The London Dinner

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(Translated by Ernst Sondheimer)

Strange as it may seem, it's because the lightning had struck, high up in the north face of the Aletschhorn, on 13 August of that year, that I found myself, on the 1 December which followed, clad in a dinner-jacket which didn't belong to me, driving by night across London through the late autumn fog.

The lightning had hit a party which, right from the start of the route, had been several ropelengths ahead of us, having started from the Hollandia hut whereas we had come from the Konkordia. Nothing had forewarned us of the sudden arrival of the thunderstorm which, indeed, moved away again as fast as it had come. We got away, Jean-Claude and I, with a good shake-up and a bad fright, but the other pair was closer to the ridge and was not so lucky. We moved up to them in a fierce little hailstorm and found them in rather bad shape. One was British and the other German; both were suffering from slight burns. The German had lost his ice axe. The Brit had lost the use of one arm and had sprained an ankle: he had been hurled several metres down the slope and owed his life to the ice screw to which he had been belayed and which had held firm.

We were in a remote spot, and it would have taken too long to alert the mountain rescue. Besides, the two casualties wanted to move on, and seemed just about fit enough to do so. We decided to rearrange the ropes: Jean-Claude took the German under his wing, and I the Britisher. In this way we managed the rest of the face without too much trouble. Also the weather had turned fine again, and the whole situation appeared less dramatic than it had done earlier. We moved up the ridge together but soon, as my rope was the slower of the two, I told the other pair to move on at their own pace and wait for us from time to time; it seemed pointless for them to stay always close to us.

Injured as he was, my partner climbed with plenty of spirit. He didn't even want to stop for any length of time, judging that his ankle would only become more painful as soon as it was no longer heated up by the exertions. I kept well above him so that I could check any slip, and thus had plenty of time to have a good look at him. He was a man in his forties, in whose lean face sparkled two large grey eyes. He wore the ragged clothes traditionally sported by the British: patched trousers, an ancient, faded sweater with frayed cuffs, a greenish cagoule, its rents and tears stuck together with crossed bits of sticking-plaster . . . In the underground you might have given him a small coin. But he spoke excellent French, and so I thought – I don't quite know why – that he must be an academic. It was just an idea that crossed my mind, but of course I had other

things to do than ponder about his life history. The first priority was to reach a safe haven before nightfall.

It is 2500 metres down from the top of the Aletschhorn to Belalp, 2500 metres of ridges, snow slopes, glaciers, scree, and mountain-paths at the end. It goes on for ever. . . Nevertheless, we were in time to catch the last cable car, and there we found Jean-Claude's party waiting for us.

From here a complicated sequence of trains could have taken us to Grindelwald, but our British friend was generous enough to summon a taxi. He was feeling better and some movement had returned to his arm but, worn out by the big effort, he slept throughout the journey. We asked to be dropped off at Stechelberg where I had left my car, and there we took leave of our new friends. Poking about in a dusty pocket of his rucksack, my Briton extracted a wallet – a magnificent one, I can tell you – and pulled from it a visiting card which he gave me with his profuse thanks. I scribbled down for him my own address on the back of a hut receipt. And I wasn't half surprised when I took in, a bit later, both his name and his title: our ragamuffin was called Lord Whichunt. [*Author's note*: this name is not a reference to Lord Hunt (of Everest), but a family joke concerning a cousin of the author.]

And that's why, having been invited by my new friend to the Annual Dinner of the Alpine Club, I was crossing London, sitting next to him, at the beginning of the following winter . . .

I had arrived by air a few hours earlier, and had to leave again next day. It was a bit foggy but the weather was unseasonably mild, and we had the windows open. I had worked for two years in America and so my English was quite fluent, but I had never been to London. The city seemed enormous . . . From time to time I gave a startled jump, not being used to people driving on the left (I did my best to conceal this from my friend), but I was much entertained by the famous red two-storeyed buses, the tall policemen with their extra-tall helmets, the streets with their rows of dozens of identical houses, distinguished only by the colours of the front doors deep inside their pillared porticos. I was delighted to be there and to be about to take my place in the bosom of such an illustrious gathering; indeed I felt that I had entered the world of Phileas Fogg . . .

The dinner was held in a large building near the Thames, and we were directed to a hall on the ground floor where drinks were served. As I walked into this room I gave a start of surprise. A few moments earlier I had reflected that I was about to join the most ancient of all alpine clubs, but it had not occurred to me that the people I would meet there would themselves be so ancient . . . By and by I was to discover the reasons for this. The cost of the dinner – or so I heard – was twenty-five pounds, and no doubt the younger members of the Club knew of better ways of spending such a sum. And then, it is in later years that one really likes to meet fellow-survivors of the passage of time.

