

A Fight for Life on Monte Rosa

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MOUNTAINEERING is full of light and air. The early call, the quick breakfast, and away into the darkness with the flashlight picking a way through the rocks of the terminal moraine. Thus it started for Fritz Lenz and me, leaving the Bétemps hut to climb the Cresta Rey of Monte Rosa. This route is seldom climbed but reportedly offers a fine rock climb to the very top of the Dufourspitze. After we had been plagued by snow and ice in several other areas of the Alps, the thought of a good rock route had much greater appeal than the snow slog up the regular route.

The night before, we had read the scanty details given in the guide book and looked at the drawings. We had been warned to by-pass the smaller ridges coming down from Monte Rosa towards the Grenz Glacier. After traversing the huge moraine, we reached the ice, put on our crampons, and started up the easy glacier. This gradually steepened. We were soon in the Grenz icefall, notable for its huge block-like structures and enormous crevasses. We temporarily lost the route and had to work down an ice cliff, but we were soon able once more to follow the faint footsteps of previous parties. The bridges over the crevasses were solid in the cold morning air and we made good time over the ice. We were now on the upper smoother section of the glacier from where the Lyskamm glowed golden in the morning light. At this time a great ridge made up of several spires was seen extending down from Monte Rosa. We concluded that this ridge, the highest point visible, was our route. It looked like a formid-

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able rock problem, but since the guide book had not mentioned any unusual difficulties, we went forward to see. On one side was an overhanging ice slope, which was to be avoided. On the other, boiler-plate slabs of granite led up to the first tower. But first the bergschrund had to be crossed. It was bridged only at one spot by the remains of a sizable snow avalanche. The snow was not well packed and the deep, dark interior on either side was not a pleasant prospect. With a firm belay we crossed safely and made our way to the slabs, which proved most uncompromising. Holds were few, and belay spots were more suggestive than real. Above these slabs the ridge rose steeply. Fritz chose to lead up the left side. Here the rock was twisted into contorted strata, some firm, some loose, and always difficult, with many strata lying vertically rather than horizontally. Several traverses were made in the hope of finding more pleasant strata, but to no avail. We were making fairly good time, however, and had climbed about 1000 feet of rock when we reached a narrow couloir which from below we could see led to a break in the ridge. Here we found an overhang covered with verglas. Fritz placed a piton and snap link and I belayed him while he solved this tricky problem. Above, the couloir sloped inward and then rose steeply and I could no longer see the climb. The rope slowly went out as Fritz progressed upward. Almost the full length of the rope was out when I heard a faint scuffle above. Almost immediately, and to my astonished horror, Fritz shot out from the overhang and plunged down the couloir out of sight. A moment later the jerk on the rope came. I was shot up against the rocks with great force. Blackness and silence engulfed the scene. When I came to, I lay against a big boulder, splattered with blood. One of my eyes was swollen and a cut at the side was bleeding; a deep scalp cut also added to the trickle down the side of my face. My right hand was swollen and cut, but fortunately the fingers all worked without pain.

Upon the return of consciousness I began to consider the situation. Surely Fritz must be dead from such a fall, and the chances of getting down 1000 feet of formidable rocks, plus the negotiation of the badly crevassed icefall alone, were very small indeed. "Everett, you've had it," I thought, but one must at least fight.

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Slowly I got to my feet. Immediately I was jerked towards the carabiner by Fritz's weight on the rope. My ribs ached. I was slowly drawn towards the carabiner and to an awkward position against the rocks. Cut the rope? No, that was out because Fritz might possibly be alive. I finally thought out a way to tie the rope and cut myself loose. The task seemed impossible, especially since I was being held awkwardly on tiptoe against the rocks by the rope. I had just succeeded in untying the first knot when I heard Fritz yell, "What happened? Are you all right?" Fritz was alive! "Fritz, are you all right? Can you move?" "Yes. Pull up the rope and I'll climb up." Slowly, as I pulled on the rope, Fritz climbed up the couloir to the ledge. His clothes were torn and there was a small bump on his forehead but no bloody wounds. He sat down. His pallor evidenced the shock he had sustained. Also, he was mentally confused. By now our position was all too clear. It was obvious that Fritz was still able to climb and had not lost his technical skill, but the problem of finding the route and keeping the effort sustained was going to be up to me. Getting down 1000 feet of difficult rocks and crossing snow-covered, crevassed glaciers and icefalls were our only possible means of escape. By now the wind was coming in roaring gusts, ice cold and carrying bits of stinging ice. After surveying the situation for a few minutes, I told Fritz that our only chance of survival was a successful descent of the rocks, since the wind would freeze us into two battered gendarmes within a very short time.

