

A first climb: the Matterhorn

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A FIRST CLIMB: THE MATTERHORN.

By ASHENDEN.

This interesting article was recently published in "Blackwood's Magazine". We reproduce same by courtesy of the Editor.

After long years of illness, an improvement in health allowed me in 1949 to visit the Promised Land of the great peaks. Well-meaning friends had wanted to warn me off the larger centres, and suggested my making a start in some quiet retreat like Cogne or Binn. But I was already nearly thirty, and the rumblings of strife on an uneasy planet made me wonder if another chance would be given; also, after many set-backs and disappointments, there seemed to me to be no guarantee that the improvement in health was permanent.

So I decided on Zermatt, base for the Matterhorn, and scene of some of the most vivid pages in the history of mountaineering, to which we as a nation have made the outstanding contribution.

On my way to Switzerland from Turkey I fell ill at Lake Como, and an anxious Italian doctor in Menaggio sat up with me for part of a night, to give injections and discourage me from further activity; and after learning my medical history, he told me I would not be able to do much for several weeks.

Ten days later, wearing a rope for the first time, I was moving gently up and down the gnarled rocks of the Riffelhorn, in the competent care of Alfons Franzen. Drawn into the lungs, the cool air of 9,000 feet sent fresh blood coursing through the body; a surge of energy began to revive my system. All round about in the crystal atmosphere stood the vast congregation of peaks — the Zermatt giants — whose slopes and ridges had been the scene of such great aspirations and endeavours, of many a hard-fought struggle, and of much poetic writing. In front of them all, set in splendid isolation, towered the Matterhorn.

Alfons looked at me curiously, perhaps pondering on the strange economy of effort which I had shown. Already, even on the first day, I was experiencing that subtle sense of rhythm, whose cultivation is one of the joys of the mountain day.

It was July 30th.

"What you say if we start tomorrow?" asked Alfons. "I meet you at Hörnli about six. You walk up slowly from the morning."

I made a quick calculation. August 1st, on which we should therefore be climbing, was National Day, when all Zermatt is in fiesta: it would be a pity to miss the festivities through being tired out. But before I had time to object, I was surprised to hear my voice say "Splendid. I meet you at Hörnli tomorrow night."

We careered down the 3,000-foot descent to Zermatt in eighty minutes. Fraulein Eberhardt, the charming manageress, met us at the door of the Monte Rosa Hotel. "And how did it go?" she asked. "Fine," I replied. "Tomorrow I'm leaving for Hörnli," and went upstairs to order the necessary food from Mme. Casanova. Mme. Casanova smiled indulgently. "The Matterhorn, sir? Yes, of course. We will prepare special food for you and the guide." In her thirty years at the Monte Rosa, she must have

seen more climbers depart and return, and attended to their food, than almost any other person alive.

The next day I set off from Zermatt at 8.30 in the morning. After a mid-day lunch at the Schwarzsee Hotel (8,600 feet up) I started on the everlasting zig-zags up the shale-and-rock cliff to the Hörnli Belvedere. It was a warm afternoon and the roar of the glacier torrents was very loud. Below the path lay a small lake, enclosed by moraines and fed by the Furggen Glacier. Stones and ice were falling with a sporadic plonk and crash into its waters, and the occasional grate and creak of the ice and the clatter of pebbles on the glacier made the whole scene eerily alive. The forces of rock and ice, erosion and decay, were strongly at work, with a metabolism heightened by the warm sun. Drove of climbers passed me on the way up from the Schwarzsee to the Belvedere. All the people in the world seemed to be bound for the Hörnli. And everyone was in a hurry. I noticed despairingly the speed at which people were mounting, and wondered how I should ever do the Matterhorn in such company on the morrow.

Eventually, at 5.30 in the evening, I reached the Hörnli and stepped into the Belvedere. My room was cosy and even comfortable, with a view on to Monte Rosa and the Breithorn. At this height of 10,800-feet the air was thin and keen; the breeze blew sharply. One felt immensely far from Zermatt, away from all the world, set on a high ledge, and almost on a level with the great peaks themselves. The evening shadows lengthened, and the sunlight on the upper snows began to assume a warmer tinge.

