

Alpine Omens

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1952)**

Heft 1190

PDF erstellt am: **05.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-693290>

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ALPINE OMENS.

CICELY WILLIAMS.

This interesting article appeared in the August number of "Chambers Journal" and is herewith reproduced by courtesy of the Editor.

Is there some supernatural power which operates at times in the Alpine world? Are mountaineers possessed of a kind of sixth sense, an awareness of the invisible, which comes to their aid among the mountains? Or is all this merely superstition and the result of an over-anxious state of mind?

The average Briton, with characteristic common-sense, cares little for these things. It is probably just as well — we might never climb at all if we paid heed to every cautionary tale that is told. And yet there is something strangely compelling about some of these experiences. I cite three instances met with already in my own short climbing career.

A year or two ago a friend of mine, a quite hard-headed business man, set out from Zermatt to make the traverse of the Matterhorn. He was accompanied by his usual guide. Emil Perren, one of the best known of the Zermatt guides. They planned to go up by the ordinary route, via the Hörnli Ridge and down by the difficult Italian ridge, returning to Zermatt over the Théodule Pass.

The weather was not too promising when they left the Hörnli Hut, but conditions improved as they climbed. The sun rose in a cloudy sky thick mists swirled round the Matterhorn. Only the summit, from the shoulder upwards, was clear. Suddenly, as they approached the roof, Emil Perren stopped and touched his tourist's shoulder. 'See, the Brocken Spectre!' he exclaimed.

The Brocken Spectre is a phenomenon not confined to the Alps, although it is unusual to find it in lesser mountain-ranges. It was once observed, however, by no less a person than the late Frank Smythe in the Welsh hills during a winter climb. The spectre is caused by the relative position of the sun and banks of cloud. The climber sees his own shadow thrown on the clouds around him. It is said to be an eerie experience and most guides regards it as full of portent. Certainly Emil Perrin did. 'The Brocken Spectre!' he repeated. 'We are in for trouble.'

'Oh, nonsense!' replied my friend, fearing that Emil might suggest abandoning the climb. 'It's an extraordinary sight, I admit, but there's no reason to think we're about to be killed.'

'Certainly not,' replied Emil, 'but it's a warning. We must be very, very careful.'

They reached the summit of the Matterhorn, rested for half-an-hour, and commenced the descent down the Italian ridge. My friend was so engaged with the intricacies of the rock-work, the manipulation of the fixed ropes, and the many other hazards of this ridge that he entirely forgot about the Brocken Spectre and Emil's gloomy forebodings.

They had completed more than half the descent, and most of the difficulties were over, when he found himself seized by the arm and pushed under an overhanging slab of rock. He gazed at the guide in blank

amazement. 'Lie down,' commanded Emil. 'Don't move. Listen!'

From far above them came the distant rattle of some loose pebbles. Within a few seconds the rattle had increased to a roar and a vast cascade of stones and small boulders crashed on their sheltering slab of rock and bounced off into space. The bombardment continued for some minutes, and after it had passed they could still hear the distant thunder of the falling rocks as they continued on their way to the base of the mountain. 'You see' remarked Emil quietly, 'I was right. We can now get on with the climb.'

'Well, I'm glad you heard the fall in time,' answered the Englishman, continuing the descent with rather less zest than before, 'That would have been the end of us.'

'One cannot ignore the Brocken Spectre,' was Emil's brief retort.

After hearing this story from my friend I chanced to come on Emil smoking his pipe outside the Monte Rosa hotel. 'You had a good trip yesterday?' I inquired.

'It was a fine climb,' he replied, 'but we had trouble. After daybreak we saw the Brocken Spectre. I knew that was a warning. All day I was watching and listening. I heard a stone avalanche start high up on the mountain. We sheltered under a rock and it passed over us. And we came safely back to Zermatt.'

I looked at Emil. He is a fine guide, and it was quite obvious that every word he had said was sincere.

In 1936 Isidore Perren, one of the strongest guides in the Zermatt valley, was killed with his climber on the ordinary route on the Matterhorn. How the accident happened to such a first-class guide was a complete mystery. For many years his death was discussed in Zermatt by villagers and visitors alike. The name of Isidore Perren became a household word.

Two years after this accident my own guide, Bernard Biner, President of the Zermatt guides, arrived one evening at the Festi Hut with one of his regular tourists, a famous Italian climber. The Italian prefers to remain anonymous, so we will call him Benedict. They were bent on climbing the Täschhorn by the Teufelsgrat, one of the most severe ascents in

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the Zermatt district. It was not an unduly exacting climb for the Italian as, with Bernard, he had already achieved most of the major routes in the Alps, including the famous east face of Monte Rosa.

