

## THE GOOD GUYS V. THE MOUNTAIN

(*The fourth ascent of the North face of the Matterhorn in winter,  
February 12-14, 1967*)

BY MICHAEL BURKE

AFTER practising at failing on the Nollen route on the Mönch, and at succeeding on the Gervasutti Couloir on Mont Blanc du Tacul,<sup>1</sup> Dougal Haston and I decided we would *have ourselves* the Matterhorn.<sup>2</sup>

The North face fell a few winters back to a mass onslaught of Swiss, Austrians and Germans; and just afterwards Bonatti removed any chances of glory for anyone else when he walked all over it by himself one weekend. Just before our ascent three Japanese gentlemen succeeded in placing the rising sun on the summit in the early evening of their fifth day.<sup>3</sup> For the mountain's credit it had nearly claimed Huber and Nally, the toes and odd digit of members of the first ascent, and had repulsed such famous men as Hiebler and Mazeaud. The time was ripe for another round.

Early on February 12, we left our Scottish friends in their beds at the Hörnli and ploughed out into the frightening night. First round fell to the good guys when we found the Japs' footsteps leading through the séracs. No obvious excuse was forthcoming so we had to continue. Easy walking across a genuinely un-crevassed glacier and the preliminaries were over. No luck on the ice slope in the way of Japanese footsteps so we started to cut. I'm certain now that we could have front-pointed that slope. I was just as certain on the day that we couldn't. Arriving at the rock we awarded ten points to the mountain. The cold was nearly as bad as the rock itself was. I had the feeling that there would be news comments the next day, of hell freezing over. The good guys pressed on regardless and eventually found the first Japanese bivouac. It wasn't the best overnight stop I'd ever had by quite a lot of stops. However home is where you make it and anyway it was nearly dark. The day's climbing had been disappointing, at least from the point of view of

<sup>1</sup> See p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Burke addressed the Club on these climbs on October 3, 1967.

<sup>3</sup> E. Jiro, K. Masatsuga and H. Takua.

speed: also the rock was very bad and some of the ice pitches seemed very dangerous, especially when I was on the sharp end. We gave ourselves five points for finding somewhere to sit down.

The problems of winter bivouacs are ten times greater than summer ones and another thing is that it's a lot colder. We were working office hours so we started at nine. If anything it was colder than the previous day. We were hoping to get to the top that night but it didn't take very long to realise that we wouldn't make it. The climbing was very much the same as the day before, difficulty being caused where the loose rock steepened up. We reached the famous couloir, crossed over to the right and then went back left. We were still within 50 ft. of the couloir itself but we weren't too bothered because there were no stones falling apart from those knocked down by leaders prospecting for better rock. Contrary to popular opinion it was very easy to get good piton belays. I don't know what they would be like in summer when there isn't the ice to secure the blocks but they seemed good to us. Still we didn't have much choice.

Some time during the afternoon we reached the top of the couloir. This was our only route-finding mistake. We went right too soon and as a result never found the easy staircase which rumour has it goes to the summit from this point. After the proper number of rope lengths rightwards we reached the only feasible way upwards. We were still following the guide book despite our mistake. It was Dougal who told me that it was the only feasible way upwards and by coincidence it was also my turn to lead. The problem was a 60-70 ft. cliff composed of dry stone walling, but it was all leaning towards me. It looked dangerous just to stand underneath let alone climb on it. Still who is afraid of these slight problems? (Anyone who is please get in contact—I'm forming a club.) For a short while the cold weather disappeared and was followed by a very hot spell. I was really sweating. I think I managed to get one or two pitons in. I was so frightened I can't remember that passage very well. Dougal came up and traversed across to the next belay. It was five o'clock so we knocked 40 pitons in and prepared for the night. We then threw away our bivouac sheet, just that so we wouldn't be too warm during the night. We had our two ounces of water and our cold bacon. The cold harsh night was at our doss.

A clear night. Lots of cigarettes and a clever Scottish trick with an anorak and a piece of string hurried the night through. Today if we don't fall over should see our finest hours (this year's). We traversed across to the Zmutt ridge, said hello to the sun, quickly said goodbye and hurried towards the summit. What a nice way to do the Totterhorn. 2.30 saw us back in contact with the sun on the summit. We sat on Honourable Japanese bivouac site at the notch between the two summits and ate a few nuts.

So far, with the points it had won from last night's fiasco, the mountain was still way ahead. We scorched off in the direction of the Solvay hut. There were ten bonus points if we reached it before nightfall. That's saying nothing about the good sleep we would get. Despite myself trying to go head first down the East face and Dougal being stuck half way down an abseil rope, we arrived at the Solvay hut just as the light went out. Our brave, faithful Scottish friends were there on their way to the summit via the Hörnli ridge. They refused to spoil us and allowed us to make brews for ourselves.

The next day saw us arrive despite ourselves at the Hörnli hut. We then awarded ourselves a hundred bonus points for cheating the mountain and therefore won the game. The prizes were awarded in Zermatt the next day.