

Jotunheimen

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SEPTEMBER 1st, 1939, brought to the world the utter tragedy of war, but to me, at that time unaware of the events in the outside world, it meant the completion of one of the most enjoyable sojourns I have ever had in the mountains. For over two weeks my brother and I had wandered and climbed in Jotunheimen, an area in southern Norway which includes the most imposing group of mountains to be found in that country. This praise of Jotunheimen as Norway's finest mountain region by no means indicates an intimate knowledge on the part of the writer of the rest of Norway's mountains but merely bespeaks the depth of the impression made by these particular peaks. However, the Englishman, W. C. Slingsby, who was named by the Norwegians themselves as the "father of Norwegian mountaineering," always felt that, although Norway had innumerable mountain ranges, none could compare with the grandeur and majestic beauty of those in Jotunheimen.

Jotunheimen is an almost uninhabited mountain wilderness of some 1500 square miles about equidistant from Norway's three largest cities, Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim. The word Jotunheimen itself means "the home of the Jotuns," the latter being the mist giants of Norse mythology, the enemies of the god Thor. A not inappropriate name is this for, although these mountains are not notably high when compared to those in other parts of the world, they are truly the giants of Scandinavia and mists cannot be entirely divorced from one's impression of them.

As yet Jotunheimen is not a national park, but there are many mountain loving Norwegians who are backing a strong movement to make it into one, and should this occur the area will probably remain much as it is today, an unspoiled, uncommercialized, natural mountain wilderness.

The approaches to Jotunheimen are numerous, but once one enters this region the only means of travel are by boat or by foot. Coming from the direction of Oslo by auto or bus one first reaches one of the large lakes in southeastern Jotunheimen and on one of these it is possible to go into the very heart of the mountains by motorboat. These larger lakes as well as the innumerable smaller ones in other parts of Jotunheimen are an outstanding feature of

the scenic beauty of the region and in many places the mountains rise precipitously from their very shores. Another of the more commonly used approaches is by one of the fingers of Norway's longest fjord, the Sognefjord. This offers one of the awesome views of the fjords which in some places are bounded by perpendicular walls of 4000 ft. on either side. The proximity of the fjord towns to the mountains also offers the climber the somewhat unique opportunity of making his climbs from sea level. But no matter how one enters Jotunheimen he will find a grand country studded with fine mountains, lovely lakes and magnificent glaciers and among all these a very hospitable folk.

My brother and I entered Jotunheimen from the N. and were soon attracted by what is probably Norway's highest mountain, Galdhøpiggen (8097 ft.) I say probably, for apparently the title of "highest" mountain changes from decade to decade. This is explained by the fact that Glittertind, Galdhøpiggen's competitor, has a flat top on which, after three or four seasons of heavy snow, a snow-dome of thirty feet or more will form whereas this does not occur on the ridge-like summit of Galdhøpiggen. The climb of Galdhøpiggen is anything but difficult and with Norway's long summer days we made a leisurely ascent from Spiterstulen going part of the way over the Styggebrae or "ugly glacier" to add interest to the climb.

From the summit we were able to see nearly all of Jotunheimen and for the first time we could conceive the extent of its cold beauty. Not a tree was to be seen, even in the deepest valleys, but in every direction were glaciers, lakes and mountains. To the northwest we saw the vast reaches of the Jostedalbrae, the largest snowfield in continental Europe covering over 400 square miles. About twenty miles to the S.W. we could just see the sharp peaks which go to make up the Horungtinder, that range of mountains which probably offers the best climbing in all of Jotunheimen. To the N.E. just across the Visdal, in which Spiterstulen lies, we saw Galdhøpiggen's arch rival, the Glittertind. We wondered if its summit was higher this year than the point on which we stood. Our return to the valley was facilitated as well as enlivened by three or four thrilling glissades and we reached the huts at Spiterstulen with time to spare before supper.

This return to the valley is always something to anticipate with pleasure when climbing in Norway for there are such excellent huts

where one inevitably finds a hearty meal and an equally hearty welcome. Most of the huts in Jotunheimen are managed by the Norske Turistforening, a club that it will pay every visitor to Norway to join. In addition to permitting the climber the use of these huts, the club publishes an extremely good year book, the first edition of which appeared in 1868. From this publication one realizes even more what these mountains mean to the Norwegians and for those of us who are not proficient in the Norwegian tongue there are usually a few articles in English. Most of the huts are in the valleys but a few lie up in or on top of the mountains. The distance between each hut varies from ten to twenty-five miles and there are over twenty such huts in Jotunheimen and the neighboring Jostedalstraen. Here and there one sees some of the old "saeters" which served as places of shelter for the early travellers in this region. They are low lying buildings made entirely of stone, usually having only a dirt floor, and the stone roof inevitably has a good crop of grass growing on it. In addition to providing a little more grass for the goats in this barren region this picturesque roofing serves the same purpose as the heavy stones one sees on the roof tops in Switzerland. Today these saeters are used in the summer by goat herds but do not afford permanent shelter to those who live in the mountains all year round.

