

HOW THE HANGMAN LOST HIS DROP

BY G. W. MURRAY

ONE of the Swiss Breithorns, a lion with a mane of snow, lords it over the Lauterbrunnen valley with his tail in the Lötschental. From his left shoulder an easy route descends to the Wetterlücke, from the right a more difficult one falls to the Breithornjoch. In 1865, he was tamed by Herr Edmund von Fellenberg with a phalanx of four guides. Yet, so late as 1928, nobody had followed the lion's backbone right up to his head. Not that the spine is difficult. But, behind the big Breithorn, there stands a younger brother and, into the gap between the pair, nobody had yet descended. Or, if they had, and I think it probable, nobody had returned to tell their tale. Others had prudently recoiled.¹

Knowing nothing of this, my wife and I with Alfred Supersaxo looked down on August 9 from the Klein Breithorn on a prospect that might have inspired Mummery's 'vision of immanent dissolution that the hangman himself with all his paraphernalia could hardly hope to excel'. (Yes, this is a period piece—guided climbers, no ironmongery, no *corde de rappel*. It should have been staged in the last century.) But, how did we come to be there?

That decade after the First World War saw the mountains enduring assault from the ladies of Great Britain, France and the United States. Nea Barnard had led the Arrowhead arête, Gladys Scott 'had spoken disrespectfully of the Matterhorn couloir'. The very next year was to see Alice Damesme lead Miriam O'Brien up the Mummery crack. Most ladies did not, however, disdain male guidance. When they existed, husbands and brothers helped. When they didn't, professional assistance was at hand. For the guides of the Valais had lost many of their Herren in the war and welcomed the feminine invaders.

The Cairney sisters had come to the Alps with high spirits and high hopes. For their first adventure they collected a bad guide, a worse porter and a tumble of 200 ft. down a snow slope on the Jungfrau. They went on climbing. In 1923 they became the third and fourth of their sex to ascend the Viereselsgrat. Now for something new!

But, even thirty years ago, justifiable new routes were hard to find in the Alps. The thrusters had to charge really dangerous precipices, craftier folk sought cliffs that looked dangerous enough to scare other

¹ A.J. 63. 109, says 'this route defeated many parties'. Possibly because many bold climbers do not feel quite so sure of themselves climbing *down*.

people off. Dr. Maud Cairney did not resent the title of dare-devil and, in 1926, she with Théophile and Cyprien Theytaz made a fool-hardy climb down the North face of Lo Besso, during which the Theytaz's appetite for *descentes en rappel* was actually sated. Later, the same party made the first winter ascent from Mountet of the Ober Gabelhorn.

Edith, the younger Cairney, who had married, thought 1927 her year to shine. Lured by Théophile's promise of a genuine new ridge on the Grand Cornier, she and her new husband spent ten days (and 840 francs) in the same Mountet hut, waiting for really good weather. During an interval, we escaped to Bel Alp to make the first ascent of *that season* of the Aletschhorn. This was duly noted in the *Echo de Valais* and copied (without the qualifying italics) by the *Daily Mail*. Astounded, we read, 'LONDONERS FIRST. Mr. and Mrs. Murray of London have made the first ascent of the Aletschhorn, 13,235 feet.' Not the sort of fame we hankered after. Fortunately, no initials had been given while our then address lay 2,000 miles from London. Thus we escaped raillery. But it had been a near thing. On the Grand Cornier, we got our ridge. But, it turned out that, unknown to the Theytaz, two guideless Swiss had been up before us. Maud was still ahead of Edith.

The year 1928 was very dry and Théophile, who had long had his eye on the virgin North ridge of the Dent Blanche, thought his moment had come. But, before Maud could join him, they learned to their surprise and envy of the successful attempt on it by Joseph Georges *le skieur* with Dorothy Pilley, now Mrs. I. A. Richards, and her husband. Even so, Théophile still hoped for a new route on the North face.

While waiting for Maud, he took the Murrays to Zinal over the Weiss-horn. We descended *par les cordes*, the 2,500 ft. of pitons and ropes with which his clan had dishonoured the fine climb made by Benoît Theytaz with Geoffrey Winthrop Young in 1900. Where the old ropes had perished my new *corde de rappel* came in useful. So useful, indeed, that it completely wore out. That is to say, it was never seen again. I didn't grudge it, then—the grudge came later on the Klein Breithorn. Théophile showed us the place where his Uncle Benoît had slipped while fixing a rope and wakened up 20 ft. down to hear his brothers discussing whether to carry the corpse down to Zinal or just throw it down. Benoît survived the discussion many a long year.

