The Big Triple Tick or Scrambles in the Nordwands

Phil Thornhill

'You can't pack Kit-Kats and read a book at the same time' bellowed the man with the blue cap, in a heavy Yorkshire accent, straight into my right ear at very short range. 'Yes, I can—what d'you think I'm doing, you burk.' But I put *The White Spider* away (for five minutes, until the coast was clear). Putting Kit-Kats in boxes is a reality few minds can cope with for eight hours a day and mine had found somewhere else to escape to—it strayed, with Heinrich Harrer, over the slopes and precipices of the Eigerwand, horrified and fascinated by its tragedies and triumphs.

The Eiger is, after all, ultimate, classic, definitive, and casts its spell over mountaineers everywhere. The greatest of the Alpine North faces, one of the Big Three with the Matterhorn and the Grandes Jorasses, all conquered in the thirties, each with its own history of drama, adventure, endeavour . . . well, you've got to do them, haven't you. They're compulsory.

'What?! You've dropped your crampon?! Oh, s...t!!!' We were near the top of the ice-field at the foot of the Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses. I'd already broken one axe (Charlet-Moser breaks OK). Now this. Rory, you stupid, dumb, miserable, unspeakable, moronic . . . Retreat it had to be, and also a fun-time three-hour game of lose-the-end-of-the-rope-in-the-bergschrund-while-you-also-lose-your-rag-entirely. A week of beautiful, cloudless weather followed, the sun caressing the rocks of the Walker Spur, where we weren't. It was my first attempt on one of the Big Three. After that I matured in judgement and realized that, generally, partners are a hazard to be avoided—like crevasses, avalanches, falling rocks, etc.

'Sister Derbyshire? She's in theatre—shall I bleep her for you?' says the man in the grey coat in the little porter's 'fortress' in the front hall of Queen Elizabeth's Hospital for Children, Hackney Road. 'Goldsmith Ward? Turn left, down the corridor and up the stairs on the left. First floor.' But tomorrow will be different. Tomorrow the man in the grey coat will be on the opposite side of the road outside, standing by the bus stop with an enormous rucksack. This he will shortly be manoeuvring, with embarrassing awkwardness, on to one of the bus seats, receiving dirty looks from conductor and passengers all the while. Next day he will be in Chamonix, Haute-Savoie, France, at the railway station, buying a ticket for Zermatt, Valais, Switzerland. And then, a day late because of a minor tactical error with the Swiss trains, he will be staggering through the unreally picturesque streets of Zermatt, to a small familiar wooden hut with a

cosy carpet of dry, soft straw. He has spent a week there before, watching the rain, waiting in vain for the weather to clear, to allow him to climb the North face of the mountain which, on a clear day, dominates, so picturesquely, the scene outside. The Matterhorn.

I can't believe a lot of Switzerland—but Zermatt least of all. It's unreal. It's a permanent film set. Picturesque little alpine chalets, all beams and flowerpots, clustering neatly along narrow cobbled streets—and all so well preserved, so tidy, so clean. Over here the dirty unshaven climber is not a part of the scene as he is in Chamonix—here the 'climbers' wear hats with feathers, shiny boots and red woollen socks folded at the top over garters . . . I feel like a wart on the landscape, a fish out of water. I wander round from the 'Brown Cow' to something like 'Aunt Ethel's Tea House', to yet another bar on the corner of a cobbled street; staring up at the night sky, in-between, looking for stars. Clever move that was, in the morning, to traverse rightwards along the bottom of the face. After bottling out, due to the appearance of ominous ragged grey clouds, and thinking—this'll be an easy way down. Over the lower part of the Zmutt Ridge; and then a day spent epicking around on chossy rock and snow, down an endless and frightening slope; on to the Zmuttgletscher, at last, just as endless if not as frightening; and finally all the way back down to Zermatt. 'A L-E-Monade please'—pronounced super-clearly so these foreigners can understand. Just the same price as in Chamonix—if Swiss francs were the same as French.

