann Verlag, München, 1949.)

We climbed on with Anderl in the lead. Minutes passed into hours. Up we went, yard-by-yard, rope-by-rope. Eventually we gained a lodging on the wind-battered ridge and plodded our way over it to the summit of the Eiger. It was 3.30pm on 24 July 1938. We were the first to climb the north face of the Eiger from its base to its top.

Joy, relief, tumultuous triumph? Not a bit of it. Our release had come too suddenly, our minds and nerves were too dulled, our bodies too utterly weary to permit of any violent emotion. Fritz and I had been on the face for 85 hours, Heckmair and Vörg for 61 hours.

We had not had a hair's-breadth escape from disaster; on the contrary, our bond of friendship had throughout given us a firm sense of mutual reliance. And hard as the climb had been, we had never doubted its successful outcome.

The storm was raging so fiercely on the summit that we had to bend double. We just shook hands without a word and started down at once. But it wasn't easy. The descent was full of spite and malice. We kept on slipping and recovering ourselves. We suddenly felt tired, terribly tired. I had been given the job of finding and leading the way down because I already knew the route; I didn't always find the correct route immediately; then, my companions hauled me over the coals.

We could see how Anderl was collapsing, not in a physical but in a spiritual sense. Uncomplainingly, mechanically, he moved forward; but by now he had given up the leadership. The fantastic nervous tension under which we had lived for days and nights on that mighty face just had to induce a reaction. During those endless hours of danger he had excelled himself; now he could afford to be an ordinary man again, with all an ordinary man's weakness, susceptible and exposed to all the caprices of normal life.

For instance, take the matter of Anderl's trousers. The elastic band of his overall had broken. Anderl kept on pulling his trousers up and they kept on falling down again. This man, who had reacted with the speed of lightning when he fell in the icy gully and so saved us all from disaster, the man who had so often withstood the pressure of the deadly avalanches, who had climbed ice-bulges in a blizzard and, with unexampled endurance, fought a way to freedom for himself and his three team-mates – this same man was almost driven to desperation by a broken elastic.

So Anderl had given up the lead. He had every right to expect to be led down on the descent just as surely and safely as he had led up that appalling face; and he had every right to swear now when, racked by the exhaustion of a body exerted to the uttermost, he was asked to climb up a few hundred feet again because, in the mirk and the blown snow, I had led the wrong way down.

Suddenly there was a young boy in front of us, staring at us as if we were ghosts. His face expressed embarrassment, incredulous astonishment. Then he summoned up his courage to ask:

'Have you come off the Face?'

'Yes,' we admitted, 'off the Face!'

Then he turned downhill and ran away screeching in a high treble: 'They're coming! Here they are! They are coming!'

We had made an excursion to another world and come back, but we had brought the joy of life back with us. And now that earth was welcoming us home.....

Nearly 70 years have passed since then. At the end I think with sadness of Wiggerl Vörg, that strong, calm, magnificent climber, who fell in the war. Fritz Kasperek, a true child of the sunshine, fell to his death in 1954 when the summit cornice of Salcantay in Peru gave way.

As for Anderl Heckmair, who saved our lives, I would need a special chapter to sum up his merits.

Twenty years after climbing the *Nordwand* Anderl received the Gold Medal at the International Mountain Film Festival in Trento. Yet despite all successes and honours Anderl remained modest, likeable and reliable – a typical classical mountaineer. He satisfied his love for mountains on all continents, from the Karakoram to Africa's 'Mountains of the Moon'.

He had built up his life organically; however even the fame of a top climber diminishes. Anderl was wise to realise it and with the help of his wife Trudl he gradually changed from the pursuit of physical extremes to more cerebral interests – walking through the mountains with young people, teaching safety and explaining minerals and flowers.

He remained outspoken when asked his opinion and he also remained forever fond of those Swiss cigarillos with the good sounding name 'Toscanelli'. When I took him a packet of these strong Virginian 'Stumpfen' for his birthday, there, at the same time, was his personal physician from Oberstdorf. He gave Anderl several bottles of Schnapps saying: 'This strong alcohol will neutralise the strong tobacco.' Quick-witted Anderl remarked to me: 'You see, he is a really good doctor.' Anderl and Trudl came regularly to celebrate my birthdays, but with Anderl being six years older than me, they did not arrive for my 90th in 2002.

Then there came his funeral when a great crowd assembled around the grave of honour and among the mourners fittingly stood the mountain guides of Grindelwald with their flag, from the resort beneath the scene of Anderl's greatest climb. I remembered his words again:

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