



ZERMATT AND THE MATTERHORN

E. Gyger, Adelboden

IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF ZERMATT.

1. A TRAVERSE OF MONTE ROSA.

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THE mountaineer who for the first time treads the classic ground of Zermatt, desiring above all to become acquainted with its celebrated rocky heights, will find himself attracted first by the noble pyramid of the Weisshorn, the bold, jagged peaks of the Mischabel Group, or the beautiful ridge of the Dent Blanche, not to mention the Matterhorn, the mountain of mountains, towering over all. But on the initiate, the mighty, spreading glacier massif of Monte Rosa, its wide snow-fields glowing red in the evening light, makes an equally strong impression.

Lying on the frontier between Switzerland and Italy, its snow and ice-armoured north wall rises gradually out of the wide, almost level plateau of the Gorner glacier in several glacier terraces carried on rock socles to the two highest peaks, while the south and east flanks of the mountain fall in terrible precipices of more than 3,000 metres (*c.* 10,600 feet) into the background of the valleys of Gressoney, Alagna, and Macugnaga in Italy. It is this unique frontier situation which, to my mind at least, lends the Monte Rosa its particular, secret attraction. Its peaks are the dividing line between two worlds. To the north the outlook extends over endless snow-fields, ice flanks and cliffs to an immeasurable row of lofty peaks closing the horizon. To the south, however, beyond the long-drawn mountain ranges and the deep-cut valleys, can be seen the shimmer of the Upper Italian lakes and rivers, with the plain of Lombardy faintly visible in the distant haze. We stand at the gate of Italy! One step, certainly a long one, will take us from this region of everlasting snow down into the bright vineyards and olive groves of the south. It is the first smile of the culture-blest land of Italy which greets the mountaineer coming from the north, on the icy heights of this mighty frontier mountain.

When speaking of Monte Rosa, one must be quite clear that it is not a simple peak which is meant, but a whole

massif with eleven peaks, all of which, with one exception, are over 4,000 metres (*c.* 14,000 feet). Three of the eleven peaks are in Italy, the other eight, with the ridge which joins them, form the actual frontier. The highest and also the most visited peak is the Dufourspitze, 4,638 metres (*c.* 16,400 feet), the highest mountain of the Swiss Alps.

Having climbed the Dufourspitze some years previously, I decided in the summer of 1934 to carry out my long-desired wish, and to make the traverse of the four chief peaks, Dufourspitze, Grenzgipfel, Zumsteinspitze, and Signalkuppe, one of the most magnificent tours one can make in the Zermatt region.

On the afternoon of July 29, 1934, I set out with the tried and faithful guide, Heinrich Julen, of Zermatt, who had been with me on many tours. We went by the Gorner Grat railway through the lovely Arven and Lärchen woods of the Riffelberg to the station Roten Boden. Before us stretched the Gorner glacier, an immense ice stream that has here practically no drop. Above it rises the mighty bulk of Monte Rosa; to the right of that, and separated from it by the Grenz glacier, the almost equally massive Lyskamm with its steep northern precipices; still farther right the rounded summits of Castor and Pollux, to which is joined the mighty north wall of the Breithorn, a truly majestic panorama. The walk, taking about one hour diagonally across the Gorner glacier to the Bétemps Hut, the point of departure for tours on Monte Rosa, is one of the most beautiful and enjoyable walks in the neighbourhood of Zermatt, involving neither difficulties nor any sort of exertion. Walking is pleasant over the granulated ice; sometimes one has to jump gaily flowing rivulets, occasionally a wider crack, whose smooth sides disappear in shimmering blue depths. About 6 o'clock in the evening we reached the roomy, stately Bétemps Hut, which stands at a height of 2,802 metres (*c.* 10,000 feet), on the so-called "unteren (lower) Plattje," a broad, rocky spur separating the Monte Rosa glacier from the Grenz glacier. The evening was wonderful, and so mild that we sat out on the grass above the hut till the last rays of sunshine disappeared, and gazed across at the Matterhorn which, veiled by a few evening clouds, was throned in

lonely majesty above the glacier. In the meantime the hut had become fairly full, and after a plentiful supper, we retired to rest early.

