HAVE long thought that the way to make the most of a good mountain is to climb it for the first time by one of its better routes and complete its traverse by the ordinary way off. On the Weisshorn, that noblest, purest and most beautiful of all Alpine peaks, attempts to follow this principle caused me many years of frustration. First, in 1926, R. B. Graham in the guideless rock-climbers' tradition, and inspired by Raymond Bicknell, had planned the Schalligrat from a bivouac, with M. H. Wilson and me. But we did the Zmuttgrot of the Matterhorn instead. In 1933 with Peter and Claud Bicknell we set out from the Topali Hut for the North ridge, but the weather closed in on us on top of the Bieshorn. Then service overseas, the war and respect for the bigger mountains kept me away from Zermatt for eighteen years.

In 1951 John Hunt invigorated our plans, and the Weisshorn was naturally included in them. It was presumed that after the Rimpfischhorn traverse and a couple of days over Monte Rosa and the Lyskamm, we should have full steam up. We would then go for the Schalligrat. But 1951 weather ruled otherwise. Our attempt on the Crestone Rey on Monte Rosa ended in a dash for the Margherita Hut in a storm so bitter that our boots froze during the night inside the oven. Then we filled in time with an ascent of the Schallihorn from the grand new Rothorn Hut by an elegant route which contours round under the eastern precipice of the Rothorn. From the top we were able to examine at close range the superb bastions of the Weisshorn. All its three ridges looked magnificent, but the Schalligrat was obviously better left alone for some days. Again we filled in time, on the Mischabel.

On July 31 five of us went up to the Weisshorn Hut, pausing for long draughts of milk at the chalets, which are now fitted out like a modern factory. The excuse of waiting for the afternoon shade encouraged a gentle pace up this charming walk, though in fact the weather was far from bright. Once again plans for the Schalligrat had to be abandoned, and at 3 A.M. it was doubtful if we were wise to set out even for the ordinary route. But Winthrop Young's single star was visible if intermittently, and the route was well trodden. Nowadays all parties make for the safer if slightly longer approach up the broken face well to the right of the flank of the East ridge, and we were up at the traditional breakfast place not long after dawn. And an ominous dawn it was: a warm wind from the south, heavy cloud over the Mischabel, and the Matterhorn completely blackened out. However, our mountain seemed to keep aloof in weak sunshine so we moved on.

The charm of our steady rhythmical climbing up this splendid ridge
HIGH WIND ON THE FINSTERAARHORN

Photo B. R. Goodfellow, 1949

[To face p. 466.]
THE WEISSHORN HORSESHOE

absorbed too much of our interest, and we paid too little attention to storm warnings on the other peaks. Even my photographs now show how obvious these must have been. Our final warning came suddenly. When we had nearly reached the last gendarme my ice axe, stowed shaft down between my rucksack shoulder-straps, started sizzling a couple of inches from my ear. John Hunt, who is acquiring quite a reputation as a lightning conductor 1 was hit by a mild discharge. I know nothing which so quickly destroys a party's morale as an electric storm on a rock ridge. We turned without question and at double speed sought the shelter of some overhanging rocks we had just passed. But a Swiss party behind us had the best seats. We were too exposed to the fireworks to search elsewhere, and spent an uncomfortable half-hour while lightning crackled along the ridge, fortunately below us, and three inches of wet snow fell on the rucksacks upturned on our knees.

Though the storm centre moved away as we descended, we should, by all the weather symptoms, have abandoned the mountain altogether. But the hut was a happy place to relax in the afternoon sun and we had it to ourselves. It seemed better to stay up with at least the chance of our forecast proving wrong; and to stay was only made possible by Mrs. Hunt, who had not been on the mountain. In a phenomenally short time she had run down to Randa and back with food, earning my eternal gratitude for the next day's climbing which she gave us.

The early hours were cloudless, though the wind still blew warm and strong from the south. We followed our yesterday's tracks hoping that at the best the weather might not break before noon. From the rock ridge the views now had all the sparkle of clarity after storm, with no cloud in the sky nor in the valleys deep in shade beneath us. We were in no hurry, and in crampons the long upper slopes needed steady care, for yesterday's doubtful snow lay on ice. An aircraft circled below the summit as we reached it.