At this stage in the story it would be as well to mention that Bernard Biner is the least superstitious mountain man I have met. He is a cosmopolitan figure, who held an important international post during the War, and there is nothing of the simple Alpine peasant in his attitude to life. Benedict, the Italian, is a convinced atheist, inclined to treat the customs and superstitions of the people of the Visptal with a good deal of contempt.

The Festi Hut was, at that time, a primitive, dilapidated affair with no amenities, and after the climbers had eaten their supper they rolled up in their blankets for a few hours' sleep. Before midnight Benedict roused Bernard. 'There is someone tapping at the window,' he said.

'Rubbish,' replied the guide. 'Get some sleep while you can. We shall have to be up in a couple of hours.' He turned over and was soon asleep again.

They were due to get up at 2 a.m., but long before that Benedict called Bernard again. His face was white and his hands shook. 'I can't do the climb,' he announced. 'I've had a terrible experience.'

Bernard woke up finally. 'Whatever do you mean?' he asked. 'Tell me what has happened.'

'Twice I heard someone rattling the window,'

said Benedict, speaking very quickly and in a low voice. 'When I looked I saw Isidore Perren outside. He was pointing up to the Täschhorn. I went out and spoke to him. He kept repeating: 'Don't go on the Teufelsgrat to-morrow! Don't go on the Teufelsgrat to-morrow!' Then he disappeared.'

'And what did you do then?'

'I went to sleep, but I had a dream.'

'What did you dream?'

'I dreamed that Isidore was struggling with you. You were at the place on the mountain where the ordinary route and the route up the Teufelsgrat divide.' Benedict paused for breath and wiped the sweat from his face.

'Well,' said Bernard, 'go on.'

'He tried to take your lantern from you. He tried many times. Then the wind put out the candle. And all the while he was pointing towards the summit.'

'And *did* he take my lantern away?' asked Bernard.

'I don't know. I woke up.'

'You ate too much supper — that's what's the matter with you,' asserted Bernard coolly, adjusting his puttees in readiness for the climb.

'I can't go, I tell you,' moaned the Italian.

Bernard continued his preparations. 'Come on,' he urged. 'Get ready now. Be a man! Think how often you've laughed at the village people about their superstitions.'

Unwillingly Benedict began to pack his rucksack. 'All right,' he said morosely. 'I'll come, to please you. But I shan't enjoy it'

Unnoticed by the Italian, Bernard folded up his candle-lantern, put it in his rucksack, and took out his electric-torch. With Benedict in such a state, he would not run the risk of any chance coincidence.

Soon after two o'clock they left the hut. It was still dark when they reached the position on the mountain where the routes divide. Bernard shortened the rope between himself and his climber and turned towards the Teufelsgrat. As he did so, his electric-torch flickered and went out. He shook it violently, but there was no response. Nonchalantly he turned to Benedict. 'I'll use your torch, I think,' he said, holding out his hand. Slowly the Italian handed over his torch. Bernard switched it on. It refused to light. Several times he tried, but nothing happened. He glanced at the terrified man trembling beside him. He was loath to pay attention to the supposed warning, but he had not only himself to consider. 'All right,' he said quietly, 'we'll leave the Teufelsgrat. Let's go up by the ordinary route on the face.' Benedict turned round with alacrity. Never had a climber looked more relieved.

They reached the sharp summit of the Täschhorn in good time and in excellent weather. The sun blazed down from a clear sky. Only on the Dufourspitze of Monte Rosa there hung a tiny black cloud, no larger, in fact a good deal smaller, than a man's hand.

After a rest they began the descent. When they were half-way down the face of the mountain black clouds suddenly raced across the sky; the sun was blotted out; a curious green light glowed on the peaks; the wind rose with a roar to a mighty gale.

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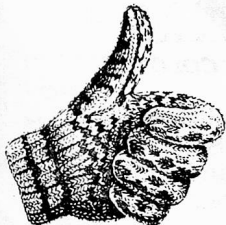
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Somehow Bernard fought his way down the rest of the route and brought his climber in safety to the Festi Hut. That storm is remembered by mountaineers all over Europe. Never has a storm broken so rapidly. It raged from the Austrian Alps to Dauphiné, and it continued unabated for three days.

When Bernard told me this story I did not at first understand its true significance, having never climbed the Teufelsgrat. 'Of course, a ridge would be much more exposed in a storm,' I suggested, remembering some of my own experiences on lesser peaks.

