

## 2. THE MATTERHORN.

BY JAMES McCOSS.

WHAT is there about the Matterhorn which gives it such worldwide reputation? Not merely its height, for, though it boasts the very respectable altitude of 4,505 metres (14,776 feet), there are at least five higher summits in its immediate neighbourhood. It is its unique and stupendous shape—it stands quite alone, and not, like most mountains, as part of a connecting ridge. It is an immense four-sided rock pyramid rearing its majestic summit about 10,000 feet above Zermatt, like a huge wave curling over to break. The actual height of the rock peak above its supporting base of green alp and snowy glaciers is about 6,000 feet. It can be said at once that its reputation rests on no insecure basis. It is undoubtedly the most fascinating of mountains, having a purity of outline and solitary grandeur, and a certain character both sinister and menacing.

Whymper said of the mountain: "However exalted may be your ideas, and however exaggerated your expectations, you will not come to return disappointed after gazing upon its awful precipices and wonder at its unique form."

The first time I saw the Matterhorn at close quarters was from below Breuil in the Valtournanche on the Italian side of the mountain. The late Robert Clarke and I traversed the Théodule Pass from Breuil to Zermatt, guided by the son of Jean Antoine Carrel, who competed with Whymper for the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865.\* While looking at the mountain from the summit of the pass I decided that I would ascend it at the first possible opportunity. Five years had passed before I again rounded the corner near Zermatt, and saw the whole stretch of the mountain glittering in the sunlight with fresh snow upon its mighty rock wall. The ascent of it then seemed absolutely impossible. The Swiss Ridge between the east and north faces, though the easiest route, seems to rise at an angle of  $70^{\circ}$ , which is alarmingly steep. In reality, this is something of an illusion, for the

\* See "Scrambles in the Alps," by E. Whymper.



general angle up to the shoulder, or for about three-quarters of its height, is not more than  $40^{\circ}$ , or about the steepness of the Black Spout of Lochnagar. Above the shoulder the mountain steepens sharply, and much of the upper face is nearly as vertical as it looks. After I arrived at Zermatt the weather became bad and the snow-line came down to 8,000 feet. Through the telescope one could see a party of three moving outside the Solvay Hut, apparently, for the time being; they could get neither up nor down owing to ice-covered rocks.

After five days spent in climbing lower heights, the Matterhorn got into climbing condition, and I arranged with the guide to leave the next afternoon. When we left Zermatt for the Belvidere Hut at 10,820 feet, the weather was perfect. Our pace, set by the guide, was about two miles per hour, which seemed to me to be ridiculously slow, but as he had ascended the mountain more than ninety times, I thought he ought to know what he was doing. We very soon left the level ground and started the steep path on the Alp side. It appeared we were to have a non-stop of over 5,000 feet, so I very soon found the pace which neither slowed nor quickened, but kept a steady mechanical rhythm, to be quite correct and fast enough. When we arrived at the well-known little lochan named Schwarzee, a few flakes of snow whirled around us. The weather quickly changed, the mountain above became smothered in storm, and the sky grew very dark. Rain fell in torrents and a thunder-storm broke over us with terrific force. We persevered and climbed up the steep path on to the Hörnli. On the ridge we went into a blinding snow-storm with thunder and lightning, so the guide wisely decided to turn. His opinion was that the mountain could not be ascended next morning, so we ran back to the Schwarzee Hotel, soaked to the skin. Next morning I had some difficulty in persuading the guide to go up to the hut because he thought that the mountain was quite out of condition. However, the day turned out bright, warm, and windless, so we moved up to the Belvidere in readiness for the next morning. After a perfect day I watched a magnificent sunset. The warm rosy glow gradually crept



up the white slopes of Monte Rosa, leaving the glaciers at the foot a dull and sullen hue in comparison, and finally one could tell the highest mountains by the lingering afterglow. The Weisshorn was particularly grand with its long sweeping ridge dyed by the last rays of the sun. Far below, the Zermatt Valley was now in twilight, and the lighted windows of the hotels showed up as bright points of light. The impressive silence was broken at intervals by the rumble of avalanches in different directions. After dark I went again to the door of the hut, and there I found that the wet footmarks in the sun-softened snow were now solid ice. The stars were shining in the clear sky with a brilliancy I had never before perceived. We were awake at 2.30 A.M., the guide made coffee, and we had breakfast.