The splendid panorama lost interest when we looked at the North ridge. The first stretch, nearly level, fascinated us with its steep flanks, 60 degrees, rising to a thin transparent flake of ice. Beyond that it swung down from left to right to the Great Gendarme, was then lost in a jumble of rock towers, and emerged again as snow to the Bieshorn far below. John Hunt had made up his mind and it did not take me long to decide to join him. Although it was already late, and we had no spare food and no spare rope, the ambition of twenty years was there awaiting fulfilment. The weather looked safe and the south wind, now cold in the thin high air hastened the decision.

We set off at eleven. At first the summit ridge was extremely sensational, with an exposure beyond my previous experience. Indeed it required tight-rope technique. Our security lay in balance and a readiness to jump instantly down the other side if one's partner's steps were to break away. There was little steadiness from an ice axe which could only be plunged well below the heels, in a posture neither elegant nor making for progress. The exposure soon lessened and we were

1 A. 9. 58. 226 et. seq.
able to move faster between other narrow stretches. Old tracks warned us of some big cornices.

We reached the Great Gendarme, the end of the snow, in about $1\frac{3}{4}$ hours, and paused on its shoulder to take stock and remove our crampons. The situation was superb especially looking back up the ridge we had come down, the pure white slopes of the north of the Weisshorn to its left and the big peaks round the head of the Zmutt glacier to its right beyond the fearful precipices of the West face. We were still surprisingly high, for the Gendarme is nearly as high as the Dent Blanche, and the serious climbing of the day lay ahead of us.

Following the crest we soon came to the top of the overhanging chimney, the main difficulty of the ridge in ascent. Luckily we had enough rope, 150 ft. of half-weight nylon, to abseil off a well placed piton without untying. There was no need for anxiety about route-finding, for a nervous pipe smoker, in some previous party, had left a trail of pink match stalks like a paper chase; and on patches of snow below we could pick out the same old tracks.

It is a fantastic ridge. Towers followed in dozens. Their flanks fell from their firm crests, a few feet wide, for a hundred or two hundred feet vertically to hideous looking slabs below. Clearly one must avoid turning the towers, and, surprisingly, the climbing along the airy crest is nowhere difficult. We rarely had to check our steady progress by moving singly. After $3\frac{3}{4}$ hours on the rock ridge we reached snow again. The afternoon mists were creeping round the towers behind us, and we put on our crampons. Michael Wilson and Charles Warren, who returned down the East ridge, had waited until now to see us safely off, and were soundly rated by the guides at the hut for staying out so late on the mountain.

We now had to take a decision. The time was half past four. To our left was the steep descent from the so called Weisshornjoch, leading in perhaps a couple of hours to the comforts of the Tracuit Hut. But we had set out to do the ‘Horseshoe’ back to Randa, whither the others were returning. Again ambition triumphed over discretion, and in the full knowledge of the long odds on our being benighted, we set off for the easy slopes up to the Bieshorn. In mist now we carried straight on down its East ridge. This was the ridge we had come up in 1933 and I had forgotten how narrow much of it is. To have to move again with special caution on none too good snow so late in the day, made this the most trying part of the whole expedition.

By half past seven we were down on the level basin of the Bies glacier and looked over the edge where it breaks into the fair-sized icefall which one sees on the skyline from Randa. Thanks to 1951’s snowy conditions this went easily and quickly, and we were soon scampering down dry glacier. Half an hour’s light was left and we thought we had won through. But we had reckoned without the pitfalls of those precipitous hillsides above the middle Visptal. We came on a line of cliffs we could not turn, and had not enough daylight to climb down them.
It was not too bad a night. Even at 3,000 metres it was still fairly warm in among the big moraine boulders. On another occasion I would carry a change of socks and a little more to eat, though it had indeed been a joy to travel so light. When we reached Randa on the morning of the fourth day for a breakfast of ham and eggs, the night out seemed a small price to have paid for such an expedition.

The records show surprisingly few British parties on this North ridge, and scarcely any of them guideless. This is odd, for in its grandeur, and length—two miles over 4,000 metres—there is nothing quite like it in the Alps. Yet it is nowhere really difficult nor, if taken from the Tracuit Hut, is it an abnormally long day.