# A TRAVERSE OF THE MATTERHORN

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ON waking at 1 A.M., at the Belvedere above Zermatt, I looked out from my narrow bedroom window into the still night. The stars seemed to hang like glow-lamps in the air. The giant obelisk of the Matterhorn was visible to its very summit, where it died away into the night. It seemed to be beckoning me upward. Its real message, if I could have read it, was : ' I think you had better leave me alone today.'

At 3 A.M. came knocks on every door, and heavy boots began to move—a suggestion, at any rate, that the great peak might ' go.' I came downstairs and joined the semi-silent group of yawning climbers. Remembering my past experiences I avoided the coffee, and indulged in a small omelet. My guides, Leo and Otto Gentinetta, were finishing their breakfast. ' Well,' I suggested, ' it doesn't look so bad outside, does it ? ' ' It is fine now,' they replied, ' but we don't much like the look of things. The wind is in the wrong quarter.'

We agreed to start, however, and roped up. As we approached the first rocks (3.25 A.M.), it was evident that conditions were not normal. The white sugarloaf appearance, so familiar to us at Zermatt for days past, was on the mountain still. Instead of making straight for the rocky spine, we worked our way well round to the right, and after scrambling up some steep snow, zigzagged back on to the familiar ledges. No lanterns were necessary ; the moon had risen in a bank of cloud, and its subdued light was enough for us. From rock to snow, from snow to rock we mounted, steadily upward. Suddenly a brilliant light shone upon our footsteps from behind. The moon had sailed out from behind the clouds, and was shining on the rock with wonderful brilliancy. The Belvedere was already far below, whilst Monte Rosa and her sisters were peering at us in their moonlit glory through the abyss. Presently there came the light of dawn, often so cheering and full of hope, but today uncertain and somewhat sinister. Then the sun rose behind the Rimpfischhorn, all the colours of the spectrum tossed high into the sky, and every peak glorying in the sunrise splendour. At the Solvay hut I said to myself : ' Now for a breather and for one of those pears in the rucksack ! ' But Leo had his eye on me. ' We mustn't linger here,' he said. ' The fine weather isn't going to last. We had better get on at once.'

I gave Leo half my pear, and in five minutes we departed. That was the only halt of any consequence in thirteen hours. Soon afterwards I noticed that filmy clouds were beginning, so innocently, to girdle the summit of the mountain.

We climbed the rocks immediately above the hut, and worked our way slowly and cautiously up that frosted treadmill, the Shoulder. Then we began to negotiate the fixed ropes, which were in an icy, most unpleasant condition. Other climbers could be seen above us on the ropes, and one or two of these, we heard later, had unpleasant experiences on their way down again to the Solvay. A keen wind was blowing and it became colder. All the rock crevices were filled with matted cakes of frozen snow. My guides asked me if I thought it were worth going on, as the conditions would probably be too bad for the descent on the Italian side. On a ledge we discussed the possibilities of success or failure, and decided that, as an hour and a half should see us on the summit, we would push on for the present and take counsel again later. Older and wiser men turn back, no doubt, but one cannot always be older and wiser. And when one's verdict is reinforced by the strength and ardour of two first class guides, what more can be said than that we were the victims of a form of mountain madness not understood by dwellers on the plains.

A further pull up the remaining ropes and we were on the snow. Another fifteen minutes would bring us to the summit. But the driving clouds prevented our seeing much until, at 9.40 A.M., the Swiss signal mark suddenly emerged from the gloom only thirty yards away and above us. We grasped it for a moment, as if once again to touch *terra firma*, and passed along the summit ridge, with its beautiful cornices crowning the cruel, unplumbed precipices and abysses which descend to Italy. We declined the pressing invitation of the wind to visit the Zmutt valley on our way, and stumbling along in the increasingly unwelcome blast, reached the Italian signal mark, which had evidently been struck by lightning. I wonder if a shorter visit than ours was ever paid to the top of the Matterhorn. It seemed disrespectful to come and go so quickly. Yet this was no place for a halt; so different now from the same spot just twelve months ago on that summer day when we could sit on our coiled-up rope in sunlit space and 'skim off the visible cream of creation.'

We decided to descend a little on the Italian side and finally test the conditions. It is a wonderful moment in this traverse when one begins the downward plunge; impressive at all times, but now full of mystery and foreboding. With firmer grip and tighter rope, and with an impatient kind of caution, we began the descent. In half an hour any question of a return to the summit had passed from our minds. We had, in fact, by this time burned our boats, and knew that if we were to find safety at all it must be at the Italian hut, four or five hours further on. Otto led down the rock, his brother bringing up the rear. Then suddenly the crisis came; in other words, the storm proper in its vilest mood. As we rounded a buttress on the exposed precipice

