

From the Diary of an alpine Guide

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FROM THE DIARY OF AN ALPINE GUIDE.

By CICELY WILLIAMS.

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I am very fortunate in my guide. He is the greatest guide in the Zermatt district, and one of the most famous in Switzerland. We will call him Melchior Meier. That is not his name, but he would prefer to remain anonymous. I myself am a very moderate climber, nevertheless I have climbed with Melchior since I was a child and he is prepared to take me around in spite of my limitations. Melchior's grandfather and father were guides before him. His father was particularly famous. From him Melchior learnt his craft. He took his son with him on the great Zermatt mountains before he was fourteen years of age. At sixteen Melchior led a climber to the summit of the Matterhorn despite the fact that he had never climbed the mountain before. He did not climb then as an official guide, of course, but the amateur was apparently willing to trust himself to this youngster.

In Switzerland a man may not become a guide until he is twenty-three years of age. Then he receives his Guide's Badge, Certificate, and the coveted Book — a kind of diary in which his climbers record ascents they have made with him. From the time he became a fully-fledged guide, Melchior has never looked back. He has climbed with royal princes and with ordinary folk from every country of Europe; his clients have included the most expert amateurs and the most inexperienced beginners; he has led elderly ladies and schoolboys and schoolgirls. And by all he is considered, as one can read in the pages of his book, a remarkable climber and a delightful companion.

These are stories culled from the pages of his book, which he lent me to read during rest-days in Zermatt, and others which he has told me as we have sat on the summit of a peak or on the crest of a pass.

An American arrived in Zermatt seven days after leaving New York. His one aim and object in making the journey was to climb the Matterhorn. He knew nothing about mountains and less about climbing, but no sooner had he come to his hotel than he was out in the village fitting himself up with all the latest equipment, including an enormous pair of climbing-boots. The American accosted Melchior in the street and asked him if he was a guide. Melchior replied that he did a bit in that way, whereupon the would-be climber requested him to take him up the Matterhorn. Melchior put the usual questions. What had he done before? Was he in training? The answers were anything but satisfactory. However, Melchior, with his vast experience and extraordinary strength, could probably pilot a paralytic to the top of the Matterhorn. He happened to be free, so he consented to go.

They spent the night at the Hörnli Hut, the sleeping-place for all Matterhorn climbers, and at two o'clock next mornning they roped up. It was pitch dark, and there was no moon. Melchior carried his lantern, and during the next three hours they ascended the great rocky ridge. The American was slow and clumsy and could see nothing but the step immediately in front of him, yet somehow he got along, buoyed up by the hope of achieving his ambition. At five o'clock they reached the Solvay Hut at a height of nearly

13,000 feet. 'We rest here for an hour,' announced Melchior. The amateur willingly agreed.

By six o'clock the Alpine dawn had broken. The whole scene was clear in the morning sun. Once again they roped up. The pitch immediately above the Solvay Hut is difficult. Melchior climbed the length of the rope in his usual effortless manner. 'Come up,' he called.

There was no movement on the rope. Not a sound could he hear. Melchior jerked the rope and called again. There was no response. He climbed down until he could see the hut. At the entrance stood the American clutching the doorposts with both hands and peering straight ahead with a fixed stare. Obviously something or other was amiss. Melchior returned to the hut. 'What's the matter?' he enquired.

The American drew his hand across his eyes and did not speak. Melchior pulled him into the hut and made him lie flat on his back. 'Arent you well?' he asked doubtfully.

The American uttered one word in a distant voice: 'Vertigo.'

In a flash the truth dawned on Melchior. While it was dark all was well, but when daylight revealed the true position the unfortunate American was finished. It was impossible to continue. By slow degrees Melchior guided his climber back down the ridge to their starting-place. Dejectedly the American returned to Zermatt. He had come all the way from New York, and now he must go all the way back.

