

Just a Bit Difficult

by PETER HARDING

The strange thing was that I had done it before, quite a few times; well, twice in the upward direction and thrice in descent, and in my mind's eye it seemed like only yesterday. But it wasn't yesterday, nor even yesteryear; it was more than four decades ago, and now there was the desire to do it again.

On the first occasion, with Norman Horsefield and Ernie Phillips, we rushed at it, clattering up in nailed boots. Last to leave the hut after a ghastly breakfast of egg soup, prepared by the warden from our own imported packets of post-war dried egg stirred into lukewarm water, we set off in hot pursuit of a mixed caravan of climbers. Guides with their clients, experienced amateurs and quite incompetent tyros; we, of course, being of that middle group. Or maybe not, for in the dimmer than dim light before dawn we had soon attracted an audience of non-combatants by leaving the scree path too early. The Belvedere's 'orchestra stalls' buzzed with excitement; one could almost hear the word go round: "Les crétins Anglais! Ils sont allés au Face de l'Est." Fortunately, an impatient Swiss guide, already delayed by his two clients and dragging them along like dogs on a lead, gave us a clue to the best way up the Hoernli ridge: shadowing him for a couple of hours taught me a lot about alpine route finding.

This time though, I had no need to follow a guided party, and in any case there were none, so far as I could ascertain. Just one group of three had left the Berghotel Belvedere over an hour before and enquiries revealed that, of the dozen or so folk staying at the SAC hut, only five had gone for the Matterhorn. This signalled a note of caution; perhaps I should leave it for yet another day. After all, on my walk up from the Schwarzsee that previous afternoon, I had seen there was a fair bit of snow on the E face although the Hoernli route itself appeared to be reasonably clear almost as far as the Shoulder. Now, indecision lost me a good hour; hanging around in the dark grey mist of early morning, plucking up courage to go for it. At least by then, the morning was a much paler shade of grey and from the scree path this time the devious route was obvious - made so by a fixed rope. It was over forty years since I had last reached this point and I wondered if such 'cordes' now continued right to the summit. Whatever were things coming to?

As the mind's greying grey matter seeped through mildewed memory banks I recalled the last time I had had thoughts of re-ascending the old Cervin. It was exactly a dozen years earlier, also in early July. The weather had been wicked, with new snow right down to below the Schwarzsee, so I promptly fled from Zermatt to Davos and its lesser peaks, but even these were blanketed in white.

After that first fixed rope, the way ahead was free of further aid, and the rising traverse across scree strewn slabs below those lower, daunting ramparts of the Hoernli ridge itself went quite quickly until the narrow neck of a gully funnelled out above to form the Great Couloir. An awe inspiring place; it brought back memories.

On completing our first ascent, after a slow descent to the Shoulder we had skittered down in double quick time; Ernie leading with Norman and me acting as brake men, for his cherished Mkl Lawrie's were fitted with 'Mont Blanc' heel plates, designed for descending icy slopes, whilst our boots had simple soft-iron clinkers in their heels. At least these provided some grip on the hard slabby rock whereas our front man could hardly have been worse off in roller skates! Lower down we got involved in helping two climbers who had followed the Hoernli ridge too rigorously and got themselves in bother. Sending them ahead of us, we soon found their route finding was hopeless and signalled them to follow. Crossing the notorious couloir, to which we paid scant attention on the ascent, I looked up at it and thought: 'There hasn't been a stonefall down here since Ed Whymper was a lad.' Then I moved on. Barely 50 feet behind, our leading rescuee was right in the funnelling gully of the couloir when I heard his cry and the rattle of falling stones. Looking round, I saw him, holding on with one hand and the other arm protecting his head, being bombarded by a shower of rocks. Fortunately it was only small stuff and although battered and badly shaken he was not dislodged from his footing. His horrified companion was in no position to have held him had he fallen. One lives and learns, or else one may not live so long!

Alone now, on the endless slabs beyond that Great Couloir, it was as silent as the grave and visibility was neither good nor bad as mist still shrouded the mountain. The intense silence was strange for on my previous ascents and descents there had always been a continuous rattle of small stones bounding down the E face, with an occasional large lump falling to liven up proceedings. Now perhaps that icy snow covering, higher up, was keeping things in

place. Even stranger were some tiny, red, reflective markers en route which I could only think had been placed at certain points as 'guides' for the guides, to enable the best way to be seen in bad light or darkness. Maybe, if and when I go again, they will have been superseded by beepers or flashing lights, for making a living out of the most famous peak in the Alps must be akin to running a Las Vegas gambling saloon - operation has to be possible on each and every day when the crowds of tourists arrive, if one hopes to make a fortune.

