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# When Things Went Wrong

ASHLEY GREENWOOD

*Characters in order of appearance: Sandy Wedderburn, Tommy Wedderburn, Pat Baird, Donald Ross, Tom Peacocke, Rosemary Greenwood, Paul Roberts, Norman Gubbey, Jen Solt*

*December 1932. Idwal Slabs, Hope*

I was in my early days of climbing. The Slabs were wet and I wore nailed boots. Half-way along the delicate traverse I paused, perplexed by the next move. 'Oh well,' I said to myself, 'you've led it before' (in the summer in rubbers), 'it must be OK.' Forgetting the recessed fingerhold, I launched myself.

A moment later I was sliding upright down the Slabs. 'He will stop in a moment' piped up that part of my mind which immediately detached itself from my body. And I did – fortunately, as Sandy's belay had at that moment slipped off. My foot had slid neatly into the one hold on the pitch that was large enough for it. Shaken, I descended the parallel cracks. 'Try again, or you'll lose your nerve,' said Sandy. And that's what I did.

*March 1934. Ben Nevis, NE Buttress, 8pm*

It had never occurred to me that there was any climb in the UK that could not be completed in a day. Tommy and I had started from the CIC hut at 9am and here we were at 8pm, torchless, just above the Man-Trap but still 100m below the summit plateau of the Ben, and it was too dark to continue. Cramponless we had worked our way slowly upwards all day, clearing holds on the ice-sheathed buttress with an old-fashioned long ice-axe. The Man-Trap alone had exacted an hour and a half to clear, climb and hoist my diminutive and fortunately lightweight companion.

Now we had to sit it out, inadequately clothed (cotton shirt and golfing jacket), for 11 hours. We dug out seats from the ice, sat down, hitched the rope round a poor belay, and sang and dozed, waking at one moment to find the belay off. We were encouraged by shouts and flashes from the hut, signals from our two friends who had wisely turned back from the adjacent Tower Ridge before it was too late. So, by the time we were exercising our stiff limbs and restoring circulation at 7am the next day, there was Pat abseiling down to us from above to help us to the top. No harm came to us except for fingertips

skinned from sticking to ice-axes, but we were wiser climbers when we settled down in the hut to eat and sleep off hunger and exhaustion.

*July 1937. Mer de Glace, below the Montenvers Hotel*

Bad weather had delayed our start for the Dent du Géant from the Rifugio Torino till noon, and we were a party of five. Nevertheless we were still in good time on the descent of the Géant glacier, when an evil genius tempted us to stop and linger over a late cup of tea at the Requin hut. And so it got dark while we blundered around, looking for the path from the glacier to the Montenvers Hotel, without which we deemed it too risky to scale the worn slabs by the side of the glacier. So after a long and fruitless search we sat down and waited for dawn. Hot Ovomaltine from our pocket stove cheered us, and it was a tolerable and shortish night. As darkness began to fade into dawn we espied the lights of a party descending to the glacier *only about 40 yards away*. We looked at each other sheepishly and walked up the path to Montenvers.

*August 1954. High on the Schalligletscher, midnight*

Why on earth, I asked myself, did we turn back two-thirds of the way up the Schalligrat at about 2pm on a cloudless day. There was no hope of descending to the Weisshorn hut that afternoon by the normal route via the Schallijoch (there was no fixed bivouac there at that time) – that would have been much too dangerous because of falling stones. The others thought we might find a way down the Schalligletscher. I doubted it and thought it would be better to run the risk of being benighted on the way down the E ridge of the Weisshorn rather than on the Schalligletscher. But it was not mine to reason why; I had not been leading up over the snow-covered rocks. Needless to say, there was no way through the maze of crevasses; so, after hours of searching, we wearily climbed up and traversed to a rib of rock on the side of the glacier and sat shivering there till dawn, when it was safe to descend to the Weisshorn hut by the way we had come up. It was miserable for all, but particularly so for Donald, who had a severe cold. Ever since then, Tom and I have regretted not going on up the Grat.

*Christmas Day 1957. Otira Gorge, New Zealand (South Island)*

Rosemary and I had failed to get to the top of Mount Rolleston from Arthur's Pass that day. The approach and the ridge were too long, and we had started too late. On the descent it got unnaturally warm. Never before or since have I seen snow begin to roll down in balls on such gentle slopes. But it did not avalanche, and back on Arthur's Pass we ate our Christmas dinner of chicken legs by the roadside. Then after driving our hired car westwards down towards Greymouth, we pitched camp by the wooden bridge over the Otira river. Ignorant in those days of the weather portents in New Zealand, we stayed on the bank opposite to the town of Otira. At dusk it began to rain and, by the time it stopped 12 hours later, 13 inches had fallen. The bridge was gone except for one span, and the road to the pass behind us had been washed away to such an extent that it took 18 months before it could be reopened. It was a frightening

time that night, beside the rising river thundering continuously with the big rocks being swept down. I had stuck my ice-axe in the ground and decided that, when the waters reached it, we must strike camp; and they got within inches of it. Three days later I was able to wade the river and make my way to Otira to buy food. The road was submerged by rocks which reached almost to the tops of the telegraph poles. Two days later the bulldozers, which had been building up the river banks to save Otira from further flooding, could afford time to divert the river under the surviving span of the bridge, build a ramp and tow our hired car out. That night we pitched camp on top of a hillock, and once more the rain began to teem down. There was no more climbing that holiday, and broken bridges stopped us even reaching the Fox and Franz Joseph glaciers on the West Coast.