The next story concerns the Dent Blanche, one of the hardest peaks in the Zermatt district. Four guides, each with a tourist were ascending the difficult Viereselgrat (Four Asses Ridge). The last party consisted of Melchior and a German lady climber. About halfway to the summit a tremendous thunderstorm developed, accompanied by a violent gale. It was quite impossible to retreat. They must go on to the summit. There is no more dangerous place in a thunderstorm than the rock ridge of a great mountain. It attracts every flash of lightning. Somehow Melchior was able to keep his climber just below the ridge, but he himself was obliged to stay on it in order to hold her on the rope. The head of his ice-axe was humming with electricity, still he dare not abandon it owing to the icy conditions. Three times electric-shocks knocked Melchior flat on his face, yet by a desperate effort he clung to the ridge and held his tourist securely. Suddenly he felt a great pain in his side. He was too pre-occupied to do anything about it, and gradually it be-



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came easier. It was not until the next day that he found a hole burnt through his clothes and a great scar on his side. The head of his ice-axe had been struck while he was carrying it on his belt.

'How far to the summit?' Melchior called during a lull in the storm to the guide ahead of him.

'Three hours,' came the brief reply.

Almost instantly, however, the leading guide called out: 'We are here! We are on the summit!'

None of the parties stayed there for more than a moment. The summit of the Dent Blanche is 14,318 parties hurried down the south ridge of the mountain as quickly as conditions would allow. When they reached the glacier, darkness overtook them. The guides realised that a bivouac was inevitable — it was already snowing hard. They found a crack in the ice, and into it Melchior wedged his climber. A young Austrian boy was pushed in on top of her. The four guides and the two remaining climbers roped themselves in a ring to the surrounding rocks. Through the night they divided up between them the little food they had and washed it down with a few drops of cognac. When the daylight came they were all encased in a film of ice. Gradually the guides rubbed and stamped a little life into themselves and their climbers. The snow had ceased. The sun came out. Stiff and cold they made their way painfully down to Zermatt.

'But the end of the story is good,' concluded Melchior with a grin. 'At night we all met for a great *Glühwein* party. The cold and anxiety were all forgotten then.'

The Zermatt Breithorn can be an easy or a difficult mountain. There are routes on it ranging from the simplest to the most severe. The most difficult of all these is a ridge named after Geoffrey Winthrop Young the great English climber, who, with his guides, was the first man ever to climb it, in the year 1906. This ridge was never attempted again until 1928, when four French climbers tried it without guides. All four fell to their deaths when within a few feet of the summit. In 1931 it was decided that for the honour of Zermatt this ridge must be scaled by Zermatt guides. Melchior Meier led the party, and took with him his cousin and his brother-in-law—all experienced guides. The ascent was arduous in the extreme, but they accomplished it successfully, and the honour of Zermatt was vindicated.

'Quite a family affair,' laughed Melchior when they returned in triumph to the village.

On this same mountain, the Breithorn, there is a hazardous and interesting climb known as the North Face. During the 1930's Melchior was frequently climbing with an elderly English lady of sixty-eight. She had taken up mountaineering late in life, but she climbed like an expert when she was with Melchior. If she attempted anything with another guide she never succeeded in finishing the climb. Melchior, who was proud of his 'Old lady,' as he called her, suggested to her that they should try the North Face of the Breithorn. The old lady was delighted, and accordingly they spent the night at the Gandegg Hut and set out next morning on the ascent. All went well, and the lady climbed with remarkable agility until they reached the place on the mountain where one must hurry for a short time because of the danger of avalanches and falling stones. It was precisely at this spot that the old lady's nerve failed her. 'We must go back,' she exclaimed. 'I can't do it.'

'Madame,' replied Melchior, 'it is impossible to go back. We have to go on to the summit.'

'I am ill,' whispered the lady, suddenly sitting down in the snow.

'Very well,' said Melchior unmoved, 'we will stay here, but we shall both be killed.'

'What do you mean?' came the despairing enquiry..

'I mean that anyone who stays on this spot will undoubtedly be swept away by an avalanche or falling stones.'

'Perhaps I will try to move.'

'I think it would be just as well,' replied Melchior nonchalantly, gathering up the rope.

As they moved steadily up towards the summit a great snow-cornice peeled off and thundered down across their resting-place. Neither spoke, and in a short time they were basking in the sun on the summit.