In our condition the direct descent of the upper cliffs was out of the question. The only feasible route appeared down a 60° ice couloir. We rappelled down to the edge of this ice slope, which plunged down to end above another section of cliffs. Here we put on our crampons, a formidable undertaking in itself. The damnable wind raged and battered us. Fritz had lost his ice-axe in the fall. Fortunately, he is an expert ice craftsman and has had experience in using his piton hammer as an additional axe on steep ice. I started down the ice slope facing in. The thin snow cover was firm and the crampons held well. The ice-axe head could not be sunk deep enough to give any feeling of security. After descending a rope length to a small ice ledge and cutting out steps for a belay spot, Fritz began to descend. With a

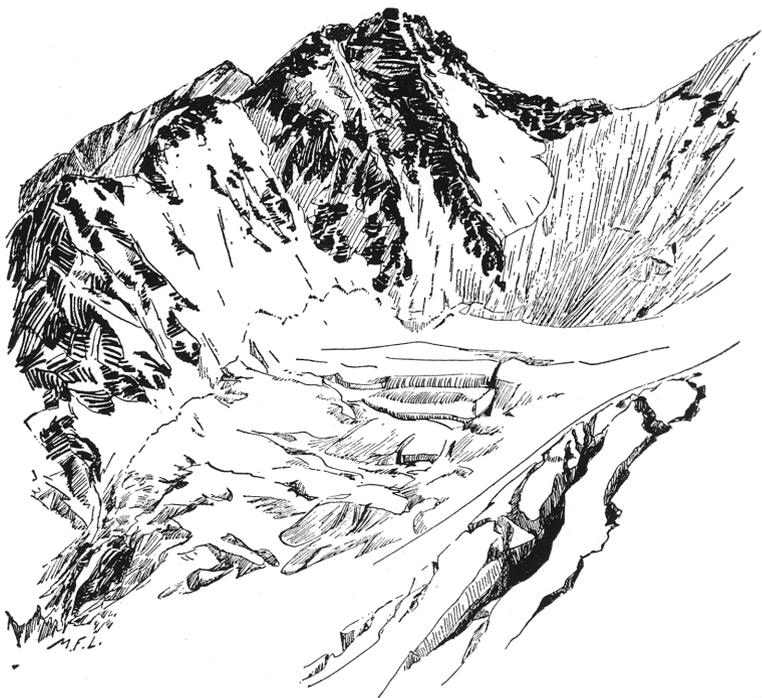
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technique both perfect yet automatic he descended slowly towards me. By now the shock was wearing off and the pain from his swollen ankles was becoming unbearable. At times he swayed, but we had to go on. Several more rope lengths and we were on a wide ledge. Fritz slumped down in a half faint and asked for food and water. I opened the pack and found half a chocolate bar and a half-filled canteen. The ankle pain was now really affecting him. Fortunately, I had morphine tablets with me. I gave him one.

The wind was roaring down the couloir, driving the fine particles of ice into our faces. We must go on for we were still high up on the rocks with the glacier far below. I realized the slabs to our left would be a dangerous if not impossible route for descent, and so I started down to the right, following another ice couloir for a few hundred feet. We were now forced to take to the rocks. Our condition, our position, and the wind made it impossible to remove our crampons. The rock was in steep, almost vertical folds with no breaks or obvious lines of weakness in sight. Climbing down on small ledges, we descended another hundred feet. Since Fritz was again near collapse, we sat on a small ledge. The pack was removed and opened for a drink of water. In the shuffle the rope picked it up, and to our horror we watched it go bounding off into space. It contained several extra pitons and carabiners. Fortunately, Fritz had five pitons and three carabiners; I had two carabiners and a rope sling. With at least 400 feet to the glacier and the holds becoming thinner, it was obvious we would need these and perhaps even then be hung up. I searched out every possible section for routes to save on precious ironware, but soon a narrow exposed crack was more than Fritz could tackle in his condition. He placed one piton, which didn't set. He placed another. The ping told us it was firm. But pound as he would, the other piton would not loosen. The wind roared and we could not stop, so we had to leave that precious iron spike behind. This left us three pitons and a rope sling.

