

April in Zermatt

Autor(en): **Williams, Cicely**

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In die Tage einer immer länger werdenden Sonnenscheindauer fallen noch wesentliche Wintersportanlässe und bilden festliche Dominanten des Frühlingsskifahrens. Unser Bild berichtet von einem Gornergrat-Derby in Zermatt, das dieses Jahr vom 16. bis 18. März durchgeführt wird.

D'importantes manifestations sportives, événements marquants du ski de printemps, se déroulent en Suisse alors que le soleil brille avec plus d'éclat sur les pentes enneigées. Sur notre photographie, le Derby international du Gornergrat, à Zermatt, qui aura lieu cette année du 16 au 18 mars.

Zermatt has been a second home to me ever since I was a child. The mountains, the people, the village—they're all my friends. When I'm there I feel happy and safe and peaceful. But, like so many other people, I've always been to Zermatt in the summer—partly because I wanted to climb, partly because that has always seemed the best time to take a holiday. And after all, it was as a summer mountaineering centre that Zermatt first became famous. But last year circumstances made it necessary for me to be in Switzerland during April and I just couldn't resist the temptation to take a short trip to Zermatt. I was told that the weather was good and that the ski-ing was excellent, so I packed my rucksack and set off.

As the mountain train hurried on its way up the familiar valley I began to be anxious. Was I really wise to come? Would Zermatt in April be anything like the happy, friendly place that I knew so well in August? The winter season was over—would the hotels be shuttered and the streets deserted? On the other hand, if it was full of skiers, would it have become modern and sophisticated? Would it have lost the simple charm that for a hundred years has made it the Mecca of mountaineers? I almost wished that I hadn't decided to come—it would be such a pity to spoil my own special picture of Zermatt.—I needn't have worried. Zermatt in April is beautiful—incredibly beautiful. The shops and cafés were busy and gay; in the narrow street happy crowds of mountain people jostled each other—their faces as tanned as if it was mid-summer. The only difference was that instead of ice-axes tucked under their arms they carried skis over their shoulders. And—most important of all—it was still *Zermatt!* The spirit of Whymper and the great pioneers pervaded every corner of the village. The indestructible charm, the indescribable atmosphere of Zermatt remained quite undisturbed; the Matterhorn, clothed in the white robes of winter, still reigned supreme.

Snow had disappeared from the village but it still lay close at hand among the pine trees in the Riffelalp forest. The lower slopes of the hills, always so green in summer, were thickly powdered and the great mountains were whiter and seemed perhaps even more beautiful than ever before.

Bernard Biner, my guide and friend since my school days, now President of the Zermatt Guides, took charge of me as he does each time I arrive in Zermatt. We walked out on the Schwarzsee path beyond the village to find a field carpeted with tiny white crocuses, the first promise of spring; below the path the Visp stream, released from its winter prison, was already singing its summer song. From the Wiesti meadows near the station the chair-lift carried skiers up to Sunnegga. From there a ski-lift whisked them up to Blauherd, and down they rushed to the village, and back again to the peak for another, and yet another, run down.

Nei giorni che già si fanno sempre più lunghi, sui monti svizzeri gli sports invernali danno ancora luogo a importanti manifestazioni che si affermano quali festose note dominanti dello sci primaverile. La fotografia mostra un Derby del Gornergrat, che Zermatt quest'anno ospiterà dal 16 al 18 marzo.

I managed to find a seat in the Gornergrat train, already crowded with eager skiers. In summer I know every stage of the journey—in April I could scarcely believe my eyes. As we crossed the Findelen viaduct I missed the thundering roar of the waterfall—it hung silent, frozen in mid-air, like an immense curtain of ice. I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming! The warm, comfortable little train hummed on its way up the steep track; glistening snow fields spread out on either side. This was a new world to me; on the slopes, which in summer are starred with gentians, crowds of skiers skimmed past on their way down to Riffelalp. These were the best skiers—intrepid souls who swooped down hundreds of feet in one long, uninterrupted flight. They were a joy to watch as they sped past us—a spray of snow following in the wake of their skis. At the Gornergrat the sheer wonder of the scene almost took my breath away—in summer it is magnificent, in spring it has a different, an ethereal beauty. The great glaciers have become broad, gleaming corridors; summits, that for me had always been black and rocky, wore glittering crowns of snow and ice.

Everywhere there were skiers and all the world, it seemed, lay at their feet. Some were already winging their way down behind the Gornergrat to the Findelen valley; others were ascending the Hohtälligrat for an even more thrilling run down to the Findelen Glacier Inn; near the station skiers of all ages, men and women, boys and girls, were setting off on the 5000 ft. descent to Riffelalp. At Rotenboden, just below the Gornergrat, I put on my skis to run down to Riffelberg. I paused for a moment in the shadow of the Riffelhorn, the little mountain on which I began my climbing career, to reflect on the scene around me. They were all there, all my old friends—Obergabelhorn, Wellenkuppe, Rothorn, Weißhorn, Rimpfischhorn, Monte Rosa, Lyskamm, Breithorn and—the Matterhorn, greater and more compelling than them all. And all around there was a strange, frozen silence—no sound of stream or bird or falling stone; in the valley spring had come; on the mountains it was winter still.

Down at Riffelberg I joined the throng of happy skiers coming in from their classes in the ski schools—all full of stories of progress, of falls, of exciting incidents of all kinds; and I drank hot soup in the ski-room amid a babel of tongues speaking languages of every country in the world.

The sun was sinking behind the mountains; the wind was blowing colder; it was time to go. I shouldered my skis and packed myself into the crowded train. One last look round and we were off. And so I came back to Zermatt where the crocuses were folding their petals for sleep and the church bells were chiming for Easter and the Resurrection. Life, I told myself, is good; and life at Zermatt is *very* good.

As the days grow longer, many important winter sports events will be held under the bright warm spring sun in the Swiss Alps. Our photo shows a scene from the annual Gornergrat Derby downhill run near Zermatt. This year the event will be held from 16th to 18th March. Photo Giegel SFZ

APRIL IN ZERMATT

A TALK BY
CICELY WILLIAMS