

Gleanings in the Canadian Rockies, 1930

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MT. ROBSON

IN PLANNING a mountain trip, few of us will wilfully detract from the pleasure of it by giving more than the barest minimum of thought to the uncertainties of bad weather and its relation to the fulfillment of the program. Perhaps this explains the feeling that nature was a little unfair in presenting us with a full week of dismal weather during our sojourn at Mt. Robson. Certainly we would have expected the reception had we more seriously considered the July weather records for the region over a period of years. Be that as it may, in the early afternoon of July 2 we left the horses and trail just above Emperor Falls and with heavy packs started up a rocky brule toward the great northwestern ridge of Mt. Robson with the hope of working out a new route to the summit. The group at first consisted of Newman Waffl, William Hainsworth and Max Strumia. We crossed some loose rock slides and easily ascended the first tier of cliff belts. The second tier, a short distance above, proved more difficult. At length we found a passage along a couloir running to our left over smooth water worn rocks and under high overhanging cliffs. On this side of the mountain four such belts of cliff are clearly seen from below.

We bivouacked at the head of the couloir close to the north-west ridge at a height of about 7,500 ft. and then our adventure with the weather started. The mountains around us soon disappeared in a thick grey mist which later turned into a steady snowfall throughout the night. Waffl and Hainsworth attempted a tour of exploration the following morning but were turned back by a biting snow-laden wind. Needless to say, we returned to the Berg Lake Chalet. On the way down we met John Lehman, the fourth member of our party, just in time to save him the discomfort of a wet and lonely night on the mountain.

On July 4 while waiting for the weather to clear, Hainsworth and Lehman ascended Mt. Mumm, and Waffl and Strumia did some interesting rock climbing in the direction of Peak Saurian. Both parties found a great deal of fresh snow, and more fell the following night.

However, on July 5, to relieve the increasing irritation, we decided to return to the high camp which we moved further up to the right above the third tier of cliff to a height of about 8,000 ft. Our arrival was properly celebrated by a display of hail, snow and high wind. But hope springs eternal in the breast of amateur climbers. At twilight it cleared, and we ventured out on the little wind-swept platform to admire the luminous glory of Mt. Whitehorn, blazing through fast-traveling clouds.

For some of us at least, there was not much pleasure in being up at 1.30 next morning. Hainsworth, indeed, feels that one very prominent feature of our adventure was the new conception of time so forcibly thrust upon him and others. As suburbanites, we live in a time groove, but as climbers throughout the coming weeks we arose at anytime between midnight and noon, had breakfast when we were supposed to have dinner, and usually had nothing when we were supposed to have luncheon. The ground and tents were white with fresh snow, and ominous clouds gripped us in a shivering embrace as we set out at 2.40. Following much discussed and often changed plans, we moved diagonally to our right, around a spur joining the northwest ridge. This spur formed the right side of the large triangular, furrowed face above our camp. Shortly after 3 A.M. we reached the base of the great western face, beyond the spur.

For about one hour we followed the foot of the fourth tier of cliff belts, which at this point is impressively formidable, and finally selected as our lead the third pronounced cleft after rounding the spur. We first scrambled up a steep, ice glazed staircase, and then after kicking steps through the comparatively easy lower slope of the couloir, found it necessary to cut steps in ice to its upper part. This, after a steep, tortuous course, seemed to die in fog-haze against perpendicular ice glazed rocks. As we followed the neck of the couloir, the storm assumed a more menacing form and repeated blasts of hail came hurtling out of gray space against the thousand ribs of the great face invisible, above. A rivulet of frozen snow began to pour down upon us, filling every niche and the steps we had cut so carefully. The couloir ended in an ice-filled crack, wedged in between smooth rocks. Strumia worked here for about one hour, and with the aid of two pitons and a few abortive holds, scraped out of the black ice-glaze, managed to get half-way up. But he was unable to keep his center of gravity close enough to an

