

FROM A DIARY OF 1907

BY F. J. SALMON

ON AUGUST 8, 1907, my lifelong friend the late Charles Gos and I crossed from Bertol to the Matterhorn hut. We were bound for the traverse of the Lyskamm and Zwillinge but we had with us Manley Farrer who wanted to 'do' the Matterhorn before leaving for England two days later. At the hut we were joined by eight young students from Zürich, some Swiss, some German. Next morning we managed to get away before the others.

The ordinary route in those days was along the top of the Furgg-Gletscher, under the first couloirs and up on to the face but at the base of the couloirs some blood and the track of a sledge reminded us that, three days before, a solitary German had been killed there by a falling stone and so, although it was early for stone-falls, we took to some not very easy rocks and crossed the couloirs near their top (I understand that nowadays people usually go straight up from the Hörnli).

At the Ancienne Cabane, where we had a snack, the other party scuttled past us without so much as a 'by your leave'. For another hour or so we scrambled along the regular route until the others got on to some rocks encumbered by snow and verglas when they turned into a little couloir which led them up on to the crest of the ridge into difficulties. We shouted to them that they were on the wrong route but they argued that they must be right as they had found a fork and a sardine tin—is there anywhere on the Matterhorn where you will not find such things? They would not wait while we passed under them and, to avoid the showers of debris they were sending down, we had to follow them up to and along the ridge. They were on three ropes and when the first one got stuck on a little gendarme the last two came down on to the face to pass under them and the leader was knocked off by a falling rock which luckily hit him on the rucksack. By a miracle the rope held, for it was little stouter than a length of sash-cord but other stones fell and he finished up a sorry sight—unconscious, his breeches in tatters, several nasty cuts and a hole in his thigh. We bandaged him up as best we could and his companions started letting him down but he soon came to and helped himself along although he could use only one leg. Although in great pain he showed remarkable courage and was the only one of his party who did not seem scared. We must have been somewhere near where the Solvay hut now stands. Progress was desperately slow and it was clear that he would have to pass the night on the mountain so we found

a rock which gave him some degree of shelter and left him and his friends with all our spare clothes, some food and our only lantern. The idea was that we were to get down to the hut, that Gos and I would return in the morning to help and that Farrer, who had to catch a train anyway, would go down for assistance.

Then a storm broke, a real beauty with hail and magnificent flashes of lightning. Our axes were singing and I got a slight shock down the back of my neck. Farrer, an electrical engineer declared that our axes could not possibly be a danger but, all the same, he preferred to see them stacked some way away from us! In this connection it may be interesting to record that three days previously I was standing on the top of the Aiguille de la Za while a storm had developed on the Bouquetins three miles away and, simultaneously with a flash of lightning on the Bouquetins I heard a tzinging noise and got quite an appreciable shock down my back. I dismissed this as a harmless brush discharge and it was not till forty-one years later that Geoffrey Winthrop Young told me that such shocks could be fatal.

When the storm had cleared, four of the others decided to come down too but we separated as they insisted on clattering straight down the East face, dislodging vast quantities of rubbish.

It soon got dark and I could barely see where I was putting my feet as we had no lantern but, on my suggestion that we should lay up, Gos, who must have had eyes like a cat, assured us that he would get us off the mountain. In one place I led down a chimney supported by the rope as I could not see the holds. Fortunately Gos had a stump of candle in his pocket and there was now not a breath of wind, so, with that stuck on the top of an axe, we were able to show him where to put his feet. Finally, at the rimaye, we could not see to prospect for a possible crossing so I was lowered over on to a fair landing and Gos came down last on a 'rappel' over a large loose rock which we distinctly heard to shift when it took his weight—his only remark was 'il faut bien descendre'. We reached the hut at 11.30, where we found two Lausanne students who had seen the accident through a telescope, from the Schwarzsee, and had phoned Zermatt for a rescue party which was on its way up with an English doctor. We later learned that the lad had some broken ribs and some nasty cuts and contusions but that he would soon recover.

Gos presented me with a copy of his book, *Le Cervin*. On the title page is the inscription 'En souvenir d'un bel orage au Cervin'.

On the way down from the Lyskamm we met, at the Riffelalp, Geoffrey Young. Gos and his friend Jean Kappeyne after climbing the Zmutt ridge had met Young on the summit of the Matterhorn. He described him to me as 'un chic type bien calé'.¹

The following day Gos and I were plodding up the Trift moraine in

¹ See *On High Hills*, p. 118.

the dark on the way to a traverse of the Rothorn when we saw a bright beam of light issuing from high up on the ridge of the Weisshorn. We were completely mystified and could only think that the army was trying some extraordinary experiment with a searchlight. Shortly afterwards the beam became detached from the mountain and showed itself to be a small comet.

On the Rothorn summit we were joined by an American lady with a couple of guides. To some remark of mine about the magnificence of the view she replied that she thought it was 'just cunning'. The men, as second-rate guides were wont to do in those days, made caustic remarks about guideless parties until one of them discovered that Gos was a lieutenant in his mountain battery.

I was an inexperienced ice-man and for me to lead, without crampons, down the long arête 'du Blanc' was an interesting experience, for on one stretch—fortunately not a long one—I had to cut along a ridge of ice. In 1947, from above the Mountet hut, I noticed that the easy snow-covered ice slope down which we had plunged forty years before, was now bare rock.