We got up at 1 o'clock on July 30, and at 2.15 A.M. went out of the hut into a moonlight night of truly magic beauty. An almost full moon shone down from the night sky, flooding the mountains around with silvery light. We wandered leisurely across the moraine to the glacier and there put on rope and crampons. Two other groups of people came with us, a German tourist with his guide and three Englishmen with two guides. The hours which followed are amongst the loveliest and most impressive which I have ever experienced in the mountains. Between the ice-bound chasms of the northern wall of the Lyskamm and the no less steep south side of the Dufourspitze, the broad, terraced ice stream of the Grenz glacier, somewhat broken in the middle by a bluff, reaches out into the broad basin of old snow about which are set three peaks of the Monte Rosa massif. Over this silvery glacier path we now wandered into this sublime snow world, which enfolded us with solitude remote from man and solemn quiet. There was no sound but the crunch of our footsteps on the hard ice. It was a walk, dreamlike and withdrawn from the world, through the moonlit mountain night. With crampons the going was light and easy, at first over the slight incline of the glacier whose notorious abysses we hardly noticed that day. By way of a very steep ice slope we made a detour round the crevasse of the first bluff to the left, and reached at daybreak the rock where the first stop is generally made for breakfast. The moon paled, and the peaks of the Matterhorn and Dent Blanche reddened in the first rays of the sun. Soon we reached the upper, flatter plateau, and could see our way ahead of us: the Crestone Rey, a ridge of rock, which in the midst of the here predominating rocky south precipices of the Dufourspitze leads us in an almost direct line from a deep hollow of snow to the peak. The ordinary and most used way on Monte Rosa leads from the Bétemps Hut over the north wall to the summit; the route over the Grenz glacier and Crestone Rey is longer and somewhat more difficult, but so much the more interesting and worth while. In 4½

hours we had reached the foot of the ridge, removed our crampons, and, after a short halt, began at 7 o'clock the actual climb. The rock is always steep, but the foothold is good and the ground solid, so that the climb was not difficult, though fairly exhausting. Then we began little by little to notice the great altitude in our quickened and shortened breath and the apparent increase in the weight of our rucksacks. Climbing at a height of 4,000 metres (*c.* 14,000 feet) every half-pound counts! Still, we reached the summit of the Dufourspitze, 4,638 metres (*c.* 16,400 feet), by 9.30 A.M.

What splendour opened out there before our eyes! To the north a sea of larger and smaller peaks, above which, like islands, stretched the bold heads of the Wallis Alps: Matterhorn, Dent Blanche, Grand Combin, Weisshorn, Mischabel, and beyond them the great mountains of the Bernese Oberland, truly a proud panorama, worthy of the highest peak of our Swiss Alps. But I was still more attracted by the view to the south. Immediately before us the jagged, challenging rocks of the Grenzgipfel towered into the air; behind it a sharp, steep snow ridge swung up to the Zumsteinspitze, and still farther behind lay, broad and weighty, the Signalkuppe, with their fissured and steep declivities on the east, and widespread snow-fields on the north and west. On the highest crest is the Italian hut, Regina Margherita, the goal of our expedition. On both sides of the mountain were billowy, dense, white clouds shutting out all view of Italy. Overpowering was the view down on to the Grenz glacier, 700 metres (*c.* 2,500 feet) below us, with its labyrinth of crevasses, and projecting *séracs*. And over all was an unfathomable blue and sunny sky.