icy overhang to justify further attempts to pull over. Being open-minded in such matters, Strumia asked our advice, and shortly the rope was reversed for the return. This must have been sometime around 6 A.M. The steep rocks at the base of the couloir covered with soft snow proved very difficult, even with the aid of a long safety line. At 8 we were at the base of the couloir, whence Lehman and Strumia returned to camp, while Waffl and Hainsworth scouted along the shale slope as far as the "Wishbone arête." Little was accomplished, however, by the long trip around the base, as the snow and hail storm still persisted. Several rivers of hail had to be forded on the way back to camp; the streams were twenty to thirty feet wide, about two feet deep, and had sufficient velocity to make the footing uncertain. The excitement was increased by the ominous hissing of electrical discharges. There was only one thing to be thankful for: that we were not on the upper ridge! Late in the evening we returned to the chalet, in time to avoid a long and violent storm.

Next morning Hainsworth, Lehman and Strumia crossed Berg Lake in a boat, and, having ascended about half of the central and most spectacular portion of Tumbling glacier merely for exercise and pictures, made a belated decision at 1.30 in the afternoon to keep on and try for Mt. Helmet. After hours of exhausting work amidst snow-covered crevasses and breast-deep drifts in the saddle between Mt. Robson and the Helmet, the attempt was abandoned at 7.15 in the evening, when within 300 ft. of the summit.

IN FRYATT CREEK VALLEY

With nothing accomplished in the Mt. Robson sector except a general hardening of the muscles, it was with some misgiving as to the outcome of our climbing campaign that we started toward Jasper and the mountains of the Athabaska. On the way out from Berg Lake, Strumia decided to take one more picture of Mt. Robson and had the misfortune to catch a tricouni of his mountain boots in the stirrup as he dismounted. The horse bolted, dragging the prospective photographer through the woods, but was fortunately blocked in time to save the rider from the flying heels. Thereafter mountain shoes were safely packed away before each trip with the cayuses.

Mt. Christie, a 10,180 ft. peak easily seen from Jasper, was approached via the Athabaska River, Lick Creek and Fryatt Creek.

The first day, true to the precedent of the past week, was fraught with uncertainty, as Dave and Kenneth spent many hours combing the woods to locate our straying horses. Finally, after a long, dusty ride we reached Athabaska Falls and in the evening camped near the river bank. There, cut off from the world by the misty roar of the falls and with the moon shining back of the Fryatt spires, we managed to cast off some of Robson's depression and recapture our lost hopes.

From Athabaska Falls we kept to the left orographic shore of the river, through treacherous marginal high-waters, and then across a thickly wooded lowland flooded by beavers. Shortly after noon we arrived at the confluence of the Athabaska with Lick Creek, and followed the left orographic side of the latter until it became too undercut. We then took to the river flats, but these soon had to be abandoned on account of swift currents and high water. As a last resource, we plunged through a mean growth of thick jack-pine, where much cutting was done. In the end, having covered about eight miles from the Athabaska Falls, we had to retrace our steps a short way to camp on the gravel flats near the junction of Lick Creek with Fryatt Creek.

On July 11, with the aid of our old friends, Dave Moberly and Kenneth Allen, a high camp was established on the western slopes of Mt. Christie, about 2,000 ft. above the right orographic side of Fryatt Creek. Fred, the cook of the expedition, remained to watch the base camp.

Leaving the high camp at 10.40 A.M. we proceeded up a broad couloir of steep scree and snow leading over a secondary ridge into a large snow basin at the base of Mts. Christie and Brussels. We were now having the first warm weather of the season, and thundering avalanches from Mt. Fryatt continually reminded us of the condition of the upper slopes.

