

Lightning on the Mönch *Rhona Fraser*

Regular readers of this journal will be well aware of my fascination with thunder and lightning storms, for they have been the basis of many an article^{1,2}. This one is no exception. I have always been awed by the amazing power to be witnessed in the heavens during such events. The noise, the searing light, but most of all the patterns of brown and grey colliding in huge masses in the sky. No wonder the ancient Greeks believed the Gods and Titans were fighting. Nature, I suppose, having a tantrum!!!



The Summit Ridge of the Mönch

Peter Bellarby and I met at the Swiss town of Grindelwald in August 2004, he having just finished leading a Waymark holiday, I having briefly attended a Ladies Scottish Climbing Club meet. Lots of the 'ladies' had managed to climb the Mönch the week before, and having had a week of acclimatisation, we felt that this would be a reasonable target. We attempted to book the Mönchhütte beneath the mountain, but it was full, so we stayed overnight in the Kleine Scheidegg Hotel. Pictures of historic expeditions lined the hotel wall, and books in the library told of epic

battles on the Eiger and Jungfrau. The Mönch, the middle hill of the trinity, was hardly mentioned.

Next morning we got the earliest train to the Jungfraujoch. The forecast was reasonable: no storms were expected that day, though the weather was due to deteriorate over the next couple of days. On reaching the top station we were greeted with blue skies and a slightly cloudy mountain: nothing to worry about. After an easy start from the glacier, we put on crampons. As usual, being unguided, we lost time trying to find the correct route, having to retrace our steps to get round a small rocky tower. The climb then flattened out into an easy-angled rocky ridge, where I discovered the unexpected delight of climbing rock in crampons. The points cut into the small cracks, nice!!! This rocky ridge led to a narrow snow section, then to steeper rocks and a final steep snow section. The grade of the climb is PD, due I believe to the almost horizontal, but very narrow, exposed summit ridge. This proved to be not as nerve-wracking as I (with no head for heights) expected, since the cloud blanked out any sense of exposure.

We started our descent just after one o'clock in the afternoon. As we made our way down, we saw two other groups, climbing upwards. Did I hear thunder? Surely not?? The clouds were still white, and I did not feel the usual sense of pressure or foreboding which accompanies an approaching storm. Shortly after getting to the start of the narrow snow section, we crossed the path of one of the groups, comprising two men and a woman (I assume the other party had descended). Almost immediately after they disappeared from view, IT happened. My ski poles started to hum, a pressure headache formed on my forehead, and clouds darkened. We had to get down NOW.

We were indeed fortunate. The first lightning happened to arrive just as we had descended a steep rocky section and before the start of the narrow snow leading to the easy-angled ridge. We had to stay put. It was nerve-wracking, but to continue along the next exposed section would have been too dangerous. What made conditions even worse was that snow was now starting to fall. Not only was there a risk from the lightning, but also from the increasingly cold and wet conditions on the ground. It was hard staying put in such cold, but we had to reassure ourselves we were in a relatively safe position and the storm was unlikely to last long. After what seemed only a few minutes, we were surprised and relieved to see the other group descend to our location. However, I was slightly taken aback to realise that they were not stopping with us, but continuing down the hill. As he passed us, the back marker muttered "it is best to get off". We waited briefly, but as the storm seemed to be receding, the herd instinct came to play and, with some relief, we started to follow.

What a difference descending from ascending: no belays, no hesitation, as fast, and as low to the ground as possible. The other party had just reached a slight rise in the ridge when I felt a definite knock on the head: not painful but a definite brief sensation of pressure. Peter later said he felt it too. I knew it meant something, and in this fraught situation it would not be good. I sank to the snow, placing my ice axe as far away as possible. Almost immediately, the woman in the middle of the group seemed to slip, there was a streak of yellow light (I was wearing snow goggles), and the back marker crumpled to the ground – his legs had just folded under him. Nobody falls like that consciously, and from my position, at the most only 20 meters away, I knew I had witnessed a direct lightning strike. He was so still, his stillness in stark contrast to the cries of distress from the woman. I was now lying face down in the newly fallen snow with “hell” above and most probably a dead body meters away. The claps of thunder and flashes of lightning had returned with renewed vigour. The noise and light were simultaneous, almost continuous, and truly deafening, only inches above my head. Electric force was in a frenzy and I was in the middle of it. I should not be here; nothing should be here!!!! I waited for the next hit, trying to reassure myself, that if struck, death would be instantaneous and inevitable. Forked lightning was circling the summit, perhaps hitting the metal abseil posts on mountain, one of which was between me and the stricken climber.

Eventually, when the noise and the light seemed to separate, I very gingerly crawled towards the fallen man, expecting to see death. The woman enthusiastically announced he had started to breathe. Breathing or not, the lasting memory of this sad event was the appalling smell of burning flesh and the torn singed mess that was the man’s shoulder. I did not have the heart to say anything, but I knew. Peter noticed his ice axe several feet away.

We then found out that the fallen man was a guide, and that the woman had used his radio to summon help. What could we do? Believing it to be a short walk, we had failed to bring any extra clothing (a lesson in itself), the only thing we could have given to help the situation. The two remaining members of the party reassured us that help had been summoned, and we were safe to leave the scene. However, the scene had now changed from the rather benign rocky scramble to a snow-covered slippery slope. It had taken us two to three hours to climb up but was to take us five hours to descend, belaying slowly down the transformed and now dangerous hill. By the time I reached the easier lower slopes I wanted to be sick, a combination of fear, lack of food and altitude. The shaking, perhaps due to lying for a prolonged period in the snow, started shortly afterwards. For once, I was off my food. Normally, Peter has the poor appetite, but he was hungry. At the hut I only wanted my bed, safe and warm.

The next day we read in the papers that the guide had died in hospital. The woman had been his daughter. I suspect that he had taken his daughter, with her boyfriend, on a short summer afternoon stroll on the Mönch. After these events, there was little enthusiasm for the holiday and we finished by doing a mountain marathon run. At the mid-camp, I witnessed a storm over the Weisshorn: black, very black and very vicious. I stood and watched it, and pondered: a few days before, I had been at the bottom of the flashes, in the middle of the darkness.

References

1. A Solo Ascent of the Munros and Corbetts, *Cairngorm Club Journal*, Vol 20 no. 104, 1996, p. 161.
2. Scarecrow on a Pyramid, *Cairngorm Club Journal*, Vol 21 no. 107, 2004, p. 154

Walking

On the day after a wedding celebration at Braemar on the 31st July 2004

We dined simply, with ghosts,
in the ruined Bynack Lodge
before making our way towards
Carn Liath's summit.

The world was ours
until a moving hillside
drew senses across the valley
to where, on plucked staccato hooves
antlers, spindle legs and close packed bodies
funnelled the July air.

From the slowing, stopping,
turning, staring herd
rose calls
low and generational.

Umbilical severed
need not yet outlived.

Sheena M Leith