After a halt of an hour under a cliff warmed by the sun, we started our climb over the ridge, the most magnificent I know in the Alps. The German and his guide had already gone ahead, the Englishman had taken the ordinary route. Over an airy little ridge we reached the rocks of the neighbouring Grenzgipfel, and then went down to the Grenz saddle over an at first narrow but later broadening snow ridge, whose flanks shot down in terrifying steepness, on the left nearly 2,000 metres (*c.* 7,100 feet) towards Macugnaga, and on the right several hundred metres on to

the Grenz glacier. Later I asked Heinrich what he would have done if I had slipped at this ticklish point, to which he replied he would have watched first to see if I could get a hold again, if not, he would have let himself down on the opposite side in order to keep the balance! Above the Grenz saddle my guide showed me the place on the east wall where Dr Achille Ratti, now Pope Pius XI., had bivouacked when he climbed the mighty east wall of Monte Rosa. On the Grenz saddle we hastily put on crampons again and climbed comfortably to the Zumsteinspitze, 4,573 metres (16,200 feet), where we again enjoyed a short rest in the warm sun. The descent gave us a wonderful view of the famous east wall of Monte Rosa. Broken by rocks the snow slope falls in terrifying ruggedness from the Nord End, the second highest peak of the Monte Rosa group, more than 3,000 metres (10,000 feet) into the depths of the Macugnaga Glacier, a picture of overwhelming impressiveness and wild grandeur. Finally, the last steep ice slope was climbed, and shortly before 2 o'clock we reached joyfully the Capanna Regina Margherita on the Signalkuppe or Punta Gnifetti, 3,561 metres (*c.* 12,600 feet). This Italian hut, named after the Queen Margherita, consists of an Observatory where meteorological observations are made, and a club hut, with room for about fifteen tourists. From the middle of July to the beginning of September this, the highest club hut in Europe, is inhabited by a hut attendant and a meteorological observer, who are relieved every fourteen days, as they cannot remain for longer spells at that great height. The attendant gave us a hospitable and friendly welcome and quenched our burning thirst with tea and soup. Then we lay down for a few hours' sleep, until the sun drew near to its setting. The impressions of a clear evening on the Signalkuppe cannot be given in words. Here are given to the mountaineer festive hours for the soul such as are rare in the life of man.

As we went out of the hut at sunset an unforgettable spectacle met our eyes. To the south and east, where the Signalkuppe plunges in dark ribs of rock and wild icefalls to the depths, surged a sea of white clouds touched with a rosy glimmer by the setting sun. To the north and west,

however, the horizon was quite clear. Directly at our feet stretched wide regions of snow suffused with red gold by the last rays of the sun, so that one could see clearly every undulation of the ground, every crack. Towering above it, glowing in golden sunlight, was the jagged, rocky crown of the Dufourspitze, and beyond the Grenz glacier the huge bastion of the Lyskamm. Over the deep incision of the Grenz glacier the eye wandered to the ice giants of the Wallis Alps, Mont Blanc, Grand Combin, over the—even at this height—commanding figure of the Matterhorn, to the nobly formed peaks of the Dent Blanche and Weisshorn, and farther over the Bernese Alps to the Eastern Alps, an unlimited sea of peaks standing quiet and distant under the translucent green evening sky, a picture of the most solemn greatness and indescribable majesty. To me it seemed as though I were looking down from a planet floating high in space, upon the earth far beneath, so quite cut off one seems from the everyday world up there, where time and space seem to be no more. Like a ball of fiery gold the sun sank behind the Dent Blanche; at one stroke the rigidity of death fell over the wide glacier world, and we fled from the icy west wind into the comfort of the warm hut. There we sat with some other tourists over a dish of delicious spaghetti and a steaming glass of mulled wine, all very merry and very content. It often happens that at this height tourists are overcome by mountain sickness and feel miserably ill. At last, filled with deep and thankful joy for the rich experiences of the day, we sought our pallets. After a fairly good night—one rarely sleeps well at this height owing to the quickening of the pulses—the attendant woke us in the morning with the news that the weather had changed. Dark clouds were coming up from the Italian valleys, the Lyskamm was hidden in fog, and we had to give up our plan of climbing that mountain also. So I said farewell to the Capanna Margherita; but as we descended the Grenz glacier to the Bétemps Hut I felt quite sure that I should come again, for the picture of the lonely hut looking out over valleys and peaks into the endless depths of the heavens remained indelibly printed in my heart.

(Translated by E. N. BENNETT.)