

A SOLO TRAVERSE OF
THE MATTERHORN, 1961

BY W. F. WATSON

THE first part of my holiday was spent at Chamonix, where, with John Winter, I had quite an adventurous time. A sixty-four-hour traverse of the Grépon and a thirty-two-hour traverse of Petit and Grand Drus give some idea of the weather and the conditions we experienced. It was on the descent of the Grand Dru, during the traverse of the Drus, that John fell off and suffered injuries which we found later included three broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder and internal injuries. The Chamonix doctors despatched him for home and hospital.

Our programme had been to move to Zermatt, so in spite of losing John I still decided to go, even if it meant only admiring the beauty of the Matterhorn and talking to my great friends Adolf Schaller and Bernard Biner. This, however, was not to be; even the charms of my two friends could not suppress the magic of the Matterhorn from awakening a secret ambition I had nursed for years. This was to traverse the Matterhorn alone, from Zermatt to Breuil and back to Zermatt in one day without the aid of the huts and the mountain railways.

I decided to leave at 10.30 p.m. that same day, August 29. The biggest problem, as it always is, was what to take and what to leave behind, which was not made easier by our apparent preference during the Chamonix expeditions for sleeping tied to a piton on rock rather than in a bed. When I had packed, Bernard Biner, former Chief Guide of Zermatt, picked up my sack in horror with the gasp, 'I have never in the whole of my career climbed with a sack approaching that weight.' Result: out went my duvet jacket, over-trousers, etc.; in fact, the bivouac clothing—everything I wished I had had on our Dru and Grépon bivouacs. After Herr Biner's kit inspection, I made myself a meal which I knew would have to last me for around 24 hours. I also added a few slices of bread and honey to the chocolate rations in the sack.

At 10.30 p.m. I walked through the brightly-lit streets of Zermatt and was soon on to the track leading to the Schwarzsee. It was a beautiful night: moon, stars, everything gave promise for a good climb. Night seems to change the appearance and character of the mountains and one seems to be brought closer to them than in the day. How much pleasanter this route to the Hörnli was by night than by day,



Photo, W. F. Watson]

BREUIL FROM THE SUMMIT OF THE MATTERHORN.

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when there are usually so many people about. At a little after midnight I passed the Schwarzsee and, as it was a little cooler, I put on the anorak. It did not seem long before the Hörnli hut was reached, but I did not stop. It was only two o'clock and there was a light burning inside, but perhaps it was a little too early for most people.

On reaching the foot of the Swiss ridge proper, I put my pullover on under the anorak, and attached the lamp to my waist. I was now set to make the summit my next stop. Although the lamp was available, I did not use it. The moon and stars continued my good friends. The Matterhorn has been described as 'that marvellous heap of rubble', and it is this section, between the foot of the Hörnli ridge and the Shoulder, that the writer no doubt had particularly in mind. Care had to be taken with the route over this part because there are so many variations, some very much better than others. The guides will favour one variation, and perhaps keep to it for years, until some guide finds a slightly easier and quicker route. Of course erosion is also taking place, and sometimes inviting *vires* lead to an impasse and have to be reversed.

During the ascent from the site of the old hut to the Solvay hut the light was coming slowly, very slowly, until gradually the rocks ahead became more defined and the landscape to the east was reborn. I looked into the Solvay hut, hoping to find my two friends, Tom Carruthers and Brian Nally, who were making the first British ascent of the North face. Perhaps I was too optimistic in expecting them to make it without a bivouac; they were in fact bivouacking on the face at this moment, and they reached the summit later this same day.

I always think the first pitch up from the terrace, on which the Solvay hut stands, is one of the more interesting and harder pitches on the Hörnli ridge. In descent in bad conditions it can be difficult and requires great care.

With the dawning of the new day, I felt the thrill of having the Matterhorn to myself, a feeling which, if I were capable of putting it into words, would be the complete answer to the question, 'Why do you climb mountains?' The improved light made the choice of route easier, and I soon rejoined the ridge which leads to the Shoulder. From the Shoulder up to the Roof there was a lot of ice, but the real climbing difficulties which this would give are overcome by the iron pitons and the fixed ropes. To lighten my sack, I had left my ice-axe behind, and although I had crampons I did not put them on, but found, as I had on other occasions this season, that a sharp ice-piton grasped like a dagger in the hand was of immense help.

Above the Shoulder, which is around 14,000 ft., I began to feel the effects of ascending nearly 10,000 ft. at a good pace, without rest or refreshment. It was not fatigue, but the stresses put on the body

through insufficient oxygen. Although I had spent lengthy bivouacs fairly high, one at 12,000 ft., the highest I had been this season was the 12,317 ft. summit of the Dru. It was also about this time that I imagined I was accompanied by a friend, and this illusion remained with me until I arrived back at Zermatt. I found this 'second party' was considered in all thoughts and decisions I made, and, when as leader of the rope, I would normally get agreement for a decision I wished to make, I found myself turning to consult him. I do not make any attempt to explain this phenomenon and I am aware that it is by no means uncommon in men who are tired and have spent lengthy periods alone. I would remind the reader that I was to some extent tired, and that I had spent long periods with John Winter without seeing another soul, e.g. three days and nights on one mountain and two days and a night on another.