Unbelievably, this is it. It's happening at last. I'm on the lower snow-slope of the North face. Easy plodding, but tiring, with an enormous sack—bivvy gear with heavy pit. Too much. It's not a confident climber but a habitual hedger of bets. And it was about then he went past. A few words: 'Where are you from? Chamonix?—oh, *Germany*—a guide.' He disappears into the distance, like an MG overtaking an artic on the M1. Gasp. Bleeding Krauts. Pant. Gasp again.

But there's still a magic in being really there at last. After the snow the rocks, and the face steepens up a little. Awkward manoeuvres to get to a belay because this is where timidity dictates I use the rope. This is hard to use effectively—all the cracks expand, blocks come off in your hand—the close-up reality of that majestic pyramid is a rubble-heap after all. The belays are mainly pegs—as many as possible. I tip-toe nervously up the doubtful rocks. Back down to retrieve the gear and up again by jumar. Slow, but it's going. Looking up it's all rock, looking down it's all snow. The Matterhorn is yielding at last.

I emerge into something of a broad gully in the centre of the face. Seems easier, the rope's packed away. Then it isn't again. Should I, shouldn't I, use the rope? A loop through an in-place peg. Later, another awkward bit. I try. Come down. Try again. Get scared. Get out the rope. And leave the sack behind, for a while. Slow, and too much time has passed. Committed now, a clock ticks away anxiously in the back of my brain. I emerge somewhere, on to an easyish snow-slope—traverse right round a rib. What is underneath this knee-deep unconsolidated snow? Just slabby rocks? Up there somewhere is the guidebook's 'ledge'—my bivouac, I hope. But first an indefinite slope of snowy rocks—not steep, but worrying—there's a little support in the snow, but not much—crampons jar and skid on rocks underneath. Which way to go? Up

there? Across there? And then comes the storm. And the spindrift. And the night. Scrabbling up loose snow, with more loose snow swirling all around in the gloom. Hyperinsecurity compels a premature bivouac—the 'ledge' is up there in the murk somewhere. I hammer pegs—as many as possible—into a pile of rubble and gingerly lower my weight on to them, having also tried to excavate some sort of scoop in the snow. I can't get into the pit. I wrap it round me, inside the bivvy bag. By and by the pain of hanging in a 'Whillans' torture-chamber becomes excruciating . . . until the cold becomes unbearable and I think about it less.

Sometime in July 1983 there was an Englishman hanging off the North face of the Matterhorn in the early hours of the morning, flapping his fully extended arms from side to side and shouting repeatedly at the top of his voice 'Jesus, it's f...ing cold! It's f...ing cold!' It seemed the best way to keep warm. In circumstances like this the dawn arrives like the best friend you've ever known, and the sun like a personal rendezvous with a beauty queen. I struggle to arrange a brew. I begin to feel slightly human. I soak in the sun. There is much fumbling and grovelling and time-wasting. Moment of commitment as the belay is removed and I'm heading towards a line I've spied out, through the steep rock-band that dominates the snowy slope. Moving warily, awkward and insecure, a peg and sling are left behind on a frightening step. The rock-band—back-roping now—steep and blocky, strenuous pulls on good holds. Easier now. A foot swung high. Crash! Thump! Crash again, and down to distant depths. Fingers clinging desperately, heart thumping wildly, foot hovering vacantly over what I'd thought had been an integral part of the rock-face, but was now somewhere on the glacier at the bottom of the face. Heartbeat subsides gradually—timid, cautious movements as I creep gingerly up the rocks. Crash! again. A block about twenty feet below me, totally spontaneously it seems, decides to part company with the face. Jesus! It's a minefield! My God! It's all falling apart! And then the horrendously jutting block, and the desperate attempts to climb the slab overhung by it without pulling on it. Probably it was solid. I never found out. I didn't dare. Profound relief at last as I emerge on top of the rock-band . . . and then, abseiling down the back-rope, I see where the easy line goes, over to the right. And it isn't till I am off the climb that I notice the place in the rope where the sheath is cut through.

I've spent ages, of course. There's that helicopter buzzing around again, like a vulture awaiting the end of some unfortunate wounded animal. They've probably put me down in the statistics already. The angle eases now. The snow gets deeper. It slows me down. I'm floundering about, gasping and panting. Some rocks again, and route-finding problems. The shadows are long, the sun collides quietly with the horizon. I'm still not at the top and it's another bivouac. But, excavated out of deep snow, it's like a five-star hotel compared to the last. I can get inside the pit and be warm.

