

THE NORTH FACE OF THE MATTERHORN¹

By DIETHER MARCHART

(Translated by Hugh Merrick)

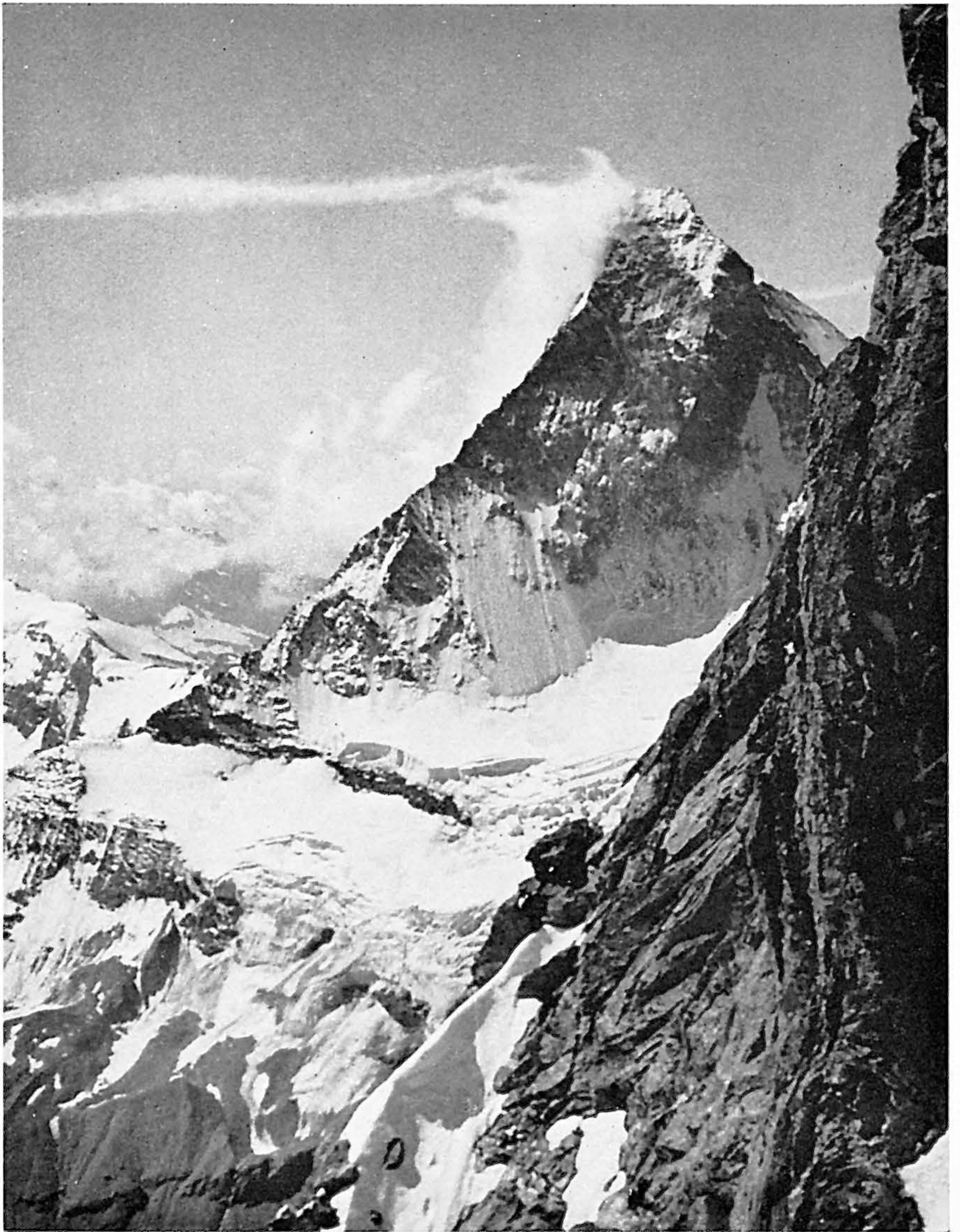
THERE are many mountains harder to climb than the Matterhorn, but for me it is the mountain of mountains, surpassing all others in its unique glory.