the wind hurled itself at us in a frenzied icy blast—a triumph of mountain devilry—filling the air with a million particles of driven snow; not the soft snowflakes of the Christmas card, but frozen atoms which bit into our eyes just when every ounce of vision was needed. Those who live in safety far below may disbelieve, if they wish, the legend that these high peaks are inhabited by evil spirits. But up here in the wild fury of the storm, the mountain was now obviously alive with them. They were dancing on every ledge, chasing us down the rocky walls and jeering at us from every icy shelf. Of course, like most evil disembodiments, they were invisible; and that is about all that could be said in their favour. The streaming angry gusts followed one another as with half-closed eyes we dropped from ledge to ledge, from slab to slab, setting our teeth and moving with the utmost speed which could be reconciled with care. There were moments when the wind would seem to be abating. Then it would come back with a fiercer blast than ever, when it was safer just to remain anchored as still as possible on the rock, which seemed to dip away into clouds and eternity below us. Continuing the storm-swept arête, it was always our bad fortune to remain exposed to the blast, for it was necessary above all to keep to the true line of descent, much as one would have given for the shelter of some friendly ridge. We came to the fixed Italian ropes—the ropes I had so often heard of and longed to see and handle. I had asked for ropes, and ropes I was to have! Here they were, white and icy. We dropped and dangled down them at almost incautious speed. Oh for a fairy godmother to hand me some new warm gloves! My own were quickly icing up with the cold, so I took them off and put underneath a pair of socks. But this manoeuvre having been noted by one of the malignant spirits, the ropes tore my gloves off and made things worse than ever.

Then there was the famous ladder. There is an almost vertical descent just above it, and as I came down I could see its three cables lashed over a ledge. It was anchored at the bottom, but was tugging and shaking in the wind, white, sinister, evil-looking. I clambered on to it and dropped from rung to rung. Whether *terra firma* lay a hundred or a thousand feet below me I could not say, for beneath was cloud. Leo was shouting from above, but I could not hear him in the storm. Halfway down the ladder—and clinging tighter than one does to the poles of an electric battery, I obeyed the signal and turned round its outer edge with my back to the precipice, to drop down the remaining rungs.

From time to time a thinning of the clouds would reveal an unsuspected presence, some gigantic buttress of rock disappearing into the unseen depths, something vast and near to us but soon obliterated, giving us just a passing vision and then cloud again. The Gentinettas took full advantages of these glimpses. The cold, coupled with the short night's rest at the Hörnli, ended by making me feel sleepy. It seemed so tempting just to take a nap and forget it all. But there remained to me enough sense to realise that sleepiness might be a

more subtle enemy than the chance of a slip. I told the guides, and they gave me cognac. I shook myself, concentrated on the details of each step, forced myself to remember our position, compelled myself to wakefulness. Icicles hung from shelves of rock, huge and sinister. And then there were stalactites of frost, pearly grey in colour and lovely in form, forming curtains and fringes. At one point the wind wedged its way behind an array of this frosted drapery, ripped it off and tore it into bits, hurling them into the air and mixing them with the flying snow. 'Cognac, please, cognac!' I cried—and how grateful were those meagre thimblefuls! Along and down the slippery ledges we passed, but how insecure it all seemed, even when the rope was passed round knobs of rock for anchorage, and how cold and slight the finger holds on those exposed corners. The guides kept manfully at their task, hardly speaking. Slipping and dangling down further ropes, Otto and I landed on our respective ledges, Leo as last man performing the hardest task of all by prodigies of balance, encumbered with ice-axe and bulging rucksack. I hated the sight of those ropes, and still more the icy feel of them, but where should we have been without them?

Thus piecemeal we came to each famous passage in turn. The visibility continued as bad as ever, and owing to this we missed our way once or twice and (easy temptation) got too far down, retracing our steps laboriously upward. Yet how any one in such weather could find any way at all was a marvel to me. Once or twice in weak moments I began to ask myself, 'How is this going to end? Is it really well with us?' We came presently to something which always tends to make me hesitate—a disappearing snow slope of ruthless steepness. It was the Linceul. I had purposely left my ice-axe behind at Zermatt. One could do without it on the rock, but here how welcome it would have been! Steadily we advanced across it, the rope anchored to the Gentinetta ice-axes, and held tight by Leo and Otto, myself between them, digging my fingers where possible into the axeholes in the frozen snow above me. These things teach one perspective and a sense of proportion, for on such a slope the little things of life cease from troubling.

It was now four o'clock in the afternoon, and we were nearing our goal. Still keeping to the arête, still dropping, tormented by the wind, yet taking each step with the utmost caution, we presently beheld our Arctic Mecca. Below us on a shelf of rock—we could have jumped through space on to its roof—lay our hut, half buried in the snow. A short but unpleasant passage lay between us and it, but our 'bar' was crossed, and in thirteen hours from the Belvedere we forced open the double door and entered the darkness of the cabin (4.25 P.M.). We remained here for eighteen hours. The first thing was to get warm. There was a stove, but no fuel. We held a conference by candle light, and decided to chop up and burn the only chair. The hut rapidly filled with smoke, in which my guides moved about like Mongols in a Gobi cabin. The wind raged outside, and became more frenzied still