About half-past six Alfons and another guide from Zermatt arrived. They had raced up from Zermatt in about three hours. Even Alfons seemed a little the worse for wear.

The air grew too cold to remain out any longer, and the Matterhorn, towering up above us, had retired into menacing shadow, with only a single ice-slope on the north wall still lit by the sun. I looked up at the cliffs and pinnacles of the ridge, and then turned into the Belvedere dining-room. It was already dark in there and the room was lit by a dim lamp. People's faces looked mysterious and blurred. There was a French party, already busy consuming their supper. Two young Americans of my age and three younger Swiss lads, who seemed to form a party of five, were ensconced in one corner. A sardonic gentleman with strongly aquiline features sat silently watching us with an amused twinkle in his eyes. He was grey-haired and rather distinguished. *Un vieux loup des montagnes*, I thought.

The hostess came in and pushed the six of us into an adjoining room, where they served a large three-course supper. I ate a good deal and felt the better for it. The others ate very little. The atmosphere was one of subdued excitement. We talked hardly at all of the Matterhorn.

Alfons popped his head round the door about a quarter to eight, and insisted on rushing me off to bed. He also doled out three "pills to make me sleep" in the privacy of my room and expatiated on the virtues of proper repose. I had everything laid out ready for the morrow. The water-bottle containing cold water, sugar and Ovaltine. Chocolate in various pockets. Altimeter, camera and the rest. By the bed were matches and a candle. I lit the candle,

then slipped under the sheets, hardly undressing at all.

Voices came up from the platform outside. I heard a murmur of admiration. So I got up and opened the windows. All the high snows, from the Täschhorn and the Dom to the Lyskamm and the Breithorn, past the vast snow-fields of Mont Rosa, were stained the most vivid pink — burning in the rays of a sun that had long departed from Hörnli and had said good-bye to Zermatt in the valley a good three hours before. The sky beyond was a luminous green, almost transparent, and the snows glowed like fire, as if lighted from within. I had had the luck to witness an exceptionally fine manifestation of the famous Alpine Glow. No one who has not seen this from high up in the mountains can have any idea of what it is like.

I took two of the tablets and sank almost immediately into a log-like sleep. At midnight I woke up and impatiently lit the candle to look at the time. Through the curtains I could see the glister of stars. I got up to open the window and gazed out. It was ice-cold. The whole firmament sparkled with stars, vividly and sharply pricked in the black sky as I had never seen them before. There was no moon, but even the dark, crouching form of the Matterhorn showed snow and rock, light and shade. The world was locked in the silent rigour of frozen, windless air. Not a sound came through the night but the voice of the glacier torrent, muffled and far below.

I took the third pill and sank into another bout of sleep.

At 3 a.m. there was a clattering of boots and a banging of doors; hoarse voices and the sound of people blundering about in unlighted passages. I dressed in a flash, made a pretence at washing, fastened on various bits of equipment and sped downstairs for breakfast. It was still black outside and the stars blazed with undiminished brilliance.

A veil seems to have descended over the time between three and four that morning. I remember breakfast with the two Americans and the three Swiss. Scalding coffee and rolls; the enigmatic grey-haired gentleman in the corner; the grunted remarks about the weather and the number of ropes due to go up that day. It seemed that at least fifty people were counting on making the ascent. One of the Americans asked me how I slept, and I said "Pretty well, thank you." There were some raised eyebrows and no one seemed to take me very seriously. It appeared that none of them had slept much, what with the height and the excitement. Naturally I refrained from mentioning Alfons' thoughtful aid to my slumbers.

At 3.30 I was ready to start, but all the guides were at mass in the small adjoining room where we had had supper. I looked in and saw an altar by the guttering light of candles, and the muffled forms of the guides. The bells rang and the priest intoned. (Where he had come from I do not know.) Zermatt is deeply religious and strictly Roman Catholic. No guide will climb on a Sunday.