At any rate, my host was – apart from myself – one of the youngest members present. He had warned me beforehand that he would not be able to be with me all the time, having duties to carry out in the Club, and I had assured him that I would have no problem in entertaining myself. And indeed, he was soon surrounded by people and carried off far away from me, but I wasn't in the

least bored. It was absorbing to study the crowd which thronged the room, mostly men in their dinner-jackets, more rarely ladies in long dresses. And this gathering was, dare we say it, of such a venerable age that it seemed hard to recognize the connection between so many worthy ancients and the rough reality of the sport of climbing. I just couldn't imagine that all these fragile patriarchs, squeezed into their gala outfits, could ever have been battling against the storm which lashed their thin anoraks, soaked in wet snow and stiff with ice . . . The only thing here that might conjure up the image of snow was the immaculate whiteness of the many heads of hair . . .

There was gin and sherry on offer. I took a gin-and-tonic and, glass in hand, steered through the crowd, trying to visualize the early life of the veterans I brushed past, seeking without success to put names to their faces. As time went on, I began to imagine that I could decipher various adventures written into those deep wrinkles and into the corner of a smile. I was particularly fascinated by a smallish greybeard who must have been close to a hundred years old. Firmly pressed against the serving table, talking to nobody, he concentrated on getting hold of the maximum number of sherries which he gulped down to the last drop and, as soon as he had put down one glass, he was already reaching for the next.

Having watched these goings-on for some time, I went to study the table-plan which was pinned up in a corner of the room. We were about a hundred and thirty diners; amongst them I recognized the Liechtenstein Ambassador and various famous names in mountain history. One of these attracted my attention: that of James Eccles. In the second half of the nineteenth century there had been a well-known mountaineer of that name. Asking myself whether this could be one of his descendants, or whether it was a case of pure coincidence, I looked for Lord Whichunt to ask him about it, but he couldn't tell me. Doubtless this James Eccles must be some kind of greatgrandson or greatgrandnephew of the Victorian mountaineer, for he was one of the Club's invited guests for the evening and was going to propose the last toast. But, apart from Colonel Edward Masonridge, who had been in contact with him but was unfortunately confined to bed this evening because of an attack of gout, nobody there knew anything about this James Eccles. Anyway, we would doubtless find out in the course of the last toast, and that would be enough to satisfy my curiosity.

Banging a little hammer to ensure silence, a master of ceremonies now informed us that dinner was served in a room on the third floor. At the same time he asked the young ones if they would be so kind as to leave the one and only lift for the use of the older guests. The young ones! It was, in truth, a weird doddering band which tackled the task of mounting the large stone staircase, doing their best to demonstrate by this heroic climb that some of their vital functions were not yet defunct. It was a moving sight, and I didn't dare think of the scene in the lift . . .

We looked for our places on the long tables, decorated with anemones. A group of waitresses, dressed in black with white aprons, watched our entrance with curiosity. The Reverend J F Tindicott said Grace, after which we sat down with a great shuffling of chairs. I was next to Lord Whichunt and, as soon as

everyone had inspected the menu, I began to make contact with my other neighbours. One of them had been a member of Tilman's expedition to Everest, another had spent a whole summer working up at the Vallot Observatory without once coming down, a third seemed to have explored every single mountain on Earth . . . The talk flowed easily, even if some hands cupped to ears were a reminder that hearing had not improved with the years . . . And I felt that I was myself a living part of a little piece of alpine history, when it was pointed out to me that yonder venerable diner, his shirt-front so stylishly adorned with little starched pleats, was the last man to have seen Mallory and Irvine alive in 1924, or that this other one, with a white beard reaching down to his bow-tie, had pioneered the first ascent of a route which, even today, was not often repeated.

From where I sat I could comfortably observe the small grizzled sherry-swigger. He had been amongst the last to slide into his seat on the top table, just as Grace was being said, and since then he had not missed a single mouthful. Having guzzled with a healthy appetite the vol-au-vent which started the meal, he noticed that the lady next to him had not touched hers, and – having whispered a few words into her ear – he had, with a conjuror's skill, carried out a rapid switch of plates . . . At the same time he was swigging the Chablis, beckoning to the waiter as soon as his glass was empty. Between courses he broke off pieces of bread, munching them with evident relish. I noticed that, on several occasions, his neighbours made efforts to engage him in conversation, but to no avail. The only response was a slight shake of the head which quickly discouraged all approaches. On the other hand, I was pleased to see him enjoying several helpings of his veal escalope with mixed vegetables. After the Chablis he took equal pleasure in the Château Camarsac which went with the main course, draining it to the last drop. For dessert he went straight for the apple-pie, dousing it with lashings of cream, and, when the liqueurs came round, he helped himself to a huge, brimful glass of brandy. Here and there cigars began to appear in the dining room. Our friend pulled from his pocket a small pipe of distinctly antique design. The time for the after-dinner speeches had arrived.