when it failed to blow our hut down the precipice. Getting my things off, I covered myself in rugs, and withdrew in the darkness to the wooden shelf, where I spent twelve hours sleeping or trying to sleep, and eighteen hours trying to get warm. The bang-bang of the axe continued at intervals through the night; now an arm and now a leg of the chair was being turned into smoke, through which our stifling candle glimmered. One of us tried to open the little window. As the shutter was pushed back there was a shriek of wind followed by a smash of glass. So that was that, and henceforth it was a case of candle only. At Breuil I reported this damage and the consumed chair to the leading guide of Val Tournanche. Our clothes and rucksacks were hung round on nails and wires to set up the illusion that they were drying. The low dialogue of my Mongol guides ended every few hours with the welcome query: 'Meester Bellows—a cup of soup, a cup of tea?' Oh, that soup and that tea, I wished there had been more of each! There was just the difference between them that there is between nectar and ambrosia. Meanwhile the storm continued through the night with great force, making the hut tremble, creak, and drum, which caused us to feel grateful to the Italian Alpine Club that they had put such solid workmanship into the *rifugio*.

At 10 A.M. the next morning, after cleaning up the hut and barring the broken window, we forced the outer door open and braced ourselves for the remainder of the descent. I say 'braced' advisedly, for things still looked very nasty. One would have thought that by this time we had worn down the patience of the storm. But no, the wind at once grasped us by the throat and bade us be gone as we seized the long rope drop and descended the chimney just below the cabin. It was difficult work pressing downward under such conditions, when every foothold seemed precarious and when the slightest slip might still be awkward. But whatever the temptation to evade the issue and shorten the descent, we were compelled to keep to the line of the arête in the full line of fire of the wind. The clouds were still around us, but time was telling in our favour, and soon the great precipices began to stand out more and more. We reached the Col du Lion and strode along its lovely curve of corniced snow, whence the plunging view into the abyss of churning gloom on the Tiefenmatten side would have satisfied both Dante and Doré at a single stroke. Circumventing the Tête du Lion we crossed further snow and steadily worked our way downward over the great rock bastions towards safety. The driven snow now turned to sleet. This was a distinct gain, even if it meant melting icicles and dripping clothing. Presently the clouds opened further, and far below us lay . . . Italy; and, most welcome sight of all, little Breuil in peace and sunshine with its tumbling torrents and waterfalls. Then we came to the first flowers—frail little things growing in rock crevices. We halted at the memorial to Jean-Antoine Carrel, at the spot where the old man died, his duty so finely done.

As we strode on down easier slopes in easier mood, a marmot peered down on us from a rock. We whistled and shouted at it, but it would

not move. Why should it, indeed ? As the guides said, ' few hunters come this way, and it knows what it is about.' We hardly deserved it, but this marmot seemed to be sneering at us. Well, so let it be, we said, and passed on. In another hour we were enjoying the delicious reaction which set in as we reached Breuil. It was worth a full measure of toil and discomfort on the heights to feel as we now began to feel. We made for the Italian inn near the torrent which races through the hamlet—a simple hostelry, but just the anchorage we needed for our storm-battered selves. The landlord set before us three large bowls of hot tea, and a stir was made in the inn to work up simple comforts for us. Leo and Otto, the true heroes of the traverse, must have been glad to set down their bulging rucksacks. Il Cervino still looked angry in its storm-cap, but from this our quiet sanctuary we could now laugh at it.

Leaving the Gentinetta brothers chatting with Italian colleagues at the inn, I strolled down to visit my friend Guido Rey at his summer villa by the larch wood, for he was expecting me. He was taking a siesta when I reached his home, so I spent a quiet half-hour sunning myself on the stoep and enjoying the preliminaries of an all round drying by the kitchen stove. Presently the door opened and in came my friend and host. ' Ah, mon ami,' said he, ' si j'avais su que vous traversiez le Cervin par ce temps-là, j'aurais passé une bien mauvaise nuit ! ' However, here we were, safely anchored in the little port of Breuil, and the sharp memory of our discomforts already melting in the Italian sun. Tea was served on the stoep facing south, the sunlight acting on me as a delicious balm. Guido Rey brought out his photographs and explained to me, in detail, the route by which we had come. It was easier to follow it here on his study table than it had been up there *in situ* ! Then while my host rested towards evening, I went for a stroll in the larch woods on the mountain side, the ground ' oozing ' with bilberries, juniper and mauve gentians, and the song of water coming up from the valley below.

We who had descended that afternoon from the clouds were fortunate in being able to enter Italy without let or hindrance. For some time past there had been difficulties on the Swiss-Italian frontier, and climbers who had drifted too far down into the Italian valleys had been turned back by Fascist guards. But thanks to the kindness and foresight of my host, the authorities at Valtournanche had been warned of our coming and had sent particular instructions to the frontier guards not to disturb the Englishman with guides who was to pass this way. Nothing could have been more courteous and agreeable than the resulting arrangements made by the Podestà.

I dined and spent the evening with my friend, and together we discussed the Alps from end to end, and Italy and life. Then bidding him farewell, I returned late by lantern light to our inn by the torrent, my mind running on those memorable and truly delightful hours at the villa. The next morning we toiled up the long slopes to the Furggenjoch, crossed the pass in thick cloud, descended in a thunderstorm to the Schwarzsee, and disappeared through the rain to Zermatt.