Another day, and a very tired Thornhill struggles with the last rocks, probably going the wrong way, mittless hand freezing in the early morning cold. A final plod. It's there! It's there! It's got to be. At last. The top. At last. The Matterhorn—and the most beautiful mountain, maybe—the most famous but one—in the world. On the Italian summit I lie in the sun. For a long time.

It's very unreal, the achievement of a goal—it always is. Only the tiredness is real—the welcome warm liquid of a brew, the blessed inactivity in the sun. The route might be mediocre in many ways, I suppose, but the mountain is a superb one to climb—apart and unique. I am looking down on everything—the Dent d'Hérens, the Dent Blanche, the Monte Rosa—and down, down, way down there, the film set: Zermatt.

A traverse to the true summit and then the descent—an appropriate moment to muse about Whymper and his party's fate, while taking enough care to avoid the descent the super-fast way, like Michel Croz and Co. But now there are massive fixed ropes, as thick as a fist, on the steeper parts—too thick, unfortunately, to get a satisfactory grip on. The Solvay Hut at last, half-way house of the descent. A sanctuary—respite and rest. People again, as well, albeit I can't understand them too much. The next day's descent is just tedious and painstaking—after a rest you know how tired you really are. But blessed by that sacred feeling of success, it's bearable after all. And I stagger back to the Hörnlihütte.

Here it's a bit of a joke, evidently, that I've spent three and a half days (up *and* down) where the German spent just one. This doesn't worry me much, happy in the glow of a dream fulfilled. Then there is the girl in the kitchen, as she boils the water for tea, in her German accent, deprecatingly 'But you didn't do it properly . . . you finished by the Zmutt ridge'. Lightning bolts and boiling oil, brimstone and seething sulphur! Excuse me, madame, do you mind if I wring your neck? Happy enough to leave the Hörnlihütte behind me, the long, familiar tramp down to the cable-car brings memories of previous false starts and failures. The pleasure of success returns.

'Specimen, QEH to GOS, please. Thanks. Sorry? Sister Lee? She's in the theatre.' A postcard of the Matterhorn lies on the desk.

One brick looks much like another and, in general, bricks are remarkably uninteresting things. Especially if you are carrying them upstairs all day long. There is a clever little device called a 'hod', but Fairclough and Co Ltd hadn't heard of that yet. Never mind, there's a cunning little ploy whereby you can carry twelve on your shoulder. What you do is . . . Well, anyway, it's still fairly bad news if, like me, you have a very bony shoulder. But in the lunch break I'd been to the travel agent's to buy a ticket for the bus to Chamonix. Bye, bye, bricks.

'Eet's five francs and anozzer for my new Rolls-Royce,' says Maurice, in an outbreak of humour, as he hands me another 'fraise à l'eau'. The same old cronies are seated and sprawled around in the Brasserie Nationale. Willie is looking serenely nonchalant, apparently in possession of a secret no one else shares. Sylvester puffs at a roley. Martin Crook is chatting up two attractive young ladies in the corner. Another familiar character is expounding at length to two unshaven youths who, if they have any sense, won't believe a word of it. Alan and Neil, a mountaineering version of the furry freak brothers, are moaning about the rampant incompetence of their clients, on their sixteenth ascent of the *Voie Normale* to Mont Blanc. I have just recounted my latest failure to do the Walker Spur—owing to the grisly weather aspect when I

awoke in the Leschaux Hut at 3am. 'Did you find the Rébuffat crack, this time?' says Alan, with an evil grin. This is a reference to last year's effort when, in snowy conditions, I'd got lost and then retreated. Miserable bastard, I think, as I force out a laugh. And the worst of it is, I've now left all my gear at the hut in expectation of another attempt in good weather which, according to the *météo*, will not be forthcoming after all. This means I've now got to go all the way back up just to collect my gear. 'Well, at least I've not had to be choppered off it yet.' The ball is satisfactorily volleyed back into Alan's court.