A broken couloir, piercing the first 500-ft. band of perpendicular cliffs, opened the way to the col between Christie and Brussels. Unmistakable traces of avalanches here forced us to extreme measures in an attempt to find a route on the rocks to the left of the couloir. However, near the top of the cliff smooth perpendicular rocks blocked us and having retraced our steps for a short stretch, we unroped, entered the couloir and as rapidly as possible followed up the steep snow and rock steps to the wide snow slopes below the col. From the col the route along the snowy southwest ridge was easy and at

5.10 P.M. we were on top. The panorama¹ was one of sweeping grandeur, but our eyes kept returning to the black perpendicular battlements of Mt. Brussels, which we expected to try later. We enjoyed the first triumph of the season and left the summit of Christie shortly after six. The snow was very soft, and grave apprehension was felt as to its condition in the couloir. Just as we reached the upper lip of the latter, Strumia shouted that an avalanche was coming. We were close enough to find it necessary to hold our hats, although we did not realize the full strength of the wind until sometime later. We regretted that we did not think of using our cinema camera in the first moments of the avalanche. It came down with a terrific roar, dislodging great rocks that crashed along the cliffs below. Several more avalanches on all sides decided our next move: we each selected a convenient rock to hide under, and waited for the sun to set behind Fryatt. At 9.15 the snow had hardened sufficiently and as no more avalanches had occurred for some time, we started down at a great clip, reaching the high camp by midnight.

Not being able to find an easier approach on the following day, we started for Brussels shortly after midnight on July 13th, over the route used for Christie. The upper snow basin was flooded with the misty light of a full moon, throwing the long sharp shadow of our peak against the towering buttresses of Mt. Fryatt. Sunrise came at 3.30 as we crossed the col between Brussels and Christie. The night had been warm, and the snow was unusually soft. On account of the conditions, we could not attempt an evil-looking snow-spattered fissure in the narrow southeast face of the main tower ahead, so we followed the foot of the ridge, until a snow finger of considerable steepness brought us to the crest of the ridge, a short distance from the base of the tower of Brussels on the east side. The snow was already too soft to think of planning the return by the same route before darkness.

We roped and attacked the buttress, which was made of excessively rotten rock. At 8 A.M. we arrived at a convenient stop-

¹ The following peaks were readily recognized: Robson, Edith Cavell, the Ramparts, Needle Peak, Hooker, Scott, Serenity, Oates, Clemenceau and all the Wood River group, Columbia, Alberta, The Twins, Catacombs, Lyell, Forbes, the Freshfield group, Brazeau, Warren, Maligne, Unwin, Charlton. The course of the Athabaska down to Jasper was particularly pleasing to follow with the eye!

ping-point, convenient because we could go no farther. Here we were separated from the higher reaches of the main tower by a deep vertical fissure. There was no way around it and no way across. The route would not go. We were about 500 ft. below the summit. After some discussion it was decided to abandon further attack on Brussels. The sacrifice of our extensive future program for a single rock climb, which might require several days to work out, did not appear justified to the majority.

On the return we followed the sharp east ridge; with its reversed cornices, soft rocks and deep notches it gave us moments of anxiety and provided a very interesting descent. Shortly after noon we reached the col, and by half past 3 P.M. we were back at the high camp. In anticipation of a long day on Mt. Belanger we retired a few hours after reaching camp.

At 12.30 A.M. Strumia managed to awake the rest of us, which was not the least remarkable feat of a day of very unusual happenings. After a luscious breakfast of pork, beans and tomatoes, by candle light, we set forth for Belanger at 2.30. Starting in darkness was no real impediment as Mt. Christie had already offered an excellent opportunity to study the route to be followed.

Belanger, a beautiful 10,100-ft. peak, stands just north at the head of Fryatt Creek, and in order to reach the base from our high camp it was necessary to descend to Fryatt Creek. We did this rapidly, following a hypothetical game trail down a steep rocky torrent bed. Just at day-break we forded the main stream, and then indulged in the luxury of a small fire, to dry and thaw out. A long trip up an alluvial fan and across undulating snow-patched terrain brought us at 8.45 to the pass between Fryatt and Divergence Creeks, and at the base of the wide glacier which sweeps down the entire northern face of Belanger at a precarious angle. We had breakfast at the col, and studied the way up. The glacier shows unusually few crevasses and séracs for its great steepness, but to avoid a long siege of step-cutting in the sheet of glare ice, we followed the narrow snow trough between the ice and the rock on the right orographic side. Above the ice a long, fatiguing climb in deep soft snow brought us at noon to the first or northern peak. From this we discovered to our great dismay that the highest peak lay about half a mile south, and that the intervening ridge would offer all we could wish for an exciting day.

