

SPECIAL OCCASION—July 14, 1965

BY H. K. HOCKENHULL

A desire to make another ascent of the Matterhorn on the Centenary date would, I felt sure, be shared by numerous climbers, and I was much exercised in my mind by possibilities of added dangers and discomforts, on the mountain and in the hut, which the presence of large numbers might entail.

I resolved these problems (as a committee of one) by a simple decision to bivouack at approximately the same height as the original party. This seemed appropriate to the occasion and, if fate were kind, promised a unique experience, since the moon was obligingly co-operative by being at the full.

A few days before I left home I heard about the proposed T.V. programme, but gave this little thought except as an added reason for carrying out my plan.

I arrived at Zermatt on the evening of July 12, and on the afternoon of the 13th a load, which included a light meta stove, adequate water, and a comforting menu to cheer my solitude, was slowly carried towards the Hörnli. The Schwarzsee had provided ample evidence of the morrow's T.V. activities and the hotel at the Hörnli seemed so girt about with T.V. tackle and personnel that I gave it a wide berth, feeling that here was a performance for which I had no ticket.

By 7.30 p.m. I had fixed on a bivouac spot at what I thought was the approximate desired height, 1,000 ft. or so above the Hörnli. A party making a late descent told me they had been unsuccessful, as the snow had been too hard. After they departed only the twinkling lights below reminded me of the presence of other human beings, and I was (so I thought) alone on the mountain.

As I prepared my meal the clouds closed down and at 8.30 there was slight snowfall, after which the cloud lifted a little.

A desire to sleep was dissipated by flashes of lightning. Although these seemed several miles away I remained awake with an uneasy eye on the weather. By midnight stars were visible through the cloud-breaks and by 1 a.m. the East face was clear and brilliantly lit by the full moon. I filled my flask with hot coffee, disposed of surplus gear, and at 1.30 a.m. started to climb. The mountain was beautiful in the moonlight and no other illumination was necessary.

By dawn I was at the Solvay hut. Proposing to shelter for a few minutes from the wind, I unlatched the door and flashed a torch inside.

To my horror, the interior appeared stacked up with T.V. gear. As I reclosed the door a torch flashed from inside the hut and I vanished discreetly, hoping that the occupants would imagine that they had seen a flash of lightning.

At the Shoulder the snow was ice-hard, but as I had taken the precaution (unusual for the Matterhorn) of bringing crampons, I had no difficulties. The final ridge was in mist and on the summit ridge of deep untrodden snow I traversed the Swiss summit without exact certainty until the Italian cross loomed unexpectedly out of the mist. I halted between the two summits; it was 6.40 a.m.

On the latter part of the ridge I had heard voices and caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure. From my vantage point I eventually saw three figures emerge and complete their climb to the Swiss summit. It was then 7 a.m.

I re-traversed the ridge, carrying an open tin of mandarin oranges, and joined the party. They finished the oranges which I offered them with appreciative gusto. They were, of course, the Vaucher rope, although I did not appreciate that at the time.

I offered Mme. Vaucher a flask of sherry and we all drank a toast to 'a special occasion'. Actually, I was referring to the Whymper centenary, but I am glad to think that the wording of my proposition was wide enough to cover all implications, and everyone seemed satisfied and pronounced the drink to be 'famous'.

We photographed one another on our respective cameras and then began our separate descents. Losing touch on the mountain, I did not see the party again until the Schwarzsee, by which time I had realised from T.V. commentators on the ridge that my 'special occasion' was very special indeed.

On my descent I ran foul of the T.V. cameramen, and was asked to get out of the way. I was kept waiting rather unnecessarily for over an hour. I protested, and it is perhaps an appropriate ending to my story to quote the reply to my protest: 'the mountain', said the T.V. man importantly, 'is closed'.