The morning, although intensely cold, was perfect. To the east the Pleiades, Taurus, and the celestial Castor and Pollux were hanging like jewels in the sky. We roped up in the hut, lit the lantern, and started at 3.15 A.M. After crossing a small patch of snow we turned to the left and made a traverse round a bulge of rock, which did not seem very easy in the feeble light of one candle-power. However, after passing this point the climbing became excellent and very enjoyable and the standard of difficulty was not very high, but, of course, the route had to be known to the leader. The guide was grand, he seemed to know every hand and foothold, and we worked well together. A short distance below the old hut the dawn began to come, and a pale yellow coloured the horizon. The lantern was extinguished. We walked through the old hut, which was built two years after the first ascent. There were only a few spars protruding through the snow to proclaim its position on the ridge. After ascending a short distance I looked up the ridge and, to my surprise, I saw that the sun had caught the summit ridge and it seemed on fire. Summit after summit held the brilliant rose-tinted rays long before the sun appeared. Westward the dome of Mont Blanc was a glittering orange-red shade along with hundreds of other summits. It was indeed a most unforgettable sight this coming of the sun. We were very soon in the sunlight, and I was glad of its



warmth. We put on our spectacles and again proceeded with the business near at hand. In due course we reached Moseley's slab, and I found it easier than the smooth slab at the foot of Raeburn's Gully, Lochnagar. At 6 A.M. we arrived at the Solvay Hut—height 12,526 feet—and had No. 2 breakfast. We resumed our climb and found a lot of new snow on the ridge. Presently we reached the shoulder, situated at the height of 13,925 feet. At the vertical part the face was plastered with ice, and the guide said that but for the fixed rope further progress would have been impossible. He ascended the rope hand over hand with feet scraping on the face. At the top he held the rope with one hand and cut the first step over the edge. When my turn came I did not find it easy, and I was thankful that there was no wind. Above the shoulder a steep snow-slope ran up for some distance, and the guide cut very large comforting steps. We belayed each other and only moved one at a time. He was splendid, and thoroughly knew his business, besides being an excellent companion. Beyond the snow-slope we came to a stretch of sharp arête completely free of snow or ice. I found it to be about the order of difficulty of the "Black Men" of Beinn Eighe, only there was an appalling precipice on the right. Above we then came to a bulge of rock that is rather exposed, and beyond it we walked on to the top at 8.15 A.M., making the sixth ascent of the season. We had taken exactly five hours from the Belvidere. This works out at about 790 feet per hour, which seems to indicate that the Swiss ridge is not the standard of difficulty we are accustomed to on our rock climbs at home. The physical effort is much greater, but the technical difficulty is not so high as, say, Raeburn's Gully, Lochnagar, or the Pinnacle Ridge of Sgurr nan Gillean. The summit consists of a narrow rock ridge perhaps three times the length of an 80-foot rope. From the Swiss end converges the Furggen and the Swiss ridges, and at the Italian end is the junction of the Zmutt and the Italian arêtes. The Italian end should be visited if only for the stupendous views down that side. I sat on the summit for one glorious hour and enjoyed the wonderful panorama of snow-clad ranges, with the elation that grips



every person who is favoured by being on the high places of the earth. Just as one dips into the stupendous distances of the sun-powdered universe, so is one's smallness felt on such a mountain-top as the Matterhorn. We started to descend at 9.15 A.M. and used great care in going down the snow-slope above the shoulder. At 1.30 P.M. we were back at the Belvidere enjoying hot soup. We had taken four hours fifteen minutes in the descent. At 5 P.M. I was down at Zermatt, tired but gloriously satisfied. I had worked on the assumption that I might never again be on the Matterhorn and had taken my fill of the atmosphere of this wonderful mountain. Next day the clouds were down to 8,000 feet, and, when they lifted, a snow-line appeared at that height. The Matterhorn looked majestic with its new coating of snow, and its summit piercing the blue sky, nearly two vertical miles above Zermatt.