The ridge was in part formed of beautiful, hard conglomerate rock, broken into countless gendarmes, and in part covered with soft snow cornices of doubtful consistency. To the east it fell in a magnificent straight wall; to the west it drained into a wild circle of hanging glaciers and steep snow couloirs that were swept by avalanches all afternoon. We reached the highest peak at 3 P.M. with black clouds closing in around us and distant thunder.

The view from Belanger is spectacular. The ridge leading to Lapensee is broken by fantastic rock teeth from which hangs a shining curtain of ice. On the north side the massive peak of Fryatt is the undisputed monarch.

Before we were able to descend to the col, the storm reached us and produced strange electrical effects, which made our ice-axes hum, and our hair stand uncomfortably on end. At 7.30 we were on the way down from the col, in a losing race with time and the storm. We were thoroughly drenched when, glissading a rather treacherous curving short couloir, Lehman missed his footing and tumbled down over some rocks, stopping just in time to save a flight of some hundred feet. A painfully bruised hip and badly cut hand resulted. As it seemed improbable that we could all reach the base camp that night, Hainsworth started on at full speed, hoping to get there before dark and inform the rest of the party. The storm and the hot day had transformed the small streams into dangerous torrents, and best time could be made by wading indiscriminately down stream, avoiding only the main channels.

Soon after picking up the packs at the cache on Fryatt Creek we had to forego the luxury of wading, for the woods. In the meantime after a struggle through dense dripping jack-pine, rocks and windfalls, Hainsworth reached the site of the base camp, just at midnight, only to find a flooded gravel bar where the meadowland camp had stood. The land marks could not be disputed but the camp was not there. Obviously the river had washed away the little island, and the camp had been moved to higher ground, although such a conclusion is much harder to reach when one is fatigued and in complete darkness, standing on one of many gravel bars with water rushing on all sides. It was with considerable relief that he located the new camp by forceful yelling, and reached it after a precarious ford well past midnight.

Lehman and Strumia had met at the cache place up Fryatt Creek and at 10 P.M. Waffl joined them. They started out together

along the right orographic bank of the river, but the wet, thick jack-pine growth and the complete obscurity soon checked them. A lantern did not help matters, and Waffl and Strumia concluded to spend the night there. Lehman, however, by a peculiar twist of fate, preferred to try for the base camp, but after covering a short distance, he also stopped and rested for a few hours, starting on again at 4 in the morning; he reached the old camp place at 7. Finding no camp there, Lehman established one of his own and, much fatigued, went to sleep on a gravel bar.

Strumia, leaving Waffl and some packs, started the journey down Fryatt Creek at 5 A.M. and in crossing the swollen stream was swept by the current against a log jam and nearly carried under. He reached camp at 9, having been met by Dave Moberly and Kenneth Allen and informed of the change in its location. They kept on to assist Waffl with the packs, and at noon, Lehman having awakened from his slumber and in turn found camp, we were all united once more, none the worse for our hard thirty-six hours but full of good resolutions never to separate again.

After bathing in the stream which we had imprecated a few hours before for wetting us, we proceeded to merge several missed meals into one of gargantuan proportions. At 3 P.M. the same day we departed with the pack train and camped that night at the Athabaska falls. Next day after an early morning fishing interlude in a steady downpour, we moved camp up the Athabaska valley over the regular trail. The Sunwapta falls were reached on the evening of the 17th. Rain and bad weather continued.

IN THE SUNWAPTA VALLEY

The going next day was rough, there being practically no trail in many places along the Sunwapta. Repeated crossings of the river were very dangerous for both horses and men, and often we despaired of continuing on account of high waters. A camp was finally established on the evening of July 18 on the Sunwapta, about three and a half miles below Tangle Creek Junction at a point which we thought would be near the base of our mountain (the Unnamed peak, 10,700 ft. northwest, later called Piton Peak),² although the latter was hidden by high intervening ridges. If we had more

²Boundary Commission Map (22); also Climber's Guide, Palmer and Thorington, 1930, page 140.

carefully read Stutfield and Collie's account of the ascent of Diadem Peak,³ we would have selected a better place.