This dim nocturnal mass somehow heightened the idea of mystery and unknown which, perhaps because of the nearness of the Matterhorn, had enveloped everything since I arrived at the Belvedere. And now here were the guides, who would shortly be leading us on the spires and ridges of the mountain, com-

muning with God before starting. It was all a little strange and outside ordinary experience — almost unreal.

I descended to the kitchen, where I had a rendezvous with Alfons. He clattered down at ten to four and got out the nylon rope from his rucksack. We roped up in the light of a solitary candle, and then stepped into the rigid coldness and silence of the night. A faint, greenish pallor was filtering over the peaks in the east, and the stars were less vivid. Dawn was breaking.

Already some parties had gone ahead. A lamp was swinging thinly in front, casting a circle of orange light in the snow below the first wall of rocks. The Matterhorn loomed up, vast and almost sinister against the stars, pregnant with the unknown, with a sense of challenge, and with delight. This was the most glorious moment — before we had started; while all was dark and cold; with the Matterhorn untrod-den before me. I had known always, since the age of twelve, that some day I should climb it — and now, here it was, like a date with destiny.

Alfons led on. We crossed the frozen snow, and the particles crunched musically under our feet. Then came a piece of rock and an awkward traverse to the right. It was difficult to see, and the whole caravan of parties was held up as one climber after another hesitated and struggled to worm his way round. A tight rope and a "Come on", from Alfons. I slithered past.

I cannot remember very much of the first hour after this. We were mounting swiftly and surely on easy rocks, and Alfons scarcely ever paused. We climbed in unison, apparently without precautions, and several slower parties were left behind. The light grew stronger, and slowly the panorama of peaks was breathed from formless shade into the life and colour of day.

At 5 a.m. I looked up after tackling a steeper pitch, and saw the topmost tower of the Matterhorn bathed in waves of orange light. It blazed like a huge torch, the only part of the visible world that had received the embrace of the sun. Even the guides paused to look. Owing to the exceptional clearness of the atmosphere the effect was more than usually vivid that morning.

We were now getting near the Solway Hut. I told Alfons we were near and gave him the height. "You know better than me," he laughed. Built after three years of strenuous effort, the Solway lies perched in a nook on the ridge, protected from stones and wind, and only 1,600 feet below the summit. It stands as a monument to the devotion and persistence of its builders, and has saved not a few lives. Only climbers in distress, or unable to get off the mountain before nightfall, are supposed to use it for sleeping.

We came to a steep and rather difficult cliff. There was an English girl in a fix at the bottom, being directed from above by her leader on the rope. She stepped aside courteously to let Alfons pass. I turned and thanked her, adding "So much traffic on the road you really need a policeman to come up here and regulate it!"

Alfons tugged the rope. "Come on. I hold you if you fall." The rope tightened. I swung out and found myself working up easily and with little effort. "Wonderful," said Alfons, "you do wonderful well." Another few steps and we were at the Solway. Several

people had already arrived and were sitting eating on the front platform. Alfons pointed to a flat rock and bade me sit down. It was a breezy position and I had never before seen slopes of such steepness and height from above.

We had taken one and three-quarter hours to the Solway and I knew that this was very fast. After ten minutes Alfons was up. "We go now. Too many people on the mountain today."

After the Solway its gets more difficult. We climbed almost vertically up one of the gendarmes of the ridge, and then along the crest almost to the Shoulder. I remember vaguely a succession of spires and pinnacles, of views down on to the precipices of the North Wall, unlighted, austere and tragically cold, with frozen couloirs of vertiginous length and steepness, and the dull glisten of ice. Sometimes Alfons would stroll unconcernedly across a level tongue of rock with drops on both sides of frightening aspect. "Come on," he remarked when I hesitated, "I hold you if you fall." I would go across on all fours. "No, no, not like that," he would laugh. "Stroll along, just like you cross the street. It is so much safer."

