

My Matterhorn Climb

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MY MATTERHORN CLIMB

By W. STETTBACHER

Matterhorn! What magic name! Probably no mountain in the whole world is so well known; no statesman or general in world history has been painted or snapped from so many angles. Each year, hundreds of young people from all over the world, as far as Japan and the U.S.A., are coming specially to Zermatt to climb the Matterhorn. For many, it is the first and also their only climb. Many fail to make the grade, others have to be pulled up from in front and behind.

The first time I climbed the Matterhorn, from the usual Swiss side, was in 1929. Coming direct from London, not particularly well trained and acclimatised, I found the going very difficult over the shoulder, near the summit, where a certain number of fixed ropes and chains had to be negotiated. I reached the summit in six hours after a superhuman effort, and suffered the humiliation of being overtaken by an American father, mother, son and daughter. Each of them was roped on to a guide, thus forming four different parties.

Seventeen years later, in 1946, I did the same climb again, chiefly in order to photograph this superb mountain from all angles. This time, I reached the summit in five hours, with great ease, and none of the spots which nearly defeated me previously, presented any difficulty this time.

While the ascent from the Hoernli is not considered difficult in good weather, conditions can become extremely difficult and dangerous in bad weather, and the Horn is notorious for quick changes in the weather.

The Italian side, on the other hand, is still a formidable proposition, even if to some extent the vertical walls of rock have been tamed by fixing on them numerous ropes. Probably in the whole of the Alps, there is no spot so closely linked with the history of Alpinism, as the Italian side of the Matterhorn. But it has also been the cause of numerous and terrible tragedies, especially in bad weather, and there are numerous Plates fixed to the rocks in memory of famous guides and climbers who have fallen on the Italian side.

As long ago as 1939 I spent a few days in Breuil, at the foot of the Italian side, but the conditions were against me.

Since the war, I have tried to spur on my regular Zermatt guide to undertake with me this classical traverse, but it was always argued that conditions were bad, that no one had ever made this climb during that particular season.

Early this year, I was lucky enough to be put in touch with a brilliant international guide, René Marcoz, of Verbier, who agreed to accompany me for a full week. Unlike some other guides, he is not solely interested in material gain, but a fervent admirer of nature, for whom nothing is too much or too strenuous.

We first scaled the Besso above Zinal over difficult rock ridges, and effected the traverse of the Zinal Rothorn (just over 4,200 metres) from the Mountet to the Rothorn hut. In excellent form, I was equal to all technical difficulties, and each time, I was the first to step on the summit, having overtaken numerous other parties mostly composed of men half my age.

On Wednesday afternoon, 22nd July, we arrived at the Hotel Belvedere, approximately 3,300 metres high, from where the climb over the normal (Swiss)

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side begins. To sleep at such heights, whether on a mattress or in a proper bed, is rarely a pleasant experience. However, for once, in a comfortable bed, I felt a unique sense of elation, yet mixed with apprehension. When I went to bed, we were in the midst of a thunderstorm, and for many hours I saw flashes of lightning from the Monte Rosa region through my window. Would the weather improve, and my mountain craft be sufficient? That was the question.

We were all awakened at 2.45 a.m., and after an excellent "Café complet", the usual race for the summit began. The weather was quite good, although flashes of lightning could still be seen in the distance. There must have been all together about twenty parties; we started fourth, and although I tried to conserve my energy for the descent, I was — *nolens volens* — drawn into this race. We were the second party to reach the Swiss summit, in exactly four hours — a very good time. (I learned later in Zermatt that some climbers took as much as eight hours to reach the summit, while several abandoned the attempt.) The summit is formed of a ridge about fifty yards long, on which there are two points nearly equally elevated, the Swiss and Italian summits. We crossed over immediately to the Italian summit, on which stands an enormous Iron Cross. A few minutes were spent in fortifying ourselves with food and drink, and I took a number of excellent photographs.

Dark clouds had gathered some distance south of the Matterhorn, and clouds of mist were flashing past the summit — not a good sign. My guide thought, however, that the weather would hold at least until we reached the Refuge Luigi Amedeo di Savoia, at 3,840 metres, about half-way down.

Unlike the Swiss side, the Italian side (ridge) consists of several distinct sections.

First, on the way down, one has to negotiate the main tower (or final peak) of the Matterhorn, which rises abrupt, magnificent and apparently inaccessible. The summit is fully 750 feet in vertical height, and several fixed ropes and a rope ladder make the ascent and descent possible.