At 1.07 A.M. on July 19 we started up the ridge back of camp over slippery frosted windfalls, the flickering lantern casting weird shadows through ghostly tree trunks and dwarfed pines. Fresh snow was found at 8,000 ft., and shortly after 5 A.M. we had the first glimpse of our mountain, beautiful but very far away. We were in fact on the foothill which terminates a long ridge extending from Mt. Diadem in a southeastern direction. By perseverance we finally came to the large broken glacial basin guarded by Mts. Diadem, Woolley, Unnamed (10,700 ft.) and Unnamed (10,900 ft.). We reached the glacier at 7 and following it in a large semicircle gained the northeast ridge of our mountain. By noon we had passed over a first peak about 10,300 ft., and were on the final ridge, within 300 ft. of the summit. Here the ridge became very aerial and we roped; shortly after this we met a most unexpected obstacle that all but stopped the ascent. The ridge was cut by a narrow deep notch, with the far side very high and overhanging. On the right side the mountain was protected by a precipitous ice couloir, and absolutely perpendicular walls; on the left, beyond a narrow rocky couloir, by a precipitous wall, plastered with snow and ice, overlooking a tremendous cliff. We descended in the couloir to our left, and attacked the icy rocks above it. The rotten snow-covered rock proved difficult. It was negotiated with the aid of three pitons and safety snap-rings, and provided a highly exciting climb for the leader and a cold one for the lower end of the rope. At 3.40 we reached the summit, standing almost in the center of a panorama of impressive grandeur: Mts. Diadem, Woolley, Alberta, King Edward, the Twins, Unnamed (10,900) and Stutfield. Mt. Alberta offered a sight of lofty isolation and tremendous power, with its ugly bare cliffs swept incessantly by snow avalanches.

On the return, the rope, employed over the difficult part of the wall, caught on the rocks above and had to be partly sacrificed. At 6.30 we unroped, and descending directly into the glacial basin immediately east of our peak, followed the main stream out. Goat-wool flags helped us to follow a game trail over a canyon and into the Sunwapta valley. We had unknowingly followed the route of Collie, Stutfield and Woolley. There ensued a trek of three long

³ Stutfield and Collie, "Climbs and Explorations in the Canadian Rockies," 1903, p. 123. See also illustration facing p. 126.

miles down the Sunwapta, through muddy holes and countless channels to the accompaniment of the slosh-slosh of shoes full of water. We reached camp shortly after midnight, thus completing the most strenuous twenty-three hours we ever spent in climbing.

On the 20th of July we moved the camp over Wilcox pass to the foot of the Athabaska glacier, with the intent of ascending Unnamed northeast (11,300) and Unnamed southwest (11,200),⁴ the last unclimbed peaks above 11,000 ft. in the Columbia group, for which the name of "Mt. Cirque" was proposed. We left camp shortly after 2 A.M. on July 21 with cold, perfectly clear weather, but were not fully awake until later, when we reached the upper part of the Athabaska glacier. Here, turning east, with the aid of crampons and ideal snow, we found an easy route leading to the col (*ca.* 10,200 ft.) between Unnamed (10,800 ft.) and Unnamed (11,200 ft.). The arête to the first summit (11,100 ft.) consisted of snow and shale, and at 8.10 A.M. we were on top. The second peak (11,200 ft.) was easily reached by following the upper margin of the cirque which was adorned with massive cornices, some as large as buttresses, and others molded in curling waves that seemed to be flying into space, and giving mute evidence of the tremendous adhesive forces between rocks and ice. We attained the third and highest summit is 9.40 by a thin aerial snow ridge. We enjoyed a long rest, and a rather smoky view of a flat panorama, while stretched out on the sunny rocks below the summit. It was still early in the day as we started to follow the ridge towards Mt. Athabaska, expecting to make a traverse and descend to camp via the glaciers of the northwest face of Athabaska.

