

The Joys of Mountain Climbing

JAMES LENOX BANKS, JR.

“**T**HEN Gluck took some bread in his basket, and the bottle of water, and set off very early for the mountains.”

Ruskin's words kept throbbing through my ears as Jane and I sat in the warm summer sun on the terrace of the Hot Dog Hotel at Slatz. The high peaks of the Alps dominated the horizon in every direction and below us lay the Lake Bunner with its surface unruffled except by the tiny swell from the numerous skiffs which dotted its surface. At frequent intervals we were startled out of our chairs by the cry of the croupier in the nearby Kursaal, the crashing of broken glass in the American bar beneath us, or the roar of motor lorries, loaded with tourists, rushing back and forth on the road at our feet. All else was silence.

“How about the Pifflehorn?” said Jane.

“Righto,” I said staggering to my feet and upsetting a beaker of Flor d'Alpin. “I will be ready in fifteen minutes”. Jane and I thought as one as regards the mountains. Her father had died on the Jungfrau in 1894, and my grandmother had fallen headlong from the Oberammergau three years later. I remember now there had been quite a scandal about it at the time. “My heart is in the Highlands” was our favorite song. It is hard to explain to the layman the peculiar and unquenchable longing that persistently compelled us to leave our comfortable surroundings in Grosvenor Square, journey to out-of-the-way places in the Alps and from there spend hour after hour and day after day in the ascent and descent of those majestic peaks which now surrounded us. As our American friends so quaintly expressed it: “we were bughouse on the subject”.

Within fifteen minutes Jane and I, thoroughly equipped with heavy nailed boots, rucksacks, sweaters, axes, and a supply of spirits, canned food and rope and accompanied by our faithful guides Martin, Gregoire, Dominique and Souchard, were stumbling forward toward the foot of the Aufflestench glacier.

After one hour and 32 minutes through the intense summer heat of the Alpine valleys we reached the foot of the Glacier Moraine, the first milestone in our struggle towards our goal. It has always been my custom in arriving at the Glacier Moraine to open

a magnum of champagne, and the present occasion was no exception. I find that a magnum between oneself, one's wife and four guides is a mere appetizer, a reminder of the joys ahead. This formality having been disposed of, we proceeded enthusiastically over the rough surface of the Moraine until at exactly 47 minutes past nine o'clock, daylight saving time, we suddenly reached Gesundheit Platz.

Words cannot express to the uninitiated, to the ignorant mass in the lowlands, the majestic beauty of the Glacier as it stretched ahead of us, white in the evening twilight, awesome and silent. The surface of the ice is far different from that which we are accustomed to see at home on the lakes and in the shakers. With the peculiar Alpine twilight there is blended the pure white of virgin snow unblemished by the grayish tinges caused by the impurities of life in lower latitudes. "Quick, Martin, another magnum!" and Martin lost no time. He too never ceased to be impressed by the undying grandeur of the Glacier and all that went with it.

As is customary in ascents of this magnitude, we now proceeded to discard our goloshes, which we hid beneath a conveniently located ice-pack. Proceeding cautiously over the treacherous surface and using our axes right and left at random, we finally succeeded after tremendous effort in reaching the rocky surface of the slope up which our course lay. Again a magnum was opened and we spent a welcome three hours in the cozy Yiddisher Hut preparing for the forward rush at dawn. Martin, Dominique and I sang old Swiss ballads, while Jane slept. Gregoire and Souchard proceeded ahead with the provisions and the rest of the spirits. I have always admired Jane's ability to relax and recuperate at such moments as these. It is a gift.

At dawn we were awakened by Martin's revolver, the signal for the upward ascent. Martin, in the inimitable way peculiar to Swiss guides ranking among the first twenty, lassoed a rock 100 feet above him and drew himself up, hand over hand, to the objective point, applying an occasional toe hold, scissor or half-nelson to the more stubborn parts of the rocky surface.

It was then an easy matter for Jane and I and Souchard to follow in the order named. Less experienced climbers than ourselves often fall into the error of sending all their guides ahead of them. This is a great mistake, since it is always desirable to keep as near the provisions and spirits as possible and also to have someone below you to pick up your remains if the occasion arises. When we had all

reached the ledge, the performance was repeated again and again, until dripping with perspiration and in a state of exhaustion, we reached the razor-like edge, which stretched up to the summit of the Pifflehorn. Our only casualty so far, not an unusual one, was the loss of one of our guides, poor Gregoire, who lost his hold of the rope and fell headlong into the valley 1,000 feet below.

And now to the seasoned climber comes the great experience—the headlong dash along the ridge toward the coveted peak. A second mishap befell us during this final and exhilarating phase of the climb—the loss of Dominique, who disappeared into the depths below amid the debris of an avalanche. At last the summit,—an indescribable meleé of peaks in every direction as far as the eye can see. Below lay the panorama of lakes and villages and, over all, the sharp clear-cut atmosphere, bringing out each detail in the minutest degree! “Martin,” I cried, “the cocktails,” and what cocktails Martin could produce with the aid of the inimitable Alpine ice! No cocktail in the world can compare with it. After several rounds, the customary magnum was opened and tuning our portable radio in on Romano’s we had a delightful half hour of dancing on top of the world.

And then the swift carefree descent, the monotony of which was broken by occasional pot shots at goats on neighboring peaks, or the crashing of avalanches in front and behind us. In what seemed an impossibly short time we were again at the edge of the Glacier Moraine, where we opened our last magnum and regained our goloshes. Unfortunately Martin sprained his ankle stepping off the Moraine onto the road with the result that we all returned to the Hot Dog by lorry. The sudden relaxation, after our hours of strenuous effort, had its usual effect upon me and I fell into a deep sleep untroubled by the cares which had hung over me at the start of our ascent.

I awakened the following morning with an awful head, but otherwise a better man. Jane was having breakfast in the sun by the window of the sitting room.

“I am dying,” I moaned.

“Pull yourself together,” she laughed. “We start up the Gotterdammerung by way of the Dent du Cochon at 11 o’clock.

“Oh horrors!” I cried and passed out again.