In 1925, only two years after he became a guide, Melchior made a record-breaking climb with a lady of very different years — a schoolgirl of fifteen. This young woman had already proved herself a very capable climber, and she and her father had been climbing with Melchior's father. The girl's heart was set on doing the Matterhorn, and her father had the same ambition for himself, but only agreed on condition that they had two guides each. Melchior's father decided on his son and two older men as most suitable for the expedition, and accordingly they all assembled at the hut at the base of the Matterhorn. During the night Melchior's father became ill with a chill and

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he realised that he would not be fit for the climb. At two o'clock in the morning he came to call the party. 'Sir,' he said to the Englishman, 'I am very sorry, I am not well enough to climb this morning. But, if you can trust your daughter with my son, I can trust my son with your daughter.'

And so the party roped up—the two older guides with the father; Melchior with the schoolgirl. By half-past seven both groups were having their breakfast on the summit. Shortly after eight o'clock Melchior and his young climber began the descent. Two hours later they arrived at the hut, and thus achieved the record for the descent.

'She was only fifteen,' explained Melchior when relating the story, 'but she is the fastest climber I have ever had on my rope before or since.'

Melchior's climbing companions can even be found among the animal kingdom. During the Second World War he was to take a Swiss girl up the Rimpfischhorn, nearly 14,000 feet, and down to the village of Saas Fee in another valley where they proposed to do some more climbing. The girl had with her her wired-haired terrier, Monty. Melchior would not hear of Monty making the journey by a long detour by train and motor-coach. 'He comes over the top with us,' he insisted.

Monty proved himself an excellent mountaineer. With an occasional lift or a push from Melchior he succeeded in reaching the summit without being roped. The descent on the other side, however, was more ticklish. Melchior made a tiny harness for Monty, and he was roped between the guide and the girl climber. At first he was terrified and refused to move, but Melchior, who has great persuasive powers with animals, coaxed him down, and after a few hundred feet Monty was tackling every problem with true canine courage. On the way across the glacier he cut his paws on the ice and eventually limped painfully though proudly into the Britannia Hut. Here Melchior made him four little shoes from bandages. By the morning his paws were healed, and it was a gay party of climber, guide, and dog who some hours later strolled into the village of Saas Fee in time for lunch.

'It was such a pity he couldn't write in my book,' commented Melchior regretfully.

Perhaps it is somewhat unfortunate to end these reminiscences with the story of the only accident that Melchior Meier has ever had with a climber, but it is an incident that remains in his memory more vividly than almost any experience, and as the ending was eventually happy it is worth recording.

On Friday, 13th July, some years ago, Melchior left Zermatt for the Matterhorn with a German lady climber. As they walked out of the village, an idiot boy rushed up to them and with many signs and gesticulations implored them to return to the village. Neither Melchior nor his climber were superstitious. They gave the fellow a kindly word, and continued on their way. In the early hours of the next morning they began the climb. The weather was excellent. Both were in great form. In fine weather the Matterhorn holds only one danger for good climbers—certain parts of the route are exposed to falling stones.

As they approached the shoulder of the Matterhorn, Melchior was ascending the ridge while his climber waited for the call to come up. Suddenly there was a crash and a tremendous pull on the rope. How he regained his balance and kept control of the rope

Melchior does not know—he only knows that he did do so. He looked round to see the climber hanging unconscious on the rope, blood pouring from her face. Melchior drew in the rope and pulled the woman on to a rock-ledge. She had evidently been struck on the lower part of the face by an enormous stone. Her face was terribly injured. Melchior was certain she was dead. Carefully he wrapped her in his jacket and jersey and began to shout for help. There were other parties on the mountain. Sooner or later someone must turn up. After an hour and a half the climber's lips began to move. Melchior realised that she was alive. Now he was more anxious than ever to get help. For another half-hour he called in vain, and then at last a party appeared.

The Zermatt guides are experts in rescue work. In a short time other guides had been fetched, a party was formed and roped up, with Melchior in the middle carrying his injured climber in his arms. Down the many thousand feet to the hut they made the hazardous way. At the hut there were waiting a doctor, more guides, and a stretcher. The climber was carried down to Zermatt and taken by train to Berne. For many months she remained in hospital there. But, on 13th July of the next year, Melchior and this same German lady left Zermatt for the Matterhorn. The following day they reached the summit and returned to Zermatt—safe, proud, and contented.

These, then, are some of the experiences that go to make up the life of an Alpine guide. It is a hard life, sometimes dangerous, usually intensely satisfying. Is it worth while? Ask Melchior Meier.

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