Our plans however, were abruptly shattered. After plowing down the ridge leading to the col between Unnamed (11,300 ft.) and Mt. Athabaska, we found that a rock-swept cliff separated us from the saddle, 300 ft. below. The snow condition and the consequent danger of rock fall advised a return. What a task it was going up through the soft snow, which had been tolerable before only because it was a descent! After recrossing the three summits, snow conditions continued very bad. It was found much more convenient to slide in a sitting posture over the small open bergschrunds which in the morning we had passed by using crampons over snow bridges. In fact the sliding procedure seemed safer as

⁴Boundary Commission Map (22); also Climber's Guide, Palmer and Thorington, 1930, p. 140.

there was always sufficient momentum to carry one across the opening. We returned to camp by 5 P.M.

MALIGNE LAKE

It was with considerable regret that we left this beautiful place next morning; there was one consolation: the seasonal forest fire smoke was just reaching the stage where it impairs photography. Sunwapta pass, Nigel pass, Jonas pass and shoulder, and finally Maligne pass brought us in three days to Maligne Lake. Bad weather accompanied us most of the time, and we arrived at Maligne Lake under one of the worst and most persistent cloudbursts we have encountered in the mountains. Hainsworth rode through it all without a hat, which he lost early in the adventure, and without raincoat, which he had carefully packed away in the bottom of his duffle bag. His multiple and continuous attempts to improvise a shelter contributed much of the day's humor.

We spent the night at the Maligne Lake Chalet, which brought back some pleasant thoughts of our 1928 campaign. In fact it was our desire to complete the exploration of the Mt. Maligne group, and possibly reach its highest summit. In the 1928 campaign⁵ we had ascended two of the peaks of the group, Mt. Florence (*ca.* 9,750) and Mt. Hawley (*ca.* 9,850). However, the prospects of reaching the summit of Mt. Maligne seemed slight. We were due in Jasper in two days, and Maligne Lake was dreary under a low blanket of fog, slowly raising from the dripping evergreens. Nevertheless we awakened Joe Weiss at 2 on the morning of July 25, and with his usual cheerful solicitude Joe bundled us into his boat, covered us with blankets, and took care of things until we were landed at the upper end of the lake, on the spot of our 1928 base camp. Joe Weiss told us of a large party of climbers who had selected the same spot for their camp in 1929, whence they climbed Peak 4 of Mt. Maligne (*ca.* 10,200).⁶ We later saw distinctly a large cairn on the peak. We left the shores of the lake in a drizzling rain at 5 A.M. and with clouds just above our heads. We followed our 1928 route to the large snow basin south of our peak. The clouds seemed to lift and we made rapid progress up a steep

⁵ W. R. Hainsworth, *A. A. J.*, 1929; M. M. Strumia, *R. M. C. A. I.*, Sept.-Oct., 1929; *A. J.*, Nov., 1929; *C. A. J.*, 1929.

⁶ M. M. Strumia, "Topographical Sketch of the Maligne Group," *A. J.*, p. 340, Nov., 1929.

rocky rib which led us to the ridge connecting Mt. Hawley with the Peak 1 of Mt. Maligne. Following the arête without difficulty, we reached Peak 1 (*ca.* 10,000) at 11 A.M. A snow storm greeted us there and accompanied us for the rest of the day. Peak 2 (*ca.* 10,200) was traversed about half an hour later, and shortly after noon we were standing on the summit of the highest Peak, No. 3 (*ca.* 10,400) in a violent storm. On the precipitous return from the col between Peak 2 and 3 we descended directly down a steep hard snow wall to the glacier southeast of Mt. Maligne, and from there reached our morning tracks, and returned to the lake.

This brought our little group to the end of the summer's trail together, feeling that in spite of the discouraging start our climbing trip had been successful. However, Mt. Robson remained in our thoughts and later the urge to return and conquer was too great for one of our party. Waffl perished there a few weeks later. Few can appreciate more than we who were with him on the trail but a short time before, the thoughtfulness and sterling qualities of this man. The mountains have taken one of their best friends.