We came to the Shoulder, perhaps the most sensational part of the climb. Above it, the final tower bounds up a clear 800 feet, and below, the precipices of the North Wall fall awesomely to the Zmutt Glacier. We looked across to the Furggen Shoulder, under the vast overhangs of "The Last Step"; I marvelled at the daring of men like Guido Rey and Benedetti and recalled with approval the historic decisions taken by the Mummery-Burgener and Ryan-Lochmatter-Young parties at this point. The guides

were all very excited because an attempt was being made on the North Wall that day, and they kept peering over the edge to see if they could make out the climbing party. But we never saw them.

All the way up Alfons had warned me about dislodging stones. With so many parties on the mountain one had to take special care to avoid sending anything down which might kill or maim those below. I paused on the Shoulder to photograph parties lower down. The American and his guide were next below us. Apparently we had outdistanced everyone else.

The first fixed rope came into view. It was on a gentle slope, not more than 30° perhaps, but the rock was smooth and treacherous. Alfons led and I clambered up hauling with my arms. Then more and more fixed ropes came into view, and steeper and steeper rocks. I did not care for the ropes at all, and would have preferred to climb without them, but this would have delayed us a great deal. My arms ached. "Use your feet," said Alfons. "You tire yourself like that." Then I got the hang of it and stood almost vertically, letting the legs do most of the work on small holds.

Eventually the fixed ropes ended and the slope began to ease off. I glanced at the altimeter. Only two and fifty feet to the top. Until then I had the sensation of floating up in an almost effortless rush of movement. My mind was outside itself, beyond the body, buoyed up in a trance-like detachment and impervious to any quiver of fatigue. The intense joy of achievement, the feeling for beauty and physical rhythms — not unlike the sensation of dancing — had transported me to the furthest heights of elation. But now the thin rarefied atmosphere began to tell on

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the lungs. More breaths were needed to accomplish the same movements. Alfons pressed on. We passed thin flakes of snow and ice.

Then a long sweeping ridge of snow, shaped like a scimitar and fluted to a sharp edge of ice, hove into view.

The summit ridge of the Matterhorn.

All those who tread these last two hundred yards of snow, thrown high into the sky, isolated from all the other great peaks and hung far above the world, know the exhilaration of a great moment; but for me standing there as a beginner on his first peak there was also the satisfaction of a dream realised.

We reached the snow, and mounted the path beaten down on the Swiss side. This is a few feet from the knife-edge of ice overlooking the precipices of the Italian face. On the ultimate point of the ridge, a solitary female figure and her guide were calmly munching their second breakfast. "Congratulations," I shouted, and waved our greetings to them. Alfons took my hand. "You have done wonderful well," he said; "I congratulate you."

We retraced our steps to the eastern summit and sat down to eat on some flat rocks overlooking the Italian side. It was now half-past seven, and we had reached the top at 7.25, less than three hours and a half after leaving the Belvedere.

The view was one of extraordinary breadth and completeness. The air was so brilliantly clear that I think that some of the peaks in Italy which we saw must have been over a hundred and fifty miles away. I turned to Alfons and pointed out the principal peaks to him questioningly: "Mont Blanc? The Dent d'Hérens? Dent Blanche? Weisshorn? Jungfrau, Eiger, Mönch? Finsteraarhorn?" I knew their shapes and positions already so well from maps and photos that it was not difficult. Mont Blanc looked so close that you could almost lean over and touch it; the more we gazed the farther we realised we could see, and then we relapsed into silence.

The American and his guide, Emil Perren, joined us, and then we saw more and more climbers crowding up behind. I remember the American eating an orange and spitting the pips out: "One for Italy and one for Switzerland," he kept saying as they went, alternately left and right over the Italian and Swiss sides.

