

Return to the Alps

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THERE had been one summer after another of stifling New York heat—hands sticking to the table, body sticking to the chair—but there had been Alpine calendars on the desk to remind me of better things. Suddenly seven years were gone, and I was outside a chalet above Engelberg. The Spannörter stood black against a rising August moon, the scent of hay was in the air, and the sound of bells from the valley mingled with that of cowbells from the Alps out of sight. My host came out and stood beside me in silence. He was wholly sympathetic with my sudden and tactless outburst: "You may think I came to see you, but this is what I really came for!" Thank Heaven for understanding friends.

It had been a memorable day from the moment when we saw far beneath our plane the silver ribbon of the Rhône and a twinkling mass of lights that must be Lyon. Almost at once it was dawn, and we were winging in to Geneva over the lake. And there was patient Nina—we were two days late—standing beside her car, and before I could turn round I had been wafted to the familiar station buffet at Geneva, to two *cafés complets*. In spite of points, the butter was still in gold spirals, the yellow glycerine honey stood unchanged in its little pot, the bread tasted as good as ever. Then the wand waved again, and we were driving along the empty roads in the early morning light: Lausanne—Morat—Berne—Emental—Lucerne—Engelberg. Everywhere there were flowers and robust, red-cheeked children. The scent of hay mingled occasionally with the richer, homelier odor of good strong manure. It was all so familiar: had I ever left it?

Actually I had not expected to climb. In the first place, my boots let in water, and I was doubtful if I could still go uphill; in the second place, I knew that G. (Alexander Graven, recent hero of the Matterhorn North Face) was booked for the whole summer. But after one day in Engelberg I felt immortal longings beginning to stir, and we set off for a family picnic on the Joch Pass, through clumps of early-flowering autumn gentians. The top of the Pass was the most cosmopolitan scene I had struck for some time, thanks to one of the new chair lifts, which are very popular in Switzerland today. Dutch Boy Scouts jostled Belgian millionaires; G.I.'s

skirted round French dowagers taking pictures; shabby English wandered about, looking as if they had been translated to the Elysian fields. As usual, nothing was easier than to escape from the crowds and lie on the fragrant mountainside listening to the distant thunder of avalanches over the Bernese Oberland and the persistent near-by squeals of marmots.

Two days later I was on my way to Zermatt: over the Brünig in a beautiful new all-glass coach, hanging out of the windows on the Lötschberg, gazing with gathering emotion at the familiar Zermatt valley—the rushing Visp, the fields starred with autumn crocus, the Breithorn coming nearer and nearer. I had no chance to become sentimental, for a creature resplendent in an orange shirt and a Tyrolese hat with a plume had dogged my steps from the Bernese Oberland, with an obvious desire to thrill the novice. His statement that he was a mountain guide was followed by a wealth of anecdote usually associated with other places than Switzerland. I became quite interested in his future deeds, but Zermatt engulfed this paragon without so much as a ripple.

Zermatt is changed, but it is still unique. There are more houses. There are fewer smells. (No more can one have a rendezvous, as in the good old days, between the first and second smells.) There are fewer guides sitting on the Monte Rosa wall, and they seem older. There are fewer climbers. But the goats still come tinkling through the village every evening, and Burgener still makes his heavy but unsurpassable mountain boots. Joseph Seiler has succeeded Hermann, and the Mont Cervin Hotel is modernized from top to bottom, but the Monte Rosa Hotel is unchanged, and of an evening you can still meet anyone in the world in the village street.

I made my way straight to the Villa Ultima, home of G., his charming wife and eight little G.'s. We fell on each other's necks and wept, and then we ate. Then there were all his photographs: Matterhorn North Face (12 hours, with G. leading all the way), Furggengrat, Katerinengrat on Monte Rosa. I remarked on a slight scarcity of hair on the top of G.'s head; G. found it unnatural for anyone to have spent seven years in "whiskey-land" without accumulating more taste for alcohol or for a lurid past. Frau G. poured out more tea, and the children asked about skyscrapers. Bad weather had arrived with me in Zermatt. Herr Sutter of the Matterhorn North Face could do nothing worthy of his mettle. G.

would do some small things with me till the weather improved, if I wanted. Did I want?