Exhausted and feeling faint, Fritz swayed, clinging to the small holds. We traversed downward and were soon stopped by a sheer face. A crack here made a piton possible, so we reluctantly

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used one and descended to a ledge 50 feet below. This was the critical point. From here the route had to be determined. It was the point of no return. I studied the rock face and the wild glacier below. Yes, it would go. "Fritz," I yelled, "we're going to make it!" Two more piton rappels, a traverse to the only boulder on the face, and a sling rappel would see us down. At least it looked possible if some appropriate cracks could be found. Fritz was somewhat wobbly, but with dogged determination he set the pitons till they rang. The last one didn't give this assuring sound, but there was no alternative. We descended with care and as smoothly as possible. A short traverse brought us to that much needed rock. I took off my rappel sling, placed it over the rock, and threaded our rope. I could see the ends dangling at the very edge of the glacier, which was a shambles of small and large crevasses presenting a ticklish problem at the end of the rappel. I looked around and could see no route we could have climbed down. It was indeed the edge of survival.

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On reaching the glacier, I had to find a spot to stand while Fritz rappelled down. Near the rocks the glacier was a mass of gaping holes and the snow soft and rotten. Probing with my axe, I finally found a firm spot and waited for Fritz. With great effort he descended and landed in a small crevasse but was able to extricate himself.

We now pulled on the rope, watching the end travel up. It must not get caught! But as the end came over, it dropped into a small crack and stuck. Fortunately, a few motions loosened it and with a hiss it fell to our feet. Fritz was exceedingly exhausted from this long, sustained effort and sank down in the snow. "Fritz," I said, "we're going to live but we must go on. There's still a hell of a lot of glacier to get down before we're safe, and a night on the glacier in our condition would be a terrible business." We realized that his ankles would grow continually worse and that to keep going was our only possible course. We roped up and started down the glacier. Here the wind that had battered us was no longer important but a powerful sun had worked on the snow all day and had softened the bridges over the crevasses. We fell into endless small ones, and routes used in the morning led to the edge of some enormous ones, now open. A new route had to be threaded through these, by careful probing of edges and jumping to clear soft edges. Fortunately, we avoided the big ones, but the small ones made life unpleasant, and Fritz, who was heavier, seemed to open all those I didn't find. It was a slow, exhausting business. The grandeur of the Grenz icefall and its great ice blocks now seemed a huge trap waiting to drop us into its icy depths. This was the last serious problem. It was now six o'clock and we were on the lower glacier. Here there were still soft snow and small crevasses, but we could make much better time.

Finally, the great terminal moraine loomed into view and, to get off the snow, we headed for it. The sun was now setting and only an hour of daylight remained. The boulder-hopping was a slow and painful problem for Fritz. Slowly we went along the ice, looking for cairns to lead the way. We had taken the moraine too soon, and when darkness came at 9:00 P.M., we were still stumbling along through the rocks, our flashlight making it possible to continue. At 10:00 we reached a point where far be-

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low two other lights were flashed up at us. The route was still difficult to find in the great boulder-strewn moraine. Finally, we reached the path that leads along the spine of the moraine down to the Bétemps Hut. Now it was safe to leave Fritz and I turned down towards the hut for help. The two lights came up the trail toward me. Voices spoke only French. I held my flashlight up to my bloody face. "Accident," I said, pointing up the path, and went on towards the hut. The hut keeper's daughter looked at my blood-covered clothes and face and went to get her mother. Fritz, with the two good Samaritans accompanying him, arrived shortly in a state of collapse. It was after 11:00 P.M. and we had taken 12 hours to get down. After a bowl of hot soup and some bandaging, we went to bed.

It had been a close call. Next day I had a very severe chest cold and went on to Zermatt, where I gave the tourists the rare sight of a very black eye. Three husky Austrians, friends of Fritz, carried him in a rope seat across the glacier from the hut to the path—a Herculean feat. With grim determination he walked unassisted along the trail to the train and then up to the hospital in Zermatt. X-ray revealed a broken ankle. Fortunately in his great fall he had landed on his back in snow between the narrow, jagged walls of the couloir.

Now it's all past and we're looking at the peaks again. Mountaineering is full of light and air.