

Vain Tale, With a Madman on the Alps

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The merry little Zug puffed up the cogs to Zermatt, and opposite to me was the well-built, intelligent-looking young Englishman in the familiar uniform of the Alpinist. Contrary to the usual case, the said uniform impressed me most favourably it was evidently meant for business, and not for show. We fell a-talking, and discovered before very long that we were the men, and wisdom would die with us; and in particular that we were most carefully fitted to fulfil each others Alpine aspirations.

It was clearly time to do a new climb. How to find one? In this emergency Conway's Pocket Book informed us that no record existed of any route on the Mountlet-side of the Frifithorn,—i.e., between the Friftjoch and the Rothhorn Pass. We determined to make an attempt to traverse this peak, then, hoping that it's comparatively insignificant altitude might shield us from the more formidable results of the bad weather; weather which was destined to continue throughout the whole of the season.

We accordingly left Zermatt, and spent a comfortable night in the Frift-hut. The next morning we started in fairly decent weather, and reached Triftjoch in good time, and without putting on the rope. We breakfasted, and turned up the easy rocks of the south ridge of the Trifithorn. They were in bad condition, and the description of the ridge in Conway led us to choose a route which turned out very troublesome. It was two o'clock before we stood on the summit and shook hands over our first peak.

His manner struck me as peculiar, but I easily and naturally ascribed it to enthusiasm. Genius hath its victories no less renowned than stupidity. We began the descent down the steepish north ridge, or rather slopes nearly to the rock where the long crest runs out to the Rothhorn. Here we turned off to the left, directly downwards the little peak—I forget its name—above the Mountlet Hut. The slope soon became very steep, and the snow, lying on ice, unmistakably treacherous. We put on the rope, and cautiously continued the descent, Ellis leading. The slope steepened still more, and the layer of snow grew yet thinner, 'till suddenly he slips from his steps. I was quite prepared and easily held him. A council of war was now held and

to my amazement, he proposed to glissade. The suggestion was madness; for the slopes curled over so strongly that from where we were we could see the bergschrund at the bottom. I was for step-cutting or nothing. We decided, however, to try in another place. A short distance to our right a tiny rib of broken rock led down some distance to the glacier—perhaps all the way. If so, there would be no difficulty.

Ellis, at the last rocks, took off the rope. But no sooner had he got the rope off than his purpose became apparent. He shouted up to me, "Now I am going to glissade. It's perfectly safe. Come along!" what was I to do? With 80 feet of steep and treacherous snow between us it was impossible to join him; to have attempted to do so would have risked my own life, and perhaps precipitated him into the abyss. I was a young man still—not yet 21—and I am bound to confess that the position of affairs was rather a shock. I stormed, persuaded, threatened, cajoled, did all I could to dissuade him from his maniacal attempt; and only succeeded in getting a lecture on the new principles of glissading. He firmly turned into the new position, and began to slide. The snow slipped with him, his pace rapidly augmented, his toes caught, and, he vanished.

I climbed, with horror gripping my heart, to a small jutting rock near me, and was just able to look over into the bergschrund. This, of enormous size, was filled up with snow, so that only a slight depression was visible. In the midst lay Ellis on his back; arms and legs outstretched, and the snow tinged a little with his blood. All was over; I knew he must be dead, for the cliff over which he had fallen is many hundreds of feet in height: yet—I shouted—I stood poised on my rock, spell-bound, uncertain what to do. My position was not uncritical; the rucksac had fallen with Ellis; I was left with the rope, a meagre consolation as things stood—nay! A mockery. Whether I went on to Zinal or returned to Zermatt, I must cross snow-covered glaciers.

While still lost in these unsatisfactory reveries, my eye caught, or fancied a slight movement of the prostrate form below. Joy returned with stunning emphasis—I shouted till the hills rang again. Had I been deceived? No! the movements were repeated—Ellis yet lived. I shouted again and again, and at last a voice came back through the radiant air. Ellis spoke. He did not know what had happened—I told him in emphatic language. I doubt if he understood: he advised me to glissade—it was quite safe! I asked him if his head was quite uninjured, and, as he replied sensibly, I thought a drop of brandy

could not hurt him. I told him to drink a few drops, make some soup, and wait till I came down to him. What would I not have given for a pair of claws? He was now sitting upon the snow, and I dived from my rock.

Where could we get down? Why prolong the reminiscence of agony?

Sufficient to say that utterly wearied and frozen we stumbled down the glacier mostly on all fours until we came at last to an absolute home of refuge. Hurrah! We had found the hut.

But the day's misfortunes were not over yet! We went upstairs to the "bedrooms," I was in an inner room—I believe dedicated to the fair sex. But I was too tired for problem plays. I hung up the lantern on a nail over the table, on which I flung my sopping clothes; pulled down all the rugs in the place from their rope, rolled myself in them, and lay down' only to see if it was comfortable. Then I said, as duty bade, "I must put out the light—put out the light—put—"

The next morning I woke up much refreshed. Only to find that my clothes had got burned by the unextinguished candle. I swore and came down to breakfast. This function was hardly prepared when the guardian appeared from the abyss. He was most sympathetic and kind, and lent me a coat and shirt of his own for the descent to Zinal. With no more ado I rushed off. Ellis decided to stay another day there, to recover from his shock, and also, as he laudably explained, "to have the snow hard in the morning!" I offered to remain and look after him, but did not overpress him.

The next morning dawned—as might be expected—but brought no Ellis. Lunch followed a game of chess, and a short, a very short, stroll. No Ellis. At tea we began to get alarmed. I dressed for dinner, however, and wandered out with my friends to taste the evening air. I should explain that to dress for dinner means to put on a tie!

To us in the cool gloaming enter Ellis, footsore and weary, but with an unmistakable air of triumph, as one who had battled with Nature face to face, and won.

We shook hands heartily; and then I inquired why he had not started early, as we had begun to get anxious. He indignantly replied that he had started early, and came fast. "Not before four," I said, meaning the afternoon. "At three sharp," he answered, meaning the morning! "You cannot have taken three hours." "Three?" he roared, "fifteen!" I wearily retreated: he had an axe.

He then explained: having learnt the lesson about the dangers of glissading he had cut steps carefully down the ice slopes. We changed the subject and told him dinner was nearly ready. Would he not go and prepare? He went; and Bullock and I turned a cold and glassy gaze one on the other. Without a word we filed into dinner. Ellis retired to bed after a hearty meal; and the floodgates of inquiry were no longer closed by the look of stupefaction. Had he come over the Zinal Rothhorn? Or down over the snout of the glacier?

The mystery was soon cleared up: on the first bit of path I found traces innumerable of large and laborous steps, rudely and recently hewn by some stalwart hand. I returned, thinking, and a rapid inspection of Ellis' axe put an end to further inquiry. These were his ice-slodes!

I bade a hearty farewell, and departed to Evolena.

I had left Ellis before adjusting our accounts—he remained in my debt to a small amount. On arrival in England I found a letter from him, with the amount owing, and a wish to meet me, and chat over the events of the season! I replied cordially, asking him to dine at my club to meet Travers, with whom I had once climbed. He replied, accepting.

The night arrived, and with it Travers, but Ellis was not there. From that day to this I have neither seen him, nor heard of him, save that one vague rumour once come to my ears of his having been seen somewhere in Switzerland.