No real climbing problem arrived until, working back towards the ridge, I came to those steep pitches leading up to the Solvay Refuge; the Untere Moseley Platte section with its crucial, cracked corner. This had a length of rope hanging down which reduced its difficulty to less than difficult. I pondered whether that 'corde' was official, or had been left by some amateur ascensionists who were not so confident about climbing down. It might come in useful on my own descent! Near the top of the crack there was a 'friend' which must have 'walked' too far in, but I was in no mood or position to try and effect its rescue. Of course, one never knows the circumstances surrounding abandonment of pieces of climbing gear, but on the Matterhorn, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which the rock rapidly becomes coated with verglas - making it virtually impossible to climb. Then, the only way to get down a normally moderate pitch might well demand the sacrifice of one's best protection equipment. However, I could not help but feel that if I could afford to take and leave such expensive gear on a route like the Hoernli it might be better to hire the services of a guide to get me up and down safely. (A view which I later changed my mind about, on finding that the current Zermatt guides' fee for so doing is SF610,-, almost £300,- at current rates of exchange!) Such thought caused my memory cogs to turn again, recalling those days when this old century was still in its middle age and a second trip to the Hoernli was made in order to earn a little extra cash. Undercutting the professional fee of SF200,-, I freelance guided an English speaking Dutchman and his son up and down the Matterhorn for the princely sum of £10,- (then equivalent to about SF150,-). That enabled me to buy a nice pair of 'Tricouni' nailed boots, with enough left over to splash out on a good nosh-up at the Walliserhof.

This time, with no one to worry about other than myself, pace was relatively unimportant; the Solvay Hut was reached in just

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under 3h from the Belvedere. The mountain was still shrouded in mist and it was getting quite cold. What hadn't been evident was a nasty breeze blowing from the N - it was only when the ridge itself was gained that this made its presence felt. The late W.O. Moseley's eponymous slab, just above the refuge, was dry but extremely polished and, in cleated rubber soled boots, proved to be a lot less easy to fall off than it once was in nails. (I'm sure if William Oxnard Jr. had been watching, and reading my thoughts, he would have said 'yeah' to that !)(*)

Above were all manner of aids: pegs, nuts, old rope and even a chain, so I was soon onto steep snow leading towards the Shoulder. Here came the sound of voices so, with ice axe now unhooked from its sack loops and well driven into good firm snow, I waited. Goretexed and gaitered, in helmets and harnesses, crampons, ice axes and ice tools strapped to their sacks, they were descending very carefully, roped together. Maybe they had been up the North Face. They regarded me with astounded incredulity - shock even. I suppose that an incongruous looking person, just standing there alone, in a battered old hat and corduroy breeches, is the last thing one expects to meet when coming down off one's chosen peak in all the best gear. Seeing this sophisticated tackle made me feel a bit of an idiot, so I gave them a friendly grin and a "Gruezi !" (suspecting they were Swiss or German). They each gave a curious smile in reply. As they went on down, one said something to the other which sounded to end with "... alter Halbstarker". And unless I was mistaken this translated roughly into '... old half-strung'. I got the drift! But 4000m up on the Matterhorn is no place for any OHS to stand about so I pressed on to reach the Shoulder. There, in the snowy lee of a large rock I took another rest and had another thought: 'Mixed climbing without crampons is not nearly as much fun as it used to be before Vibrams !' But the answer to a much more pressing problem was needed; that German chap had been dead right with his 'half-strung' comment, for I had forgotten to bring any sodding gloves or mittens. However, a quick delve into the rucksack produced a spare pair of socks and then a couple of snips with a Swiss Army penknife effectively saved the day (I knew that funny thing with a hinged blade on it must have a use!)

The Shoulder itself was definitely not a 'Peu Difficile'; perhaps

(*)American doctor William O. Moseley slipped and fell to his death in 1879.

better classified as a PH ('Pretty Horrific'), but more due to a cold N wind than the amount of snow. Glad to reach the final series of knotted 'cordes' leading up to the Roof, I decided to tackle them in Dolomite 'Via Ferrata' fashion; ice axe back on the sack and a short length of Kernmantel brought into play, protecting progress by means of slings, karabiners and my modified Sticht plate. This was tedious but those 'cordes' were rather unsatisfying to grasp, especially by hands clad in sock-mitts. Near the final section there were voices again, so it was time to secure myself to a metal fixing and wait. This time a party of three climbers was coming down. Being very near to the spot where that dreadful accident occurred in 1865, and since my apparel was misconstrued as dating from that 'Golden Age', the leading climber looked at me as if he'd seen a ghost. His startled exclamation suggested they were probably Italians so I gave a cheerful "Buon Giorno!" The three men came by quickly, the proximity of their moving 12 point crampons so close to my sock-mittened hands giving yet more food for thought: 'Ah, yes - something else I could have brought'. However, so much snow had not really been anticipated; if it had, I would not have been there! That permanent snow slope, on the Roof above, was my sole reason for bringing an ice axe, my wife's 72cm walker's job.