The next morning found us with English friends, going up and down the Riffelhorn like yo-yos. I was still aching in every limb when G. suggested that it might be well to sleep at the Trift and do the Ober Gabelhorn next day. So well trained am I, or so lacking in proper spirit, that I was only mildly surprised next day to find my untrained self, together with Otto Furrer and a young Norwegian, marching up that endless moraine on the Eseltshuggen, battling with snow and wind over the Wellenkuppe, the big gendarme, the Gabelhorn, and down the Arbengrat. But the Matterhorn was all pink in the dawn, and G. cooked a nectar called *Ovo Sport* on the top. We decided that I had shed the effects of war years; but, as every Zermatt mountain was by now plastered with snow, G. advised our departure for Rosenlauri in the Bernese Oberland, where the Dolomitic Engelhörner will "go" in almost any weather.

It was a happy choice. Rosenlauri is a huge, rambling, Victorian place, admirably run by Mr. and Mrs. Brog. The Engelhörner can be done from the hotel; and, if there is anything pleasanter than scrambling on sunny rocks in kletterschuhe, while the sound of cowbells floats up from the valley, I have yet to discover it. Every morning our fellow-guests gazed spellbound while we climbers devoured bowls of a local concoction called *Birchermüsli*, made of oatmeal, condensed milk and every kind of fruit, and guaranteed to keep the wolf from the door all day. (I understand that one of New York's creators of charm provides the same for her clients, at vast expense.) Every evening they watched in a wide circle while we played an acrimonious game of *Battleship*. Soon we were all on the most friendly terms. Rosenlauri has its own climbing school; abseiling down the side of the hotel is a favorite sport for rainy afternoons. Guides dropped in from Grindelwald, over the Grosse Scheidegg, for drinks. Young Schlunegger told of his desperate attempt on the Eigerwand, with a companion who survived that awful exposure only to perish a week later on the Engelhörner. We had two good days and one rain-washed day of climbing; and, when the weather forbade everything else, we struggled with the rudiments of billiards. There was never a dull moment at Rosenlauri.

I left the mountains sadly, to stay with a friend who has a farm in Bex, in the Rhône Valley. A few days later, as we were busily picking plums between showers, the children rushed out to announce a big strange man with an ice-axe. There stood G. No other mountain being possible, would I traverse the Diablerets? A minute later I was collecting my climbing things. G. spent the evening sorting plums, while my friend busied herself at the spinning wheel. They had a wonderful time bewailing the immoral modern customs which, according to them, are ruining the Valais. Incidentally, most chalets and houses all over the Valais now bear large signs: "Dress decently." I could see no reason for this, but my Swiss friends assured me gloomily that it is indeed most necessary.

Next day we were off on our voyage of exploration. Neither of us knew the country, and we had a storm about every two hours, so conditions bade fair to be interesting. Anzeindaz, at the foot of the Diablerets, is an idyllic little alp, abounding in cows, horses, pigs, sheep and hens; but the actual climb was quite an undertaking. The rocks, poor at the best of times, were plastered with snow and most difficult to negotiate. By the time we reached the top, we were completely shrouded in fog. It was only after several adventures with crevasses and false trails that we finally reached the deserted Oldenhorn Hut and dropped down to the Col du Pillon, like two dripping water rats, but more satisfied with our achievement than if we had traversed the Matterhorn.

G. mounted his yellow Post and disappeared to the north, while I dropped down the valley toward the golden sunset with a great warmth in my heart. The mountains were the same as ever; they had been waiting like faithful friends for those of us who had been exiles for so long, and they had admitted us again into their magic circle, where there is "no variableness, neither shadow of turning."