

THE MATTERHORN COULOIR BY NIGHT

By E. B. BEAUMAN

ALTHOUGH this little escapade took place some ten years ago, I am still quite unrepentant and shall always look back on it as one of the better expeditions. It happened like this: I had arrived at Zermatt the day before, and as I was strolling back in the evening after a pleasant training walk to the Schönbühl hut, in the village I met Lincoln O'Brien, President of the Harvard Mountaineering Club. He immediately greeted me with the startling suggestion: 'I've had no exercise to-day bar a couple of tango lessons; come up the Matterhorn Couloir with me tonight.'

A number of more agreeable ways of passing the hours of darkness immediately flashed through my mind, but I had not the moral courage to refuse, and to my horror I heard myself weakly answering: 'All right; when do we start?' The Matterhorn Couloir, as the majority of the readers of this JOURNAL know, is situated on the far side of the Riffelhorn and is so called because it faces that famous mountain. It is a steep funnel-shaped gully rising in a series of rock pitches from the Gorner Glacier for a distance of roughly 1400 ft. almost to the summit of the Riffelhorn. This route has become very rightly a most popular rock climb, especially when the weather is bad and the big mountains are out of condition. I suppose that by British rock-climbing standards it might be classified as an easy or moderate very difficult. Incidentally these modern classifications are most intriguing—I believe that in ascending order of difficulty they run something like this: easy, moderate, difficult, easy very difficult, moderate very difficult, very difficult, easy severe, moderate severe, severe, very severe, easy impossible, and so on.

But to continue: after making a few hasty preparations, we just had time to catch the last funicular of the day up to the Riffelberg station. In the train we met a friendly guide who was on his way to a neighbouring hut. On learning our project he regretted that he would be away and so not available to join the rescue party which would be searching for our corpses on the following day. In the gathering dusk we skirted the grassy shoulder of the Riffelhorn and stumbled over loose boulders down on to the glacier below. At this time of night our couloir looked more gloomy and forbidding than usual, and I racked my brain in vain to try and think of an excuse for taking exercise in some other and more reasonable form. It was now almost dark, with no moon, and if we were to be up before dawn we must hurry; so we quickly changed our climbing-boots for *scarpette* and at a quarter to nine stepped (or rather jumped) from the snow on to the first rocks. In case it may be of interest to future night climbers I will try to

explain our methods. I first shone the electric torch on to the rocks ; O'Brien would then climb up as far as possible, sometimes to the end of the 70-ft. rope ; as soon as he stopped I followed as best I could, groping optimistically for the invisible holds and more often than not swinging helplessly in mid-air. As this way of doing things caused me to grumble slightly, my leader suggested that I should try one of the qualifications necessary for membership of his Club—that is to say, to light the way by suspending a candle lantern from one's mouth. After burning my chin severely and dazzling myself completely I gave up the attempt and informed him that I doubted whether I should ever be elected to the Harvard Club except possibly as an Honorary Member.

Occasionally we strayed from the correct route, but fortunately owing to the narrowness of the gully it was not possible to go very far wrong. All things considered we were making fairly good progress and at eleven o'clock we reached a small grassy ledge known as the Kalbermatten, where it is usual in the daytime to have lunch on the way up the climb.

We, on the other hand, reversed the process and started eating a light supper of dried prunes and sardines. While we were doing so we spent a decidedly *mauvais quart d'heure*. For first of all, probably due to lack of training, I was seized with a violent fit of cramp and O'Brien had to rope me on to a rock to prevent my rolling off the ledge. Then suddenly from just above us came a loud and horrid groaning sound followed by a shower of small stones which whizzed past our heads. It was a great relief when my companion whispered to me : ' Did you hear that too or am I dreaming ? '

It was a perfectly still night, and I can offer no satisfactory explanation of this strange incident. A short time later I was recounting it to an old guide who remarked : ' Oh yes, in the old days we often used to hear and see these spirits, but now so many people have come to the mountains that most of the *Geister* have been driven away.' He then told me the story of the ghost-boy of the Gorner Glacier whom many years ago they frequently saw leaping from crevasse to crevasse. Parties near enough used to amuse themselves by hurling stones at him, which if the aim were good passed through his ' body ' in a most diverting manner. Apparently the poor boy was trying to get a little of his own back on this occasion.

But ghost or no ghost, retreat was now impossible, and we must push on. A short way ahead of us lay what we imagined would be the crux of the ascent—a steep, almost holdless slab. If we could surmount this successfully the peak was probably ours. At the foot of it, in order to reach as high as possible, O'Brien stepped on to my shoulders, but to his disgust I proved a broken reed and we both collapsed feebly to the ground. However, without any assistance he eventually managed to reach a hold with one hand and by a fine piece of delicate climbing slowly raised himself to the top of the pitch. As he shouted ' I'm up ' the electric torch which I had been shining on the wall flickered and went out.

For the next hour or so nothing of any note occurred except that one of my *scarpette* came off and dropped down several hundred feet—not that it mattered much as by now the rope soles were wet through and practically useless. A short time afterwards we emerged from the inky blackness of the couloir on to the final slopes of the Riffelhorn, where from the distance the dim snows of the Lyskamm greeted us.

Now only one serious problem remained—the summit rocks of the peak are guarded on this side by a difficult 40-ft. chimney—the *Gegenloch*. There is actually an easy way round this obstacle, but by candlelight we were unable to find it. O'Brien with his long reach climbed the chimney in fine style and soon I heard him shout 'Come along, I can almost touch the summit cairn.' First of all, in order to lighten myself as much as possible I sent up on the rope the rucksack containing our climbing boots and a few odds and ends. I then tried to follow my leader, but unfortunately I am not blessed with a similar reach and I was quite unable to attain the first holds. The rope was not directly above me, so that a friendly pull would not have helped. Time after time I tried to climb up, but without the slightest success, while from above I heard faint cries of 'When are you coming?' 'What's the matter?' 'Shall I pull?' etc., etc., which I discreetly ignored.

After about three-quarters of an hour of fruitless struggling, I decided that something drastic must be done at once, so shouting loudly 'Pull like blazes,' I jumped out on to the wall on my left directly under the summit. For a moment or two the rope above me became wedged in a crack and I was swinging backwards and forwards like a pendulum—then it gradually tightened and before long I lay gasping beside my companion. 'Well,' he said, kindly punctuating his remarks with the brandy flask, 'I'm very pleased to see you again; I thought I might have to spend the rest of my life up here alone.' It was now a quarter to three, exactly six hours after we had left the glacier.

On the top as tokens of our victory we placed my one remaining *scarpetta* and a half-burnt candle, and then started off down the ordinary route. We had imagined that by now all our troubles were ended, but in the darkness we frequently lost ourselves on this broad face.

Nevertheless by the first light of dawn we were eating an early breakfast on the shores of the little Riffelsee, and soon afterwards in the morning freshness we were wandering contentedly down the path through the beautiful pinewoods towards Zermatt. On the way we discussed with pleasurable anticipation the prospects of a good hot bath and a real breakfast—but as we drew near the Monte Rosa Hotel we saw to our dismay that the worst had happened, for waiting on the doorstep to 'welcome' us back stood Frau Imfeld and the then Honorary Secretary of the Club.