Grisly grey storm-clouds are sweeping in from the west. One party after another is abseiling off the Walker Spur. Yours truly is the only one still going up, struggling under the weight of an enormous sack. And as I meet each descending party—'Excuse me, do you speak *English*? You see, I've forgotten . . . well, do you have, avez-vous, can I buy from you . . . a pan—*pan* . . . une casserole?' I had everything—ropes, hardware, bivvy gear, food and fuel for ten weeks . . . but I'd forgotten the pan. How can you melt water without a pan? The answer is, with foil crammed in the hole in the middle of your epigas heat shield, at the rate of about one cubic centimetre per half-hour. No luck with the Yugoslavs, but a German gives me a shiny new pan with a lid. No need to pay—he owns an equipment shop. I am able to find the Rébuffat crack this time—having watched the Germans abseil down it. It leads me to a five-star bivouac ledge. I sleep soundly through the storm and through to five o'clock next morning.

I reckoned myself fairly storm-proof on the Walker because I'd gone 'heavyweight'. Heaps of gear, fuel, food, etc, which means that I am committed to using a back-rope almost all the way, because the sack is too heavy to climb with, even on fairly easy ground. It's inevitably slow but, on the other hand, I'm well equipped to deal with storms, bad conditions and any other kind of nastiness the route may have in store for me. It works better on the Walker than the Matterhorn because there are plentiful good belays. On the Matterhorn I'd free-soloed the greater part of the route, with a lighter but still too-heavy sack. Once committed to back-roping all the way, the weight matters less.

7am, struggling to create order out of bivouac chaos. Voices below, and a German-speaking climber appears. He is a Tyrolean, a friend of Reinhold himself, apparently. I feel like an amateur footballer in the presence of Bobby Charlton. The Tyrolean team move smoothly past, with swift efficiency, and the next time I see them, when I've reached the end of a traverse, they are specks on the face, way, way up there.

Some easy ground, and I'm staring up the 75m dièdre, a little impressed. Change into EBs, organize the sack, the rope, the gear—set off. Easier than it looks, and well-equipped with little metal hand-holds. But at this point two other parties catch up with me and the inevitable comedy ensues, with everybody climbing over, under and around each other, and getting tied up in each other's ropes. All jolly good fun. At one point there is a German (or related foreigner) belayed just above me, and I foolishly make a special effort to get ahead, climbing over him, pulling on his belay and starting up the corner-crack, alone. I get to a piton, reach down for the rope to tie into it . . . oh dear, there isn't any rope to tie into it. I've forgotten it. I am, in fact, free-soloing.

Feeling a little embarrassed, I climb back, swinging down on the unfortunate climber's belay and climbing over him again.

By the end of the dièdre both parties are ahead, helpfully showing me where the route goes. Easy ground, a traverse, and the abseil. Complex manoeuvring back and forth. An overhang and a five-star ledge—a veritable bivvy-hotel. There are parties ahead, probably occupying all further available bivvies, and a party behind and it's late anyway. So, having run the rope up as far as I can, I abseil back down to occupy the bivvy-ledge.

Comfortably ensconced on the ledge, sipping at a fresh hot brew, with just the very tiniest feeling of guilt about the fact that I have doomed the upcoming party below to a miserable ledgeless bivouac. They arrive and a few words are exchanged. They are a couple—'Mr and Mrs French Climber'. I do not realize at the time that it is the beginning of a long relationship between us. The next day starts with the Tour Grise, and a jumar up my rope just as Mr and Mrs are getting started after a night of, no doubt, considerable discomfort. We do not, as I had expected, part company—they do not overtake me—they're going so slowly, they're as slow as me. This means that we are able to foul up each other's ropes and get in each other's way for the entire rest of the climb. Above the Tour Grise we both embark on a minor diversion when we follow tracks going the wrong way. This helps to allow a couple of other parties to go past. Last in the queue, I follow at last up steepish rocks and then into the sunshine on a long easy ridge. It's as if I've just crawled out of a cold, dark hole. The route unfolds brilliantly—above is the last steep step of the Tour Rousse, across to the right the steep walls of the Pointe Whymper, and then the Croz Spur with white cornice-snow showing on the skyline in the gap between the Tour Rousse and the Whymper. Looking down to the right, the grisly grey ice-fields and dark rock-walls of the Central Couloir plunge dismally down to the gleaming white glacier at the bottom.

