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GENEVA-OXFORD UNIVERSITY CLIMBING MEET

BY R. SCOTT RUSSELL

A PART from an exceptional few, none of the present undergraduate members of our University mountaineering clubs had any opportunity for Alpine climbing prior to this summer. The war years broke the sequence of men with one or two years' experience who were able to organise their pre-war climbing meets with the aid of perhaps a single guide. Thus the clubs are faced with the problem not of resuming Alpine climbing but of making a completely fresh start. To do this, outside aid was clearly necessary and, realising this, the Oxford University Mountaineering Club decided to seek the aid of Swiss students. This led to the organisation of a combined climbing meet of the Club Alpin Académique de Genève and the O.U.M.C. which was outstandingly successful.

Had we known in advance the immense trouble to which the C.A.A.G. would put itself, we should have hesitated to approach them; as it was, we had some diffidence in asking Professor Weigle, the well known Geneva climber, whether a few Swiss students would be prepared to climb with us. The reply was a warm invitation for our party first to stay in Geneva as the guests of the C.A.A.G., and then to climb with them for a week at the Mountet hut above Zinal. One experienced climber would accompany each of our members. No detail was forgotten; the C.A.A.G. had plans in hand for purchasing food and assisting us in the buying of equipment. All that remained was for us to make our way to Geneva on the stated day. The chaos of

present day railway travel on the Continent caused us to arrive by a later train, though on a day earlier than we had intended. Yet the C.A.A.G. awaited us at the station, headed by M. Pierre Gaillard, President of the Club, and M. Jean Brechbuhl, the *Maître des sports* in the University. Brechbuhl, we discovered later, had interrupted his summer holiday to join our party. For thirty-six hours we were entertained in Geneva so magnificently that it was hard to concentrate on the serious matters of buying equipment, and indeed one member of the C.A.A.G. was discovered working late at night completing the nailing of boots which the vendor was too rushed to do. There were meals such as the majority of us had not seen for six years, and visits to the lake, as well as a morning at the University, where Professor Weigle showed us the remarkable instruments and equipment which Saussure had used on the first Mont Blanc climb. It is pleasantly appropriate that the relics of the first great physicist-mountaineer should be housed in the department whose head is at once an eminent scientist and a leading mountaineer. From his museum the Professor led us to the Wall of the Reformers and pointed out the 'face route' on Calvin which evoked the admiration of our most ardent roof climbers.

Originally there were to have been twelve in the Oxford party, but circumstances beyond our control reduced our number to nine. Of my companions only one, a New Zealander, had any previous experience of snow and ice, but the majority had climbed in the British hills. In physique they were variable and at the beginning of the meet our general standard of fitness was low. This set a rigid limit to the standard of climbing which could be undertaken, and the weather still further limited our scope, but in our week at the Mountet the majority of the party climbed the Zinal Rothorn, two of our members traversed the Obergabelhorn, and parties climbed the Trifhorn, Besso and Col Durand. More important than the summits reached was the manner in which the Geneva climbers taught our party to climb—correct rope work and a very high standard of safeguards on glaciers were insisted upon.

When our time with the Geneva party ended, we had planned to cross Col Durand to the Schönbühl hut. Uncertain weather, however, made us travel to Zermatt by the valleys instead. Snow fell heavily and an attempt to reach Castor from the Monte Rosa hut had to be abandoned early in the day on account of bad conditions. Thereafter the only climbing was the ascent of Dufourspitze by two of our party and a circuit of the Monte Rosa and Gorner Glaciers to the Stockhorn, which proved under the prevailing conditions to be an admirable training exercise. Heavy snow again fell and we returned to Zermatt. The meet now ended, and while the majority of the party returned to Geneva, one of our number, Malcolm Conway, a New Zealander, left us to climb with Pat Esquilant, a very experienced New Zealand climber, who had been with us for the last few days of the meet and had led the Dufourspitze party. News of the tragic ending of their venture reached us on our return to England and cast gloom over the

recollection of the ending of our meet. But, like so many other Alpine tragedies, it emphasises again the necessity for safe mountaineering, the encouragement of which had been our primary purpose.