As you go along the narrow road leading up to Zermatt from St. Niklaus, the great four-thousanders of the Valais Alps soar up one after another from the deep cleft of the valley; the huge rock-pyramid of the Rothorn, the mighty Weisshorn with its ribs of ice and rock, the glaciers streaming down from the Breithorn, and lastly its near neighbours, Castor and Pollux. Only the Matterhorn remains hidden behind rock-ridges and grassy slopes, as if the valley of the foaming Visp were purposely preparing the eye, by this feast of great mountain shapes, for the masterpiece still to come. Excitement mounts while, one by one, the ridges fall aside, as if some theatre-curtain were slowly being parted. Not till you are a few hundred yards short of Zermatt does the Matterhorn suddenly stand revealed, indescribable in its impact, a picture no mountaineer can ever forget.

Of course I wanted to stand on that mighty summit, but the normal route has long lost its charm and become a scramble up a well-worn track. On any fine day innumerable parties struggle up the Hörnli ridge². The guides will haul anyone who can afford the tariff up it, even if he be half-crippled. From early morning on, there is a mad race for places at the head of the long crocodile of climbing-parties. Crampons rattle and ice-axes ring as they rush up the first plinth to the foot of the ridge. Parties overtake each other by dangerous detours, stones go crashing down, the guides curse and strain on the ropes; but the utter chaos only begins when the great upward-moving snake meets the descending parties which have traversed the peak from the Italian side. Then there is tied a truly Gordian knot of ropes; hands and heads are trodden on by crampons, and so, of course is the network of ropes criss-crossing one another all over the ridge; and an occasional axe goes clattering down the face from some tourist's hand. Crampons are lost,

¹ The first ascent of the North face of the Matterhorn was made by the brothers Franz and Toni Schmid, of Munich, on July 31–August 1, 1931. Toni Schmid was killed on the Gross Wiesbachhorn on May 16, 1932.

² According to the *Swiss Observer*, 180 people ascended the Matterhorn on August 15 last year.



Photo, B. R. Goodfellow]

MATTERHORN, NORTH FACE.

but never an opportunity to add a stone to the cataract, as soon as a strategic position has been gained for such exercises. Not on the Hörnli ridge

‘the sleep that lies among the lonely hills . . .’

When I went up that way, I was less interested in it than in the great North face which goes winging down as one moves upwards along its rim. A face whose name is magic for the ‘Extremists’, a face on which true solitude and high adventure still lurk. Everyone whose heart is in steep ice, glazed rock and the most difficult combinations of the two, dreams of making its ascent which, with the Walker Buttress and the Eiger’s North face, constitutes a trio of the three hardest problems in the Alps. I shared that dream, though my experience on rock and ice at that time was more imaginary than factual; but I did know enough to realise that at the moment the face was in an exceptionally favourable condition.

That evening I was sitting in the Hörnli Hut, bewailing the fact that I had no partner who came even half way up to the requirements, when the door opened to admit an enormous rucksack and under it two fairly bowed legs, and a beard which would have done credit to Rübezahl himself; out of its depths twinkled the eyes of a young member of our climbing-group in Vienna. His name was Günther.³

I only knew him slightly and was aware that his experience was even less than mine, but we were soon talking about the North face, for all that. I told him I would have a go at it on the spot if I only had a partner. ‘Even me?’ he asked in some surprise. ‘Why not?’ I answered.

When we pooled our equipment we found it was lamentably insufficient. We bought everything we could find in the hut and that brought the total up to 6 ice-pitons, 10 rock-pitons, one 100-foot rope, 6 snap-links and our bivouac stuff—not a very impressive collection. Günther’s father happened to be at the hut and was not exactly enthusiastic about our plan. ‘You’d go off to the moon, if anyone asked you!’ he snapped angrily at Günther. But there is not much a father who climbs can say against his own son’s climbing plans, is there?

When we went to sleep, we were so little excited that we overslept. The weather was not too good either, so we decided to do the easier Zmutt ridge instead. To get there, we had to traverse along the whole foot of the North face, first up snow-slopes to the right-hand side of the ridge and then up an ice-slope to the Matterhorn glacier. While climbing it I followed an old practice of mine of letting my ice-pitons

³ Günther Stärker. The ascent described by Herr Marchart was made on August 1, 1958, in thirteen hours. He was only eighteen years of age at the time.

dangle over my shoulder on a string, which is quite sound if you remember to tie the pitons on; the next thing I heard was a piton disappear into the darkness of the depths. So now we were left with 5 ice-pitons. My boots, too, were in a wonderful state; the toe-caps were so worn-through that the 'Shoe shine' at Vienna West station had asked politely whether he could cut my toe nails at the same time; but I had taken care of the trouble by wearing small nylon socks over the red stockings peeping through the boot-holes. We didn't traverse the entire foot of the North face; in spite of everything, we came to a sudden halt, looked at each other and decided to climb it, after all.