Easy ground is frustrating with a back-rope—so much toing and froing when, without an enormous sack, it would be easy soloing. The Tour Rousse at last, and comedy takes over again in the Red Chimneys as I play leap-frog with Mr and Mrs French Climber, the darkness arriving to give the punch-line. A cunning variant to the left, adventurous in the gloom, allows me to overtake Mr and Mrs on the final home straight and reach the pulpit bivouac site first. But I have to return, of course, for my sack, and by the time I have arrived again the premier bivvy sites are occupied. So I have to 'lead' another pitch which scares me silly in the gloom, when I can't find any small metal holds, and I find an inferior bivouac place on the horizontal traverse, alone, which I grudgingly occupy.

Morning—and I'm in the lead: the final verglassed groove yields to several inspired lunges at pegs. Mr and Mrs are coming up to offer a strong challenge—Mr is ahead, but I'm now jumaring past Mrs. Then Mr foolishly decides to deviate off to the left, ruining his chances entirely. I pack up my gear, at last, to free-solo almost all the rest. On the final easy ridge it's very windy. Clouds are rolling in, and I'm anxious now to be off the hill. After a final chossy gully/groove, just beneath the summit snow, two climbers are apparently setting up an abseil. 'Qu'est que vous faites?' They're making a film,

which accounts for the chopper buzzing around as well. 'Can I be the star, please?' Crampons on, and the final few feet up steep snow. Into the sunshine, and looking down into Italy—green and welcoming. Success dawns on me suddenly and it's a very wonderful feeling—something like weightlessness. 'Looking down into Italy'—I've dreamt about this so much and I've failed so many times—to have actually done it seems like the attainment of the impossible. It's like banishing a personal jinx. A final victory over a familiar rival—the Romans must have felt like this at Zama. (This classical allusion is an indication of the author's extreme erudition.)

But a long, tiring descent follows, getting bored with which I have a brew and a nap in the sun, which allows me the privilege of meeting Mr and Mrs again and overtaking them. At the Rifugio Boccalatte I'm telling someone what I've done. The guardian appears and he knows already. Three bivouacs, he says knowingly, rather as if he is awarding penalty points. Later I hear him using a sarcastic tone—'Ils sont formidables, les Anglais'—and comparing me unfavourably with the Tyroleans. It annoys me—unreasonably perhaps. I feel intruded upon. This person has somehow set himself up as a judge of what I've done. What right has he got, and what business is it of his, anyway? The little bubble of pleasure I have inhabited since the summit has been pricked, somehow. Obviously it should not have been so—my sensitivity to what another person thought betrayed a weakness in myself. Anyway, I feel better with distance gained from the hut. Planpincieux, a bivouac in the valley. Courmayeur, sipping coffee in the warm morning sun. Italy, via the Grandes Jorasses.

The van turned another corner. 'That's it! No it's not, it can't be!' We were looking for the Eigerwand. 'I think it's round the back of that . . .' Grindelwald—and we still hadn't decided. John Sylvester wanders up to a couple of American tourists. 'Excuse me, do you know where the North face of the Eiger is?'

Alone at Kleine Scheidegg—and it's just like the pictures I've seen. I can recognize all the features—First Ice-field, Ice Hose, Second Ice-field, Flatiron, the Ramp, Traverse of the Gods, Spider, Exit Cracks. It's all familiar, and yet there's something very strange in finding it at last in three-dimensional and enormous reality. The scale is hard to grasp. It does not soar up to obvious great heights like a Chamonix Aiguille. It's as high, or higher, but massive and bulky with it. And I can't believe the approach. No long steep walk, no glaciers, no crevasses in the dark. You just wander over meadows to the foot of the face—like a crag. It's limestone, too—something I'm unused to in mountains. It's obviously just a very, very big Stoney—with ice-fields. Beneath the face it's still, peaceful, warm in the evening sun—so innocent, it has to be sinister. And, well, the face does look very snowy. Already I've decided to run away.

Martin Crook appears over the horizon, then John, Simon and 'Crags'. The last three go for it the next day, but 'Crags' abseils off, leaving just the two to climb the face in about three days. I—and Martin—exercise sound mountaineering judgement and retreat to the Chamonix bars.