The President dealt quickly with the first three toasts, addressed respectively to Her Majesty the Queen, the members of the royal family and the Club's guests. This gave me a moment of intense inner joy: contemplating the whole gathering as, upstanding, it declaimed with one voice 'The Queen', I pictured to myself the ribaldry and catcalls which would accompany a similar toast to the President of the Republic in any gathering of French mountaineers, be they ever so aged . . .

The fourth toast, to the Principality of Liechtenstein, went on and on . . .

When it finally seemed to be coming to an end, my little elderly friend extinguished his pipe, leapt to his feet with vigour and, without a single note to assist his memory, started to propose the fifth toast, that of the Alpine Club. The start was traditional: 'Your Excellency, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen . . .'

And then, straightaway, he started to talk of mountains, real mountains, and – whether or not he was related to his illustrious namesake – it was obvious that he knew what he was talking about. The picture he drew for us of the early

years of the Club was gripping, full of life. Never before had I understood so well the passion which had animated the first British alpinists.

The speaker recalled for us the long journey they had had to make, by boat, steam train and coach, to reach the Promised Land. He described in detail the primitive shelters which got established, one by one, around the fringes of the mountain ranges. He recounted the history of the fierce competition for the first ascents, and the battles amongst rival climbers for the services of the best of the Swiss or French mountain guides. He reminded us of the inadequacy of the early primitive equipment, the drawbacks of hobnailed boots, the fragility of long ice axes with wooden shafts, the permeability of hemp ropes which soaked up the water and then froze, going stiff as iron bars. He spoke of the trouble caused by that heavy white tent which, on Whymper's advice, he had acquired for himself, only to find at the end of the day that it was more of a hindrance than a help.

I saw eyes opening wide in the audience. But stupefaction reached its height when James Eccles – for there could be no doubt about it, it was he himself, there amongst us in person – calmly undertook to tell us the tale of his first ascent of the Peuterey Ridge with the Payot brothers, on 31 July 1877, giving us first of all some hitherto unpublished details about their two earlier attempts, and then reconstructing for us, with a superb flight of eloquence, the full story of this great climb, performed more than a century ago.

We felt we were on the climb ourselves . . . We shivered with him in the icy cold of the bivouac . . . We could see the blue splinters of ice, spraying out under the guide's ice axe . . . We balanced gingerly on the verglas which coated the rocks . . . We suffered thirst because the water in the flask had run out . . . And finally, we felt the deep emotion which came with the realization that no further obstacle stood between us and victory . . . Entranced, spell-bound, we relived one of the great moments of alpine history.

James Eccles's eyes shone with pleasure as he described for us the relatively easy crossing of the big cornice which opened the way to Mont Blanc de Courmayeur . . . And he finished his talk with an earnest appeal.

'And right on the summit of Mont Blanc,' he said, 'what do you think we found? The pure, radiant whiteness of the peaks? The unspoiled solitude of the mountains? The wild appeal of the heights? Not a bit of it! What awaited us on the top, which had been reached that day via the normal route by three big parties, complete with guides and porters, what we saw there was filthy snow, trampled all over by dozens upon dozens of boots, soiled with food scraps, refuse and bottles which nobody had taken the trouble to remove! And will you believe that, in order to escape from that disgusting spectacle, we had to climb down again a bit, on the Miage side, before we could enjoy our victory in a more welcoming spot. And that we said as a joke, but not without a touch of bitterness, that soon the Mont Blanc range would have to be submitted to inspections by the Health Department! And that was in 1877 . . . So I now put the question to you – to you, the young. What have you really managed to do in the meantime to preserve the mountains in that pure, unspoiled state which is their essence? And what are you *now* going to do about it? Think about it. And whilst I am waiting, I raise my glass to our dear old Club.'

'The Club,' repeated the audience, who had risen to their feet.

Silence fell, and James Eccles, his head raised a little, seemed still to be focusing his intense gaze on some snowy ridge or some corner of the sky. The assembly did not disturb his reverie, and we could all count the twelve strokes of midnight drifting in through the half-open windows.

As soon as the last stroke had died away, James Eccles was no longer with us. He had suddenly dissolved, the way a light mist evaporates in the sun's rays.

And not one word could be heard as the guests, struck dumb to a man, slowly left the dining room.

On the staircase, Lord Whichunt was one of the first to regain his voice. He whispered in my ear: 'I do hope that you have enjoyed our old British customs.'