On our homeward journey the C.A.A.G. again entertained us, and this gave the opportunity for a valuable discussion between Brechbuhl and Gaillard on the one hand and Geoffrey Hattersley-Smith, Treasurer of the O.U.M.C., and myself on the other. To our delight a week's experience of ourselves had not lessened the C.A.A.G.'s enthusiasm for further Anglo-Swiss ventures. Plans were discussed for future climbing and skiing courses, as well as for the visit of a Geneva party to England in 1947, to which our members look forward keenly. Our joint experience brought out a number of points which will make future ventures still more successful. From the viewpoint of the leader of a British contingent the following may be noted :

1. *Size and composition of party.*—A dozen should be regarded as a maximum, and membership should be confined to men who have shown on rock climbing meets in Britain that they have a real determination to become serious mountaineers. It would be unreasonable to expect the Swiss climbers to spend time training men to whom climbing is but a transient interest.

2. *Fitness.*—Whatever preliminary training is carried out, the British climbers will be considerably less fit than the Swiss, and our parties have an obligation to make themselves as fit as possible before a joint meet begins. This could best be done by a preliminary week in a Swiss resort of moderate altitude, but if this is impossible, a strenuous week in Wales or the Lake District immediately before going to Switzerland would be beneficial.

3. *Duration of meet.*—A week in combination with the Swiss followed by a week independently should work well.

4. *Standard of climbing.*—A higher margin of safety must be insisted upon than at other times, for the hazards are greater ; not only the safety of lives but the safety of valuable association is involved. A venture which would be perfectly justified for an independent party is not necessarily justified if the party are members of a meet. This restriction of objective is not necessarily a disadvantage, since the training value of an expedition bears little relation to the height of the peaks climbed. For this reason lesser mountains than those which surround the Durand Glacier might well make a better setting for a meet.

5. *Language.*—The Swiss were fully prepared for the monolingualism of the majority of our members. Our knowledge of each other's language was surprisingly adequate for most purposes. It is, however, important that the leader of a British party should be a really accomplished French speaker or have a companion with this qualification, so that detailed arrangements can be clearly made. I was fortunate in having two men in my party who were invaluable in this direction.

The value of Anglo-Swiss student climbing meets is so obvious that it does not need to be stressed. It goes far beyond mountaineering; the broadening effect on men's minds of easy and spontaneous relationships with their contemporaries of other nationalities is of inestimable value. Equally obvious is the fact that it is we who benefit most, and the Swiss who contribute most in this joint relationship. However successful we may make their visits to England, our indebtedness will remain; our presence with them must inevitably restrict greatly the achievements of their climbing holidays. This need not embarrass us, since fortunately they consider the restriction repaid by its results, but it is important to appreciate that it is a very real privilege to attend meets such as that held at the Mountet this summer.

The association which has developed between the Mountaineering Clubs of Geneva and Oxford holds possibilities of considerable advantages for both; one can only hope that in the future similar relationships may be developed between other Swiss and British Universities.

IN MEMORIAM

WALTER PARRY HASKETT-SMITH

1861-1946

It is almost as if the Needle had fallen. Haskett-Smith had so long occupied something of the same isolated and traditional position in English climbing history. Rarely can a single name be so justly associated with the beginnings of a sport. When he began climbing, the first phase of mountaineering, the opening up of the Alps, was coming to an end. The second had begun, with the group of the mountain explorers, Freshfield in the Caucasus, Slingsby in Norway, Conway in the Himalaya, Collie in Canada, carrying the new craft into distant ranges. Haskett rocketed in on his own, fascinated by the single adventure of climbing rocks. He found, of course, his elders, the Pilkingtons, Slingsby, John Robinson, Collie and others, already at work on the pleasant cliffs. He joined their company as an audacious and popular junior, and of their joint and joyous first ascents in the 80's the gallant veteran G. P. Baker can now be the only survivor. But to the older mountaineers, of the wider view, English rocks were then still only a happy preparation for greater mountains, a pastime in the off seasons. Haskett joined them; but he was never absorbed into their mountaineering company or into their exploratory enthusiasm. Agile, an all round athlete, very daring, self-confident, and strongly individualistic, he was out from the first for climbing pure and simple, for its thrill and adventure, and for the physical and nervous satisfaction in mastering it. He had an erect, supple style, making good use of the feet and of balance, and with always something of the amateur 'rush' in it.