We remained on the summit for almost three-quarters of an hour. The prisms of light poured down from the sky, and the vault of space above was deep-

ened to a rich and lovely blue. Round us stood the immense congregation of peaks, pointing their upper snows into the regions where now we sat; the lower glaciers and valleys slumbered in a haze of thicker air. Even Zermatt seemed only a memory, part of the different world of plains. The clear, sword-like brilliance of the summits filled my mind. I knew the fullness of living. I had climbed the Matterhorn.

On the descent, being first down, I thought that I would have the satisfaction of making the route. But Alfons had a proper sense of his responsibilities, and constantly gave directions. "Left... Right... Traverse," or "Be careful."

We came to the fixed ropes again and here met a number of slower parties still coming up. I went down the ropes at a good rate, sideways to the rock, with the body almost horizontal, which was quite wrong. After I had reached a stance Alfons would follow in a series of tigerish leaps. The rope seemed barely to touch his hands, and he would sweep down from ledge to ledge with a "Zomp — Swish — Zomp" of his vibram rubber soles, descending perhaps five times as fast as I.

The procession of spires and outcrops on the ridge handed us on from one to the next; I remember finding them quicker to negotiate than on the way up. A final pitch before the Solway caused some delay, and then we unroped and reached the Hut about an hour after leaving the summit. The air was warm in this windless and sheltered corner; the rays of the sun falling untempered through the upper atmosphere made it too hot to remain outside on the platform.



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Alfons and I entered and sat down at the table inside. "Here we have a rest," he said. "You come down very fast." The Solway has benches round a table and bunks for about six or eight people. A plaque commemorates its builders. I felt satisfaction at being somewhere I had read so much about, and my mind went back to all those climbers who had found salvation from wind and weather within these narrow walls. Half an hour passed very agreeably before we roped up and took off for the remainder of the descent to the Belvedere.

Presently we were at the ruins of the old Solway Hut, amid a debris of loosely tilted slabs and rock. Alfons enjoined caution. I looked down to the glacier below and understood why. Beneath us stretched a shallow couloir, and the whole of its surface was coated with a thick powdery scum of yellow dust left by the rocks as they had crashed their way down. The ice at the bottom was pitted with blocks of stone, and spattered with the filth of boulders and rubble. It was a sinister sight.

We passed by and were soon on the easier rocks leading to the Belvedere. In the light of day I could now see almost a path going down through the crags. An hour and twenty minutes after leaving the Solway we were once more standing on the Belvedere platform amid a throng of gazers through the telescope, and visitors who had walked up from Zermatt. A cloud had veiled the top of the mountain, and a fresh breeze was sweeping across from the west. Apart from aching shoulders, I was untired.

At the Schwarzsee on the way down to Zermatt I met Canon Thornhill, the warmth of whose greeting

gave me more pleasure than the combined congratulations of the other company at the hotel. More than anyone else he had encouraged me to sally forth; for with the intuition of a spiritual personality he had divined all there was to know without being told.

That evening was gala night, in celebration of Swiss National Day. The Monte Rosa put on a special menu. There were flowers everywhere, and lanterns burning. Every window and balcony was decorated with lights. Miss Eberhardt and Mme. Casanova welcomed me back to the fold with appropriate satisfaction.

Before we had ended our meal, the fireworks started outside; then a procession of all the citizens of the commune went by carrying Chinese lanterns on sticks, and walking behind their band. Roman Candles were popping off in the Zermatterhoff Gardens. On the hilltops and crags above Zermatt bonfires were burning; coloured illuminations had even been put among the cliffs behind the village — some of them over a thousand feet up.

There was a ball at the Victoria Hotel. I went and danced in an atmosphere of infectious carouse until half-past one. After twenty-three hours on my feet and physical efforts that would have seemed unimaginable before, I reached my bed at the Monte Rosa at 2 a.m. The four-thousand-foot climb and the nine-and-a-half-thousand-foot descent seemed to have made very little physical impression and provided striking proof that feeling, if sufficiently intense, can reverse the natural laws and extend almost indefinitely the margin of the possible. Perhaps, though, feeling of this kind only comes once or twice in a lifetime.

LOST

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