Such musing stirred up memories of that first outing again, when someone had suggested to Norman and Ernie that all our axes and rucksacks should be left in the Solvay Hut, thus enabling us to romp up the fixed ropes rapidly, against a steady flow of downward swinging humanity. The success of this idea clearly showed it to be that of a great mountaineer-in-the-making. Or was it? For it then resulted in all three of us crawling up that snow on the Roof in fear and trepidation with no means of security whatsoever and the thin alpine line connecting us at least strong enough to ensure that if one of us fell we all would. (So much for the notions of great mountaineers-to-be!) And, as if that in itself were not nerve racking enough, some damned Yankee came slithering down the slope on his back to grab me round the legs, gibbering like an idiot: "Oh my Gard! Oh my Gard!" Fortunately he was held on a stout rope by his guide above. I responded immediately with a shrill "Jesus Christ!", for it seemed we might well outdo those unfortunate first ascensionists, with five of us scoring hits on the Matterhorn Glacier below. The guide, realising I must be English from that blasphemous cry, shouted: "Keek'im, M'sieur! Keek'im!" Whereupon the terrified American tourist let go my legs

and slithered on down the slope, with his guide confidently holding him on the rope while descending himself - just like he was coming downstairs - no sweat; been there, done that before!

Now at that very same spot, the snow slope was very much less stepped than I had ever seen it previously but, comforted by my wife's longish axe, I kicked easily up to the summit. Still in cloud, there was no view; the Italian crest being invisible and the latticed cross of metal inbetween only just discernible. The wind was bitterly cold so I did not linger, turning soon to start my descent. I hadn't really come for the view. It was only 11am - too early for lunch.

Back at the fixed 'cordes', their steel fixings were used to make a series of short abseils. Then, after traversing the snow crested Shoulder, more abseiling dealt with the pitches down to the Obere Moseley Platte and that was the end of the snow. However, the infamous slab itself turned out to be just a trifle more tricky in descent. Relieved on reaching the Solvay, and in its shelter, I wolfed down a large ham roll, guzzled a half litre carton of apfelsaft, then laughed. Any brilliant mountaineer-that-would obviously have left his food and drink in the hut instead of taking it all the way up only to bring it down again! I laughed again. Then thoughts wandered on - to my third time on the mountain, with Dennis Kaye in '51, when we had taken a rest at the Solvay on our descent after enjoying the delights of the Z'mutt ridge, despite its rotten 'teeth' and that awesome left wall of Penhall's couloir. But now it was almost one o'clock and I had been on the mountain since before 6am not nearly up to standard for the pace of a modern Rucksacker! However, nowhere had there been any running nor even a bit of jogging, either going up or coming down; always that slow methodical movement of the traditional rock climber. Considering the condition and taking account of age (the mountain's of course), my solo expedition had gone well so far, but there was still some way to go.

After 'abbing' down the cracked groove below the Solvay, resisting any temptation to acquire a 'Friend', those endless slabs flanking the E face were a doddle to descend in Vibrams. (That iron-hard work of the Pennine Alps used to be a bugger in hardened steel nails!) Only when coming to a water-streaked patch was it necessary to exercise care in one's foot placement. Somewhat tired now though, I was striding in a rather relaxed fashion when there was a sudden crash, bang and rattle. I knew it had been too

quiet without that background rhythm music of the Matterhorn's rolling stones. Now, the noise of a big 'un dropping from the E face's precipitous gable end to smash onto the gently angled slabs below and burst into a myriad fragments shook me out of my near somnambulant state.

I remembered the trip with the Dutch pair, in my day as a freelance guide; a large rock fell then, during our descent. It must have been the size of a garden shed before hitting those slabs with a tremendous crash, scattering its debris far and wide; small pieces whizzing uncomfortably close to us. My weary clients were almost shell-shocked and crouched like stone statues looking fearfully upwards, thinking the whole mountain was beginning to collapse. It was some time before I got them started on the remainder of our descent.

Back to the present, it seemed to take ages to reach the Great Couloir, but once across its narrow neck the Belvedere arrived in no time. Then the time was a little after 3pm so, relaxing with a drink, I took a long rest, looking back delightedly at my trip up and down the old Cervin once again. Before leaving for the Schwarzsee, the cloud which had hidden my mountain all day long showed the first signs of breaking and the next part of my descent became well filled with views and photographs.

Down at the cable-car station there was trouble. The attendant waved a hand at the stationary cars then pointed to his watch. "Dreissig Minuten, Sir; seulement une demi-heure; a leetle difficile, M'sieur." (*The Swiss do try and cater for everyone!*) So, I thought I might finish my day with a photograph of the tiny chapel at the edge of the Schwarzsee, then amble on down to the lower cable station at Furri; hardly more than half an hour. I didn't take that photo but I did continue down the path. After it had turned W, almost underneath the Matterhorn's North Face, the truth dawned: it was the one which went via Ober Staffelalp! When at last I reached my garni-hotel, in downtown Zermatt, it was long gone 9pm. I was very tired but happy. It had been a great alpine day; more than 15 hours which I wouldn't have missed for all the gold clocks in China. Normally that old Hoernli route can be boring, or as busy as Blackpool on Bank Holidays with more objective danger than a soccer match. And it may only be a PD, but there are occasions when not to enjoy it would be just a bit difficult.