I had slowed down a lot, but encouraged by the cheerful, if watery, early morning sun I finally arrived on the summit at 7 a.m. I should have taken a rest, with something to eat; but perhaps I am not normal, otherwise I would not have been standing alone on the summit of the Matterhorn at seven o'clock in the morning. I tight-roped along the ice arête between the Swiss and the Italian summits. There I stopped to take in the magnificent view. Breuil has always been of great interest to me; was it really like one of the gold-rush towns of the Wild West, which it had always looked like from the views I had had of it from a distance? Today I was to find the answer to the question I had asked myself for years, but if I was going to reach Breuil and get back to Zermatt in the day I would have to be moving.

On the descent of the Italian arête the first of a series of fixed ropes is reached almost immediately; these lead to the Col Félicité. All the fixed ropes of the Italian side appeared to have been renewed recently and looked much smarter and of a better quality than those on the Swiss side. I intend at some future date to traverse Carrel's Gallery, so I stopped at the Col Félicité to examine its condition and the course it took, before moving down to the Crête Tyndall. This almost level shoulder was a pleasant and restful change from the strenuous descent of the near-vertical summit tower.

For all who know the history of the Matterhorn, the passage of the Italian arête cannot be dissociated from the past; what pleasure there is in seeking and then finding the Col Félicité, L'Enjambée, Pic Tyndall, La Cravatte, Le Linceul, the Mauvais Pas and all the other familiar names! The Italian arête is of a higher technical standard, of sounder rock, and is a much more interesting route than the Hörnli ridge, but to be fully appreciated it should be ascended rather than descended. This is probably true of all mountain routes, although perhaps it is even better to do them in both directions.

The Corde Tyndall, which is a fixed rope of nearly 100 ft. hanging down a sheer wall, can be descended slowly using the rope as an aid, or it can be descended quickly by taking all the weight on the arms. This requires strong hands and arms, and is strenuous. With a little shame, I admit to the strong-arm method because, firstly, I get pleasure in hard muscular work and, secondly, there are not many occasions when the legs can be rested to allow the arms to take over.

I was interested to find a new horizontal rope at the Mauvais Pas. It had not been there on my previous traverse. After crossing this, I soon passed round the Grande Tour to arrive at the Amédée hut (12,560 ft.) at 10.30 a.m. All through the night and morning I had constantly worried myself over the welfare of the friend, whom I felt was still with me. Should we not halt a while to rest and take something to eat? I repeatedly assured him that when we arrived at the Amédée hut we would take our first rest and nourishment. The hut was empty, so there was no point in looking for something to drink—the only source of water is the melting of either ice or snow. It was warm and pleasant in the sun, so I found a sheltered place outside the hut and, sitting with my shirt off, enjoyed a sun-bathe as I relaxed and ate my few sandwiches.

From the Amédée hut to the Col du Lion there are three fixed ropes, which are now all in place; on my last visit two were missing. On the earlier occasion I had ascended and descended without their aid, so this time I had no hesitation in using them to the full. Below the Tête du Lion a stretch of soft snow, lying on ice, had to be crossed, and to do this it was necessary to put on crampons and call in the aid of my ice piton 'dagger'. The route gave no difficulties to the Riondet, variation and fun being got from a number of short glissades at the expense of wet trousers. On passing the Carrel cross I paid my respects to Jean-Antoine Carrel, the first to conquer the Matterhorn from the Italian side, who died on this spot a victim of his duty. On then to the Pavillon de Riondet, where I refreshed myself with a bottle of tonic water.

I was not long in reaching Breuil, letting gravity do most of the work by running. It was good to find that Breuil has not been commercialised to anything like the extent of Zermatt, and I hope it will remain so. I had time to do little more than walk through the streets, but this Italian village which is so steeped in the history of the Matterhorn gave promise of being well worth a longer visit.

It was now nearly three o'clock, so I commenced my return to Zermatt by the Furggjoch. The loose moraine and the soft snowslopes were heavy going; this gave me plenty of time to admire the impressive South face and the Furggen ridge. One hour before dusk I was on the Furggjoch and the glacier quickly crossed, to descend in order to join

the Hörnli path, which I reached just above the Schwarzsee as darkness descended. I was fortunate to be on the path because my friends of the previous night, the moon and stars, had deserted me and the lamp had to be used the whole way down to Zermatt. My arrival in Zermatt was at 10.30 p.m., exactly 24 hours after my departure.