There has to be a return, of course, and it turns out to be just two or three

weeks later. The face looks clear. The forecast is, more or less, good. I'm excited. I've just done a good route on the Jorasses and everything seems to be going my way. Next morning and I'm on the rocks at the foot of the face, struggling up awkwardly under the weight of my sack, very slowly and cautiously—terrified, in fact, not by the climbing as such but by the *Eiger*, by all those tragedies, dramas and disasters. There must be a hold about to break off, a block about to fall on my head, there must be some kind of trap waiting for me . . . surely the Eiger can't just allow me to wander up, unscathed. There is a lot of loose scree and loose scrambling, a lot of meandering about to find the easy way. With the terror there is, after all, a feeling of inner excitement, of jubilation, that now I can feel the cold, wet, crumbly rocks of the Eiger, really within my grasp, at last.

Ropes appear above, hanging down dark, drizzly rocks. It's immediately pleasing to see them, of course, but, deeper down, disappointing. It detracts from the experience as a whole. There is too much junk on the Eiger. It should be respected, as much as possible, as a 'wilderness' and preserved in its natural magnificence. How can the Swiss be so nauseatingly tidy everywhere else, I wonder, and allow all the junk that hangs around on the Eiger? The Hinterstoisser Traverse, and I'm using my own 7mm rope to back up the fixed ones. Time's no worry—I don't want to get any further than the Swallow's Nest. This proves to be an excellent Bivouac for One. But I haven't really started yet. It's all still up there, waiting for me . . .

I start too low on the ice-field in the cold dawn light. Wasted time, but I'm on my way again, looking for that easy white ice, avoiding the grey. First real problem—the Ice Hose. I assess it as it looms closer into view. A rope hanging down the rocks to the left. A jumble of ropes. I use my 7mm, as normal, but put a jumar on the fixed one. Up, down, back up, all going well, if slowly. On to the upper Ice Hose, brilliant ice, white ice, leading right up to the top right-hand corner of the Second Ice-field. But then comes the long traverse across—grey or black, hard ice, often overlaid with powder snow. Easy-angled but endless—torture for calves and toes. Tedious and nerve-racking at the same time. After quite a while, I'm still on the ice-field—I shouldn't really be here at this time of day. But there's no sign of stonefall and this is not entirely luck, as I'd watched it the evening before I'd started and there'd been hardly any even then, with the sun on the face. I'd reckoned stonefall would not really be a problem at any time, and I was right. September or October, given good weather, definitely seem the best time to do the face. The disadvantage is hard ice on the ice-fields but this is amply compensated for by the lack of artillery barrage.

It's a relief to be at the bottom of the Flatiron. An awkward step, and I'm using the rope again. Another awkward, loose step and, unfortunately, I'm not. I surface, gasping. Then good snow and ice to Death Bivouac—a nice little snowy platform, good for a rest, until you think of its name, and then you feel like moving on. Good snow and white ice on the Third Ice-field—rapid progress at last. The Ramp starts easily too, but then I have problems on an awkward snowy step. This leads me to use the rope again—a mistake as it turns out, because it's easy for some way. Going up and down needlessly, failing to

find a belay, wasting time—losing my temper. I become resigned, in the end, to not reaching the Traverse of the Gods for a bivouac. In the evening sun the Ramp seems absurdly un-Eigerish. The limestone formations remind me of caving. Deep down, I feel good. I haven't reached the Traverse of the Gods, but at least I've really got to grips with the face, at last. It's no longer an unknown horror, lurking indefinitely in the future—it's here and now. I look down and across to the Second Ice-field, to the screes below, to the meadows, to Kleine Scheidegg and the railway. It's superb. I wouldn't prefer to be anywhere else in the world. I spend some time hacking out a ledge, mainly out of solid ice, but the result is not too bad a bivvy at all.