Bernard laughed. 'I shouldn't be here to tell you the story if we'd been on the Teufelsgrat,' he said. 'It's a much longer climb. We should not long have left the summit when the storm broke. I could never have got down the Teufelsgrat in that weather. It would be impossible for any climber. Nor could a rescue party have got up to us. The storm went on for three days, remember.'

'You would have been lost?' I asked.

Bernard nodded. 'Without a doubt. It's a hundred per cent certain that we should have been killed.'

'And do you believe that Benedict's dream really was a warning?'

Bernard smiled thoughtfully. 'I just don't know,' he replied, 'but I often think about it.'

The third story concerns the death, last summer, of the famous guide Otto Furrer. As in the first story, the incident is connected with the Italian ridge of the Matterhorn. All mountaineers and skiers, as well as many non-climbers, will have read of the tragic circumstances of Otto's death. Seldom has any guide met such an undeserved fate.

Otto was killed on Thursday, August 26th, by the breaking of the fixed rope called the Grande Corde, some distance below the summit of the Matterhorn on the Italian ridge. The catastrophe seems even more deplorable from the fact that only on the previous Monday Otto had remarked to Elias Julen, another Zermatt guide, that the Grande Corde needed renewing. That incident, however, remarkable though it is, is not the point of this particular story.

I arrived in Zermatt a few days after the accident and Bernard Biner gave me the following account.

On the night of Wednesday, August 25th, there were, at the Matterhorn Hut, four parties whose objective was the Italian ridge. One party was composed of two guides from St. Niklaus with a Swiss girl of seventeen; another consisted of an Englishman with a guide from Randa; the third was Bernard Biner and a young Englishman from Cambridge; and the fourth was Otto Furrer with Frau Erlanger, a well-known Swiss lady climber with whom he climbed regularly every season.

The weather was good, and all four parties met on the summit and rested there for half-an-hour. Bernard was struck by two things as they sat on the summit exchanging anecdotes. One was the particularly friendly and happy state of mind of Otto Furrer, whom he had known, of course, all his life. The other was the distracted demeanour of Frau Erlanger. In Bernard's hearing she said to Otto: 'Otto, I have climbed with you for twenty-one years and I have never been frightened before. But to-day I cannot bear to

look down the Italian ridge. It terrifies me. I could not sleep all night for thinking about it.'

Otto took this remark with his usual cheerful and philosophic calm. 'Well, we can't go back now,' he said lightly, 'so we have to go down the Italian ridge.'

The guides from St. Niklaus and their girl climber went first. Otto and Frau Erlanger followed. The guide from Randa and his tourist went next. Bernard Biner and his companion brought up the rear.

Not far below the summit the guide from Randa called to Bernard: 'Something has happened. I see the St. Niklaus guides climbing up again.' Bernard joined him and went ahead down the ridge. He reached a point from which the Grande Corde can be seen. More than two hundred feet below he saw Otto and Frau Erlanger lying on the rocks; the St. Niklaus guides were bending over them; and — the Grande Corde had disappeared.

Bernard Biner and the guide from Randa upheld, at that terrible moment, all the best traditions of the great Alpine guides. Without fuss or excitement they replaced the missing fixed rope by knotting their own ropes. The Randa guide went down first; Bernard lowered the tourists to him, and finally came down himself. The whole operation took over an hour. When they reached the other party Otto Furrer was already dead; Frau Erlanger was unconscious.

It fell to Bernard Biner to assist the doctor to bring Frau Erlanger back from Breuil to Zermatt by car. This involved a long detour and the crossing of the Col de la Forclaz. It was not until nearly seventy hours after the accident that Frau Erlanger completely recovered consciousness and realised the full extent of what happened. As the car was passing through Sion in the Rhone valley on the journey back to Zermatt she whispered to Bernard: 'Bernard, do you remember what I said to Otto on the summit of the Matterhorn?'

'Yes,' Bernard replied sadly, 'I remember.'

No doubt other stories of this type could be told by many mountaineers. It seems impossible to decide just how much importance, if any, should be attached to them. So far, I am glad to say, I have never been the recipient of an apparent warning. But, if such a thing were to happen to me, I am inclined to think that I might pay considerable attention to it.

TROST.

Wenn dich ein bittres Weh befällt,
Wenn dir ein Glück vorübergleitet,
Dann schau, wie in der grossen Welt
Ja alles blutet, alles leidet.

Tritt hin, wo schwer im Todeskrampf
Ein Mensch liegt auf dem Sterbebette,
Und sieh, wie Liebe, Hass und Kampf
Des Lebens ungeheure Kette.

Dann wird dein Herz einmal
Sein Weh mit andern Augen messen,
Und wird bei Andrer Todesqual
Sein eignes, kleines Leid vergessen.

Rudolph Riesenmey.