From Spiterstulen we made our way south to Leirvassbu which lies on the edge of a small lake and at the foot of that fine peak named "Kirken" (the church). This mountain offers a little more interesting climb than that of either Glittertind or Galdhøpiggen where hand holds are not sought since one can walk to the summits of either, but even on Kirken few will experience any difficulty.

At Leirvassbu we again found an excellent hut and a charming hostess about whose beauty we had heard ever since entering Norway. From S. of Oslo to Romsdal everyone had said, "You must see the beautiful girls at Leirvassbu."

From Leirvassbu we went farther south following cairns and the ever present red paint. There are very few foot paths in Jotunheimen but rather one travels over rocks and boulders most of the way. This terrain makes it practically impossible to travel by horse even through the valleys of this region. Those acquainted with our own White Mountains will understand the character of the trails for they may be compared to the sky-line trail between the Lakes-of-the-Clouds and the Madison huts. In one day over

such a route we reached Lake Gjende and on the next Lake Bygdin. The latter is a beautiful lake surrounded by mountains and over seventeen miles long. Here we took advantage of the motorboat which plies its waters to carry us to its eastern end where we left Jotunheimen by bus.

A few days later my brother said for England, but the charm of Jotunheimen was so great that within a week I returned, this time by the Aardalsfjord to Aardal and then Farnes. Together we had crossed Jotunheimen from N. to S. and it was now my intention to cross it from W. to E.

My first night was spent at Vetti and the next day I went farther up the valley past Skogadalsboen to the summit of Fanaraaken, a peak just to the north of the famous Horungtinder. Fanaraaken is near the western edge of Jotunheimen and thus it was possible to look down to the Lusterfjord some 6700 ft. below and to see the villages of Fortun and Skjolden. Although there were deep shadows in the valley and on the fjord, the sun still lit up the peaks of the Horungtinder enough for me to realize that it was the pointed, aiguille-like peaks of this range that has made it so popular with climbers from many parts of the world. Store Skogastolstind stood out above all the other peaks of the Horungtinder and although it is lower than both Glittertind and Galdhøpiggen it should be considered the monarch of all Norwegian peaks because it is so much more difficult to ascend and is only about 200 ft. lower than the latter peaks.

On the summit of Fanaraaken there are two main buildings, one a mountain hut and the other a meteorological station. Finding myself the only wanderer on the summit for the night, I spent most of the evening with the meteorologist, who was as anxious to practice talking English as I was to hear the war news. And so he and I and his little dog, "Stratøs," got along splendidly listening to war news in Norwegian which was then translated into English for me.

The following day I returned to Skogadalsboen where another pleasant evening was spent in one of the huts. Here as in other huts every effort was made to make the visitor comfortable and at home. More than once in Jotunheimen the time was passed after a long day in the mountains by listening to folk music, watching folk dancing, and on rare occasions participating in one or the other. Throughout the mountains of Norway as in Switzerland and Tyrol the accordion was the musical instrument most in evidence, and cer-

tainly it lends itself well to the charming mountain Lieder of Norway as well as to those of the Alps.

Starting out through the Skogadal or "woody valley," I walked for perhaps a half an hour through shoulder-high white birches, practically the only trees I had seen in all of Jotunheimen. Going east I made the long trek to Gjendebu over typical rocky Norwegian terrain. Hiking alone like this makes one more acutely aware of certain dangers and it is good advice to follow the trails as marked on the map, not because they offer any better walking but because it is almost impossible to cross the many streams one encounters without using the bridges. Another danger has been pointed out by Slingsby,¹ "In some regions magnetic rocks occur, and then the compass is of no use. Where this is the case, and mists come on, and there is no wind to indicate the cardinal points, the interest of the expedition may unexpectedly be increased."

On August 31st, my last day in Jotunheimen, I travelled on Lake Gjende by boat to Memurubu and then climbed up along the high ridge called the Besseggen, where Peer Gynt was carried by the wounded reindeer :

"Have you
Seen the Gendin-Edge? So lightly
Like a scythe, straight on it stretches,
Stretches on for nigh four miles.
Over screes the vision fetches
Over glaciers, landslips, piles
Of grey rubble, then it rests
On the sluggish tarns that sleep
Far below the mountain-crests
Tarns seven hundred fathom deep!
On the edge the buck and I
Cut our pathway through the sky."

This ridge runs parallel to Lake Gjende and about 2000 ft. above its shores. On the other side of this ridge is a smaller lake some 700 ft. below. The view is extremely spectacular as one walks along this ridge separating these two large lakes which lie so far below and yet differing so in their respective altitudes. From these heights we descended to Gjendesheim thus reaching one of the eastern gates of Jotunheimen and completing our tour.

At Gjendesheim we awoke to find the world at war. Let us hope that some day soon we shall wake on the day that will bring peace to the world—and to noble Norway too.

¹ In *Mountain Craft* by G. W. Young. Chapter on the Mountains of Norway by W. C. Slingsby.