We foregathered with Maud at the Bietschhorn hut. For guide, we had Alfred, a red-headed Supersaxo from Saas; for Maud, we engaged a grandfather with a long grey beard out of the last century, Theodor Kalbermatten. The Bietschhorn once disposed of, the guides got talking. Old Theodor had been Mr. H. V. Reade's leading guide on the South ridge of the Breithorn in 1896. In 1894, two Manchester climbers, E. F. M. Benecke and H. A. Cohen had traversed the first

five pinnacles of the ridge, the Burstspitzen. Next year, they had continued their exploration—and disappeared. In the search for their bodies, Mr. Reade with the Kalbermattens had reached the Klein Breithorn and stopped. Now Theodor recommended Alfred to go in and win. How much of the ridge's history he told Alfred, I cannot say. Alfred, wisely, told us nothing.

Six thousand five hundred vertical feet separated us at Fafler Alp from the *calotte* or snow cap of the Breithorn; but Alfred's pessimistic mind was already up there cutting steps and he insisted on crampons. So, to a pack I already thought heavy, two pairs were added. (They were never used and I haven't quite forgiven Alfred yet.) At 2.10 a.m. I unlatched the door of the inn and stepped out among the topmost trees of the Lötschental, as we might have done from Derry Lodge. Fording the burns by lantern light, we set off up the long desolate glen that leads to the Wetterlücke.

When the time came to quit it, it was still dark so we drove out a lot of protesting sheep from a rock shelter and cowered there in their stead. With the earliest light we were up and off to our ridge which we reached at a conspicuous notch. My watch said 'Five hours from Fafler Alp'.

For forty minutes the scrambling was easy. Then the ridge steepened and we avoided the difficulties, as Mr. Reade had done, to the left. The first set of pinnacles had been nicknamed the Brush Prickles and the second the Fairy Children. They were far from *enfants terribles*; and, at 9.20, we stepped on to the head of the tallest, the Feenkindl, and waited for the mist to clear. Then, over two more sprightly fairies, we marched forward to the Klein Breithorn and easy victory. Then—Alfred may have been warned—but the view took my breath away.

From the left shoulder of our pinnacle an ugly wide chute fell very sheer. Hitherto untrodden, it held much loose debris; since it faced north, the holds and the debris were masked in ice. Yet, only 200 ft. down (five seconds free fall) lay the Promised Land. The summit of the big Breithorn was in cloud. But we could see the base of the *calotte* and nothing but easy rocks led up to it.

Alfred didn't like the look of the icy holds. (Looking back, I suppose old Theodor had prated of Benecke and Cohen.) Hardly a job for the last man down, he concluded. But Alfred is shy, he doesn't blurt his conclusions out, he mutters. Edith knew her Alfred, she caught his meaning and fired up. 'Aren't we going to try it?' Alfred caught her meaning and fired up too. The game was still alive.

Very gingerly I began to descend. Fifty feet down at the end of the chute, I waited for the rest. Down they came in turn, Alfred with our lives in his boots. Then I edged off to the right to the centre line of the great pinnacle while Alfred remarked slyly, 'Thank God my wife

can't see me here.' The next two pitches were, by comparison, safe enough.

Then, below a bulge still 20 ft. above *terra firma*, the holds petered out and, for one moment, I thought the Breithorn had one more trick up its sleeve. But, over my shoulder, I saw that a friendly gendarme had come up to meet me and, pushing off strongly with both feet from the cliff, I swung right across and laid firm hold of his rugged head.

The Breithorn was in the bag. I untied and sent up the rope.

Down they came, kicking as I had kicked. Then, roping up, we swarmed nimbly over the last easy rocks to the foot of the *calotte*. There, thrifty of our time, Alfred did not cut a step. Instead, he led us on the level round to the Western ridge and the usual way up. There we found plenty of steps and, in ten more minutes, we stood on the summit. It was one o'clock.

Our descent was anticlimax. Rather tired people climbing carefully down strange easy rocks. Soft snow on the Wetterlücke. Definitely tired people crawling down a tiresome glacier. Parting digs in my shoulders from those hateful crampons. At a very long last, Fafler Alp and dinner.

So the hangman lost his drop and it turned into the Hedwigkamin, 'an easy day for a lady'. Indeed, Dr. Lauper's guide-book calls our climb 'very rewarding'. And a stranger I met in the Monte Rosa some years later spoke highly of it. I did not let out what a fright it had given us.

Metaphorically, Maud put out her tongue at us. Only two days later, with Théophile she made such a route on the North face of the Dent Blanche as to earn a reproof from Marcel Kurz. 'Itinéraire très dangereux et très difficile' his guide-book says. That is not quite fair to Théophile; in 1928, the time, the place and the man all came together. But guide-books have to be written for ordinary people in ordinary years. It was Maud's farewell season. In the autumn, she went out to Malaya and, when she came back, it was only to die. Flamboyant Théophile was killed just before the war in an ignominious way—for a rock climber. He had a clownish trick of ending a pitch by jumping down both feet together on to an easy ledge. One winter night, he jumped down thus on to a frozen road. His feet shot out and the back of his head cracked on the asphalt. A tragic end to a most daring guide.

As for their rivals, we have lived happily ever afterwards.