*July 1980. Macusani, Cordillera Carabaya, Peru, 11.30pm*

It was the worst establishment calling itself a hotel that I had ever known; the loo was beyond description and the bedrooms were like prison cells. But it was nearly midnight, and I was thankful to get into it. We had been climbing for a fortnight in the Cordillera Carabaya. I was tired, and said so, as we crossed a 5150m pass to descend to the lake and road 20km from Macusani where a lorry had deposited us two weeks earlier and was to meet us next morning. On the descent I had lagged behind, had lost sight of the others and had strayed from the right direction. When I enquired at a primitive llama herdsman's hut if other gringos had been seen, I was given the wrong direction. Reaching the Macusani road too low, I had walked back up it for half an hour and met no one (and, had I known it, had reached within a few hundred yards of where the others were camped). I decided that my only sensible course was to walk the 20km to Macusani. By now it was after dark, and more than 12 hours since we had left camp to climb the 600m to the pass. I had had practically nothing to eat all day and had only a couple of sweets in my pocket. The road was long and I was frequently assailed by fierce dogs which I drove off with stones. The lights of Macusani when they appeared seemed never to get nearer, and I began to have hallucinations and see huge rocks far away by the roadside; when reached in a few yards, they turned out to be piffling little stones. On arriving at Macusani I found a shop still open and devoured some rolls before braving three dogs into the courtyard of the mayor's house where I knew that Paul and some of the rest of the party who had descended by another route would be staying. After the third attempt to arouse someone – the dogs by now had become really friendly – and all my knocking had elicited no response, I gave up. My compatriots had in fact been in the mayor's house and had ignored what they imagined to be a burglar, or at least a drunken reveller. So, the unspeakable hotel it was.

Next morning I intended to intercept the lorry before it left to fetch the roadside campers, but it had left early. An hour later it returned with Norman, intent on organizing a large search party. He told me that the campers thought I must have had a heart attack and would not have survived a bitter night on the mountain, such as those we had been having. They had searched for me half the night, and poor Rosemary had resigned herself to widowhood. We were soon reunited.

### Crevasse Trouble

*May 1949. Gross Venediger*

If it hadn't been for defeats two days running, I don't think we would have persisted to the top on the third day. The weather was thick, the visibility minimal on the upper part and the snow abominable. Coming down we were stemming slowly down our up tracks when in I went up to the armpits, skis dangling below, and myself so precariously balanced that I dared not move till Jen arrived and proffered a ski stick, with the aid of which I pulled myself out. We had a rope, but I was carrying it!

*July 1969. Presanella*

We were unroped on the descent and I was not far behind the other two, when I disappeared into a bergschrund. This time, following their tracks precisely, I had gone right in but landed on a snow bridge 10ft down. Escape was so easy that they had only just noticed my absence when my head reappeared above the surface. They seemed to find it very funny.

*9 January 1971. Breithorn*

It was glorious weather but a bitter north wind was blowing when we set out on skis for the Breithorn from Trockener Steg. We followed up beside the pylons of a small meat-hook ski-lift, used for summer skiing but out of action in winter. We stopped for a snack in the operator's hut at the top and I took off my skis and descended a few yards to relieve nature. I was standing *between the pylons* where the ski track would have been and had just unzipped my trousers when in I went up to the armpits but was stopped by snow jamming against the sides of the crevasse. Looking down through the hole I could see that the crevasse widened and disappeared into the gloom. I was out in a moment, somewhat shocked.

*March 1989. Moel Siabod*

We started at 5pm from Capel Curig to traverse the mountain by the circuit, up past the lake, along the ridge and down the grass slopes to Old Capel. I thought we could do it before dark – expected at about 7.30pm. And so we would have – just – if I had remembered to take a torch to supplement the map and compass I had put in my pocket. As it was we had to decide, when it got dark a bit early owing to the clouds, which lot of lights to aim at. There were no stars and it was too dark to read the map or compass. Four hours later, after innumerable falls, wading through streams and sinking over the knees into bogs, we approached the lights of a village and the outline of a castle loomed into sight, confirming our fears, which had gradually been growing, that the lights were those of Dolwyddellan rather than Capel. However, the pub was still open and beer was obtainable – at 11.30pm! A telephone call produced a taxi in half an hour. On our way back to Capel the driver told us that he was frequently doing the same

journey with walkers who on misty days had done exactly what we had done. By 1am we got to the Royal Victoria Hotel at Llanberis for the AC meet.