

Z E R M A T T S A G A

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Even the most kind and sympathetic of my friends are not prepared to admit that my Alpine ventures have been blessed by success. I used to think it was my companions until one day I realised that Dave Roberts was filling me up with red wine in Cortina to prevent me getting anywhere near the cliffs. With sudden insight I realised it was not my neck he was worried about but his own.

This shattering revelation forced me to reassess my whole climbing position. Obviously the *très difficile* was not for me so I would just have to conquer pride and personal ambition and concentrate on the *très facile*. The next step was to decide on a venue and climbing companions. Zermatt struck me as being the most suitable place and the apprentice, Bob Thornton (see M.A.M. Journal 1969), the most suitable companion as he had not yet learnt the cunning employed by some of my earlier companions to avoid contact with rock. The ploys adopted in the past have ranged from conjunctivitis due to looking at excessive numbers of overhangs on the way up to the climb to a three week attack of sleeping sickness brought on by alpine fleas.

To offset expense, two porters, John Norton and Hedley Hickling were co-opted. Unfortunately John was convinced that the fair sex could not resist him while Hedley could think only of food and these traits caused problems at times. We all met up according to plan at Ostend one sunny Thursday in July and promptly roared off in Bob's car down the Autobahn in pursuit of some fair damsel who is reputed to have beckoned to John on the boat.

Taking into account the mechanical state of the car and the various idiosyncracies of the party, we arrived in Zermatt on the Friday night in surprisingly good order. Since the real purpose of going to the Alps is to sample red wine we started drinking immediately. Much later in the evening the barman commented that he did not know how the English made their travel allowance last.

When we crawled out of our tents next day, it was to find the sky a cloudless blue and the Matterhorn looming over Zermatt in all its splendour. The unwilling party was rapidly organised, food and glacier cream acquired and at three o'clock in the afternoon we set off for the Hörnli hut. To compensate for the previous evening's inroads on our funds and to try and get a little acclimatised we eschewed the soft luxury of the cable-car and walked up to the Schwarz See. There we had a bowl of soup and eventually staggered up the forty two zig-zags to the Hörnli hut arriving about seven o'clock. Fortunately there were still a few beds left as the guides do not take clients up on a Sunday and after something to eat we were very glad to crawl into bed.

I had hoped to get a good sleep but first of all the apprentice started to snore. This phenomenon has been noticed before but is instantly denied. After the noise had continued unabated for a considerable period John and I could stand it no more and belaboured Bob. At this treatment Bob woke up and the snoring stopped. Unfortunately he then spent the next few hours muttering alternately about the heat and his unthinking mates.

By this time it was twelve o'clock and the temperature was close on 100°F. At this point the Japanese arose. Now the feature of the Western Alps in recent years is the amazing number of Japanese everywhere. Incredibly beautiful, doll-like Japanese girls can be seen carrying ruck-sacks three times as big as mine, while diminutive Japanese men easily manage loads six times as big. They then storm the steepest faces in large numbers leaving the rest of us slightly bemused. Unfortunately they had chosen this occasion to abandon the vertical and overhanging for the classical and we were all jammed together in the same hut. Promptly they arose at twelve o'clock and the air was filled with barbaric babble. Scholars may insist that it is a beautiful language but at that time it seemed infernal.

The Japanese having departed with the crash of crampons ringing in our ears, the English arose. Now this was a very English team and with suave, well-rounded, dulcet English tones they checked their gear and made their plans. At this point I could stand it no longer and leapt from my bed shrieking and hurling obscenities at them. Like all true well-bred Englishmen they looked at me with some surprise and then treated my antics with disdain. At this I retreated, hid my head with shame and lay shaking with rage.

At long last the sky began to lighten and I assured the apprentice and the porters that it was now worthwhile getting up. At least we would be able to find our way over the first thousand feet of rubble. We forced stale bread down our unwilling throats and savoured the glorious coffee provided by the guardian's daughter. At that moment she seemed the fairest of the fair. Glacier cream was rubbed into our already filthy features and with leaden feet we set out for the summit just touched by the fingers of the rising sun.

We crossed the snow col linking the hut to the Hörnli ridge proper and arrived at the foot of the first steep section. Here there was a rope of about eight Germans all linked together by four feet lengths. The men were swearing, the women were screaming and the apprentice stood muttering about incompetence. We waited for the pitch to clear and then rushed up solo. The apprentice's muttering suddenly changed to cries of alarm and concern when he found all the holds covered in ice but the training given by Roberts and Padfield on the Ben saw him through. The 750 metres up to the Solvay hut were misery. It consisted of fighting up rubble at 45°, trying to avoid rocks knocked down by preceding climbers and punching and fighting to get

past slower parties. By the time we got to the Solvay hut the porters were a long way behind. We learnt later they had come across a solo American who had never been on a mountain before, and in the interests of humanity they had attached him to their rope. He slowed their progress so much that they eventually had to turn back at the Solvay hut.

Bob by this time was complaining that he did not feel too good. Obviously the rapid transition from Manchester to 4,000 metres had not been too kind to his body processes. We easily climbed the upper Moseley Slab but I found the ascent to the top of the Roter Turm a little tricky as an English party was spread out all over the slope looking as if they might slide off at any moment. I traversed to avoid them and muttered to Bob that I might fall off. The only reply was steady retching and I realised the apprentice and his breakfast had parted company. The next 500 metres to the summit must have been hell for Bob as he was sick about twenty times and it is a great tribute to his courage that he kept going. We slowed down considerably and it was now our turn to be climbed over and pushed to one side. As we were moving up to the summit pyramid Bob, who was almost out on his feet at this stage, lost his ice-axe. Fortunately an ice-axe is not a necessity so I gave him mine and I did without.

The climb up the fixed ropes was notable mainly for the problem of avoiding Germans descending, totally oblivious and unconcerned for anyone coming up. The final exposed snow slopes seemed endless. How Whymper and Croz were able to run to the top is beyond my comprehension. After what seemed an eternity we arrived at the Swiss summit and we were both just too tired to go onto the Italian summit; altitude had taken its toll.

The mid-day cloud was beginning to wrap itself round the summit and anyone who has looked round Zermatt graveyard does not want to get caught in an afternoon storm on the Matterhorn. Slowly and carefully we made our way down. Every foot we went down Bob felt better and even though he had trouble with his crampons it did not seem to matter. Eventually when we reached the Moseley slab we threw off the rope and soloed almost gaily down. In fact it gave me the utmost pleasure to solo past a Swiss team, abseiling down, who had previously trampled all over us in their haste. My cup was filled to overflowing when I was able to solo back up to free their rope.

We were almost within reach of the hut when Bob's bowels rebelled and I left him making a sacrifice of one woollen glove in an attempt to cleanse himself. Finally we reached the hut and ordered bowls of soup. Unfortunately one mouthful was enough for Bob and two bowls of soup almost finished me.

We were so weary we did not leave the hut until seven o'clock in the evening and got ourselves lost in the woods on the way down.

Consequently it was two o'clock next morning when we staggered through Zermatt feeling like tramps and looking balefully at rich American tourists returning from their night's dancing at the Hotel Pollux.

We crawled into our tents and the next thing I remembered was the sun shining and hearing the dulcet tones of our English companions of the hut coming from the next tent, discussing their failure to reach the summit. I smiled to myself and turned over and went back to sleep. Even at the *très facile* level climbing is still competitive.

Any racist tendencies that may be apparent are not intentional and must be attributed to the author's present country of residence.