After having descended about thirty yards of steep rock, I noticed the end of an enormously thick rope, tied on to the rocks. Only when bending over could I see that it was about thirty yards long, leading over an enormous precipice, more awe-inspiring than I had ever seen before, in the whole of my alpine experience. Without faltering, and as is taught in text-books, I resolutely gripped the thick rope with my small hands, placed it between my legs, started gliding down, touching the steep rocks continuously with my feet, thus slowing my slide. All the time, my guide watched every movement, controlling my descent with the double rope with which we were tied together. When I had reached the end of the fixed rope, on a tiny platform, he shouted "Stand absolutely



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still", and followed. In doing so, he took all sorts of precautions, and unlike other guides, he did not put all his faith in the fixed rope. In a few seconds, after traversing a small ledge, we were at the beginning of a second fixed rope, which was negotiated in a similar manner. At last, I spotted the famous rope ladder, the "échelle Jordan", still so called, although the remnants of the original rope ladder, presented as a gift by a Mr. Jordan, are now a museum-piece in Valtournanche. This ladder hangs over a tremendous precipice. It is quite a sensational feeling, to hang on your arms over such a precipice! Except for some icy patches on the rungs, this spot was not really difficult to negotiate. My guide allowed me to take here some action pictures; in other places, he forbade my taking snaps, and rebuked me even more firmly when he noticed my feet moving even an inch, while he was descending. Several other fixed ropes led us to the foot of the main tower, and we were soon at the Col Félicité. This is not really a Pass, but a small platform, named after Félicité Carrel, who in 1867 climbed the Matterhorn—the first woman to do so. From here one gets a magnificent view of the Zmutt ridge of the Matterhorn, with the enormous overhang of the "Zmutt nose".

In a few minutes we reach another landmark, the so-called "Enjambée", which separates the main peak from the remainder of the ridge. With a mighty jump over the deep cleft, I reach the ridge which is almost level and leads to the Pic Tyndall, named after Professor Tyndall, who, in the early 'sixties, reached this point, but could go no further. This ridge, worn by the slow irregular decay into monstrous and rugged battlements, and guarded on each side by tremendous precipices, is grand beyond all description. This is perhaps the most enjoyable part of the whole expedition; it does not present any remarkable difficulty to the climber, save that some icy passages require extreme caution. This is no doubt one of the finest climbs, with rock scenery, of grandeur perhaps unequalled in the Alps.

The next important point in this pilgrimage is the "Cravate", a strongly marked streak of snow or ice, where there are still some remnants of the first Matterhorn hut, built in 1867.

We soon reached the enormous "Tyndall" rope, hanging down a vertical precipice, which I found somewhat difficult to manage, because of ice. Conditions are very difficult in this part, because some of the rocks are covered with ice. We are now passing the spot known as "Mauvais pas", and several more fixed ropes are leading down to the Refuge Luigi Amadeo, which we enter after exactly four hours descent. Near one of the last fixed ropes before the refuge, there is a Plaque in memory of Otto Furrer, the well-known Zermatt guide and skier, formerly President of the Zermatt guides, who was killed at this spot in 1951 when the fixed rope broke under his weight. All the ropes were shortly afterwards replaced with new ones. Here, two days previous to our visit, guides found a rucksack and an ice-axe. The tourist going alone, had disappeared, and it was assumed that in trying to take some photographs, he had overbalanced and fallen to his death.

After I had taken a few photographs, and owing to the deteriorating weather, we continued our descent.

The ridge is again steep, and there are several fixed ropes. Each rock is full of history, and here the first attempts to climb the Horn were defeated. Then follows a chimney and another overhang called "Seilerplatte". Here Andreas Seiler, of Zermatt, with his guide, fell to his death. This section is called "the great wall", and we arrived at last at the foot of it, within a few yards of the Col de Lion. On one side, a sheer wall overhung the Tiefenmatten Glacier, on the other, steep glassy slopes and hard snow descended to the Glacier de Lion. From here, we had to skirt the cliffs of the Tête de Lion, consisting of loose rock, encumbered with debris and covered with a thin layer of snow and ice. This was the most dangerous part of our expedition; I asked my guide to take the lead and to cut some steps, as my hold in rubber soles was most precarious. It was here that Whymper, in one of his futile attempts on the Italian side, slipped and fell quite a distance, until a protruding rock covered in snow miraculously arrested his fall. This traverse is at an angle of about 60 degrees.

Once we had passed the Tête de Lion, we were out of danger, and all we had to do was to descend the lower rocks below the Tête de Lion, which resemble a long natural staircase, on which it was seldom necessary to use the hands.

At 15.30, just twelve hours after our start in the morning, we reached an old inn, 2,900 metres high, which had just been opened by its owner an hour before. That very minute, hell broke loose outside, a thunderstorm raging for several hours. However, I was safe, and in perfect health, and, apart from a few scratches on fingers and hands, little the worse for the experience.

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