The morning sees me tackling the steep chimney-corner above the bivouac. Suffering a little from après-bivouac, I'm slow and unsure but I make it OK. Then the game of abseil down/jumar back up, doubling the 7mm if possible, because otherwise the stretch is horrendous. Next is a fine little steep ice-bulge, with rocks pushing you out where you don't want to go—but good ice. Up the small ice-field above to spend a long time rigging up a belay on unsound rock, only to see the in-place pegs I've missed as I abseil down. Rope packed away now and up to the Brittle Ledge—horrible black, slaty rock, sloping, holdless and extremely loose. No difficult climbing, however, until the end of the ledge where I resort to the rope again. The initial problem is solved by weedling a Friend into an awkward crack and pulling on it. OK after that, and I surface on the Traverse of the Gods.

It's as I abseil down that I hear the sound of shattering ice and then see a climber emerging at the other end of the Brittle Ledge. Oh no! I'm going to be overtaken again. How sickening. It's free-soloing across the easy-angled snowy slope of the Traverse of the Gods until it narrows and steepens. I thread loops of rope through pegs, but avoid the full frustration of going backwards and forwards three times. The Spider appears round the corner. Hey! Whoopee! I've not been overtaken yet! Above the left-hand side of the Spider is a lot of easy-angled poor rock. I've arrived at just the wrong time—the evening sun has just hit the face. No serious rock-fall but the odd barrage of grape-shot, and it's here that I do my fastest climbing on the face. Moving out on to the blunt rib of the Spider, ice-tools thudding home in hard but good ice, thousands of feet of empty space dropping away below, a tremendous feeling. The gully at the base of the Exit Cracks goes easily as well, and the Exit Cracks themselves are in the sun.

There remains just one nagging worry, as I notice quite a few clouds gathering in the evening sky, and that's what has probably been my worst fear all along—the possibility of a sudden deterioration in the weather. I'd had one eye on the sky throughout the climb. I wouldn't get to the top today, but I wanted to get as far as I could so that, if the weather did turn, it would still be feasible to fight my way out. I cannot yet feel completely at ease. I still suspect the Eigerwand of some last-ditch treachery.

An awkward wide crack, then I'm using the rope for the Quartz Crack, above, which is OK, when I disregard the guidebook's 'work left' and do the opposite. As I jumar back up the pitch it's dark by now, but I can see something looking like a good bivvy-ledge to the left. Various complex rope

manoeuvres in the gloom, and I'm there. It's a kind of pulpit—an excellent bivouac in an amazing situation—a kind of 'theatre box', paradoxically looking out from the 'stage' of the Eiger, down on to the 'audience' at Kleine Scheidegg, and out over the lesser hills and mountains of Switzerland, beyond. It's almost worth not reaching the top, just to bivvy here. Nearly finished now, most of the worries over, and no dramatic tragedy has overtaken me. The 'Murderwand' seems absurdly innocent, after all.

But it's a very cold bivouac—my well-used 'lightline' is wet through by now and I suffer my first bit of real bivouac discomfort on the route. This encourages an early start, brewing up in the dark, and at first light I'm tackling the Diagonal Abseil—actually a slide down a fixed rope. Next is a staircase-type feature of black slaty rock, up a distinctive square-cut gully. I get a little shock when a solid-looking piece comes away in my hand. Easy now, the rope packed away for the last time, I hope. Up the rest of the gully, to emerge into sudden exposure on a ridge. More easy-angled climbing, but always a little nerve-racking on this kind of rock—peculiarly holdless and sloping, as well as loose. Cautious and slow, but with the mounting exhilaration of imminent success. The Eiger, at last. I slump down on the rocks of the NE ridge. It's about 10.15am.

Still not quite over yet—more ice up to the snow-ridge. Then sun, security and easy dry rocks on its south side. A party is coming up this easy side. I sit down, take off excess clothes. I wander along the arête. The summit. I sit down on rocks nearby, brew up and make conversation with some Swiss climbers. The descent is tiresome, tedious, nerve-racking and long. A disintegrating rubble-heap. A very tired climber at the Eigergletscher station in the early evening. A coffee at Kleine Scheidegg. A trip to the bottom of the face to collect some stashed gear. A bivouac on the grass, near Kleine Scheidegg. In the morning I pack up my gear and wander into the Eiger Nordwand restaurant. I sit in the sun, with a cup of coffee and a view of the face. I start to write a letter—'I have just climbed the North Face of the Eiger . . .'