

# Zermatt

Frank Schaeffer

## Chapter 1

'Now we will all die because of the filthy Roman Catholics,' said Janet. 'This would never happen in Vaud.'

'Valais is a dark place,' Mom said, and sighed.

'Typhoid in Switzerland, unbelievable,' murmured Rachael gloomily.

'Catholic Switzerland,' said Dad, as he turned another page of his big old Bible with a swish-slap that made Mom wince. 'Where there's superstition there's corruption. And where there's corruption there's dirty water. In Vaud they may all be liberal Protestants, but at least there is enough of a memory of the Reformation so that they wouldn't hide a broken sewer pipe so as not to scare away the tourists!'

'I'm just thankful we're going straight up to Riffelberg this year and not spending the night down in the town,' said Mom. 'That was very clever of you, Ralph; I mean the way you figured out all these train schedules so we could make it up to Riffelberg in one day. And you were so perceptive to ask about the water supply! How marvelous that the hotel has its own spring, so we don't have to worry!'

'Don't try and butter me up, Elsa!' Dad snapped.

'All those people want to be down there because they play jazz at the Hotel Zermatterhof. Now look, they're dying!' said Janet with grim satisfaction.

'They're not all dying,' whimpered Rachael with a quiver, in a voice as gentle as the cooing of a slightly depressed wood pigeon. 'The conductor says most of them are just sick. All the cases are in one hotel where the water got contaminated he said.'

'And dying!' snorted Janet.

'Anyway, I'm just thankful that we're going to be staying above all that,' Mom added primly.

'I still would have liked to have our usual night at the Hotel Zermatterhof,' I mumbled. 'No one is sick there, are they?'

'Calvin Dort Becker, you only want to be down there because of the jazz!' said Janet. 'I saw you dancing last year!'

'I was not. I just tapped my foot,' I muttered.

'You stood right next to the orchestra and moved your legs. I saw you!'

'Well, no one is dancing now,' said Mom. 'I only hope that the typhoid has made some of them turn to the Lord.'

'Maybe we should go down there to witness to them,' said Rachael. 'I mean after we're settled.'

'Are you crazy?!' exclaimed Janet, 'We'll catch it!'

'We're supposed to be missionaries,' said Rachael.

'We're on vacation,' snapped Dad.

'Poor, poor people, they're so lost, so confused,' said Mom.

'But most of them are Church of England - the skiers, I mean,' whispered Rachael, 'not Catholics. Dad said most of the skiers are English, so maybe they're not all lost.'

'Yes,' said Mom, 'but C of E is just as bad. They call communion "Eucharist" and believe in the "real presence," just like the Catholics. I don't believe there's a Real Christian anywhere in England these days, unless you count a handful of small Reformed Presbyterian churches in Scotland, and I'm not even sure about them.'

'They're all in the same boat,' said Janet. 'All dying.'

'Or just very ill,' whimpered Rachael.

'Filthy water, bad theology. I can't think of a Roman Catholic country where you can safely drink the water,' said Dad.

He glared at us, then looked back down at the enormous Bible on his lap, turned a page hard, and started reading again and marking passages with his fountain pen. It was clear that Dad did not want to talk anymore. So the rest of us kept quiet.

Usually we spent the first night in Zermatt, then the next morning took the cog railway up the mountain to where the Hotel Riffelberg - the alpine lodge we always stayed in on our annual ski vacation - was perched high above the town. When Dad learned there was an outbreak of typhoid in Zermatt, he told Mom to cancel our vacation. But once it was established that the typhoid was only in the main town and that due to a new train schedule we would not need to spend the night there but could just change trains and go straight up to Riffelberg, Dad had relented.

To the south, the Hotel Riffelberg overlooked the cliff, the Matterhorn, the Zermatt Valley, and a range of peaks ringing the town. To the north, the hotel faced a steep snowfield perfect for skiing, which swept up for a mile or more to the top of the Riffelhorn and, beyond that, kept going for another few miles to the summit of the Gornergrat Mountain.

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We stayed at Hotel Riffelberg because it was less expensive than the hotels in town and also because we would not be corrupted by the lures and wiles of the après ski nightlife. As Mom said, 'There will be no smoke-filled taverns for this family! We have come here to ski and enjoy the wonders of God's creation!'

Even the old farmhouses, naked fields, and leafless orchards were barely visible through the swirling gossamer mist of snow stirred up by the rushing train. The familiar mountains that I knew were towering above me were hidden in the clouds. Only the dark pine forests on the lower slopes remained visible. I glanced at Mom sitting next to me and at Dad and my two sisters, Janet and Rachael, across from me. Janet was staring accusingly. I had not done anything in particular to annoy her. That was the way she usually looked at me. Rachael smiled sweetly and reached out to give my hand a friendly squeeze.

In the winter of 1966 Janet was eighteen years old, stocky and dreadfully strong. Rachael was sixteen, slender, with wrists almost as thin as bread sticks. I was fourteen and, at last, taller than both of my sisters. Janet had Dad's olive complexion. Her brown eyes were dark and peered suspiciously out on the world. She wore her plain brown hair pulled back in a ponytail tied with a rubber band.

Even when Rachael shouted she was quieter than Janet talking in her normal voice. Rachael's hair frizzed out around her head in a little halo above soft gray-green eyes and skim-milk-pale skin.