Soon the ice-slope leading up to the face lay well below us and by using an old avalanche-cone we drew near to the bottom edge of the rocks. Stones began to fall, whistling menacingly past us; we wriggled like the stomach-dancers of the Moulin Rouge to dodge them. Presently the barrage grew so intense that I abandoned the ice-slope sooner than we had intended and made for the rocks, which looked safer. As soon as we got on to them, I shouted to Günther: 'Now we're safe!' at which precise moment a stone hit me on the back of the head.

We continued to climb directly up the face, on ground which at times offered climbing of V + quality; it was very tricky as the rock tended to splinter into small fragments and there was also ice on it. The continual transitions from rock to ice were dangerous, too, for there the foot- and hand-holds were positively tiny. I usually managed to lodge safe belaying-pitons at stances, but there were rarely places which would take security pitons in between.

Even on the ice I mostly climbed without crampons, to avoid putting them on and taking them off again all the time. I used my ice-hammer to cut little nicks for the front of my boots. At last we reached that diagonal depression in the face, which is described, by courtesy, as a groove and is the key pitch to the whole face. It has an inclination of about 80° and is usually thickly iced over; but we found it entirely dried-out and ice-free, so that we were able to make almost comfortable progress on rock, till we reached a projecting rock-platform. At that moment the whole face was suddenly enveloped in a curtain of gray mist and I became somewhat anxious about the continuation of the route, for we hadn't been able to get hold of a route description. The Valais climbing-guide contains only a short footnote about it, mainly devoted to its belittlement. Stones began to fall again, probably kindly presents from our friends the Hörnli ridge 'experts'. When the fog presently lifted, we saw we were too far to the left, for the route actually crosses the face diagonally from left to right in an upward direction. My preference for climbing straight up had resulted in my pushing too far leftwards.

The rock was incredibly brittle as we climbed several rotten and crumbling overhangs. I was leaning away from one of these ugly customers when the whole thing came crashing to pieces under me. There was nothing for it but to jump; luckily, I got my hands on to a horribly small hold and hauled myself up, panting for breath. The rope down to Günther hung clear for 60 ft. without any intervening pitons. There followed a Piaz⁴ crack, bone-white and consisting of a flake which looks as if it could be turned, like the page of a book. I was a great deal happier with that behind me, and I could now see the ridge. Like many parties before us, we came out to the left of the summit through a bouldery gully, followed by an overhang. A moment later I was breasting my way through a loose mass of snow on to the ridge. We were clear of the North face at last and now, I thought, nothing can possibly happen to us. My comfortable reflections were rudely shattered by a rock-avalanche which came thundering down, projecting one of its terrifying arms into the couloir, where Günther was standing. Then there was silence again; the rope ran out over the ridge and disappeared down into the face.

I gave it a tentative pull. . . . Thank God, nothing had happened, and up came Günther, somewhat pale, to shake hands with me. We had climbed the North face, but our victim had just made it patently clear that we had not defeated it. The message at the time, fell on deaf ears; we felt elated and proud and victorious, solemnly promoting ourselves in the ranking list of international climbers to a place just after Hermann Buhl.

I only realised later that a serious embryonic mountaineer with so little experience, such poor equipment and in such dubious weather should never even have thought of embarking on the climb. And that is why I climbed the North face of the Matterhorn a second time, to admit, as it were, that I had taken the hint. That second time, I went with first-class equipment, in brilliant weather and with much wider experience at my disposal. So sure was I by then of what I was doing that I started up the face alone⁵ and, after six adventurous hours, emerged from it exactly at the summit. My best thanks to the Matterhorn, not only for that sunny summit-hour, but for all the joy my favourite peak has granted me.

⁴ Tita Piaz (1879–1948), the famous Dolomite guide; the original Piaz crack is on one of his routes on the Totenkirchl-Westwand, and the term 'a Piaz crack' is a German expression for any crack that must be climbed by pressure of feet in one direction and pressure of hands, or arms, in the opposite direction.

⁵ This, the first—and we believe the only—solo ascent of the North face, was made in 1959.