Paintbrush on the Heights

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NO clan on earth possesses memories that transcend those of the men and women who love the high places. From the "World's White Rooftree" to the once mythical mountains of the Moon; from the chalet-dotted slopes of the Alps to the ice-laden ranges of Alaska the mountaineers bring home their priceless mind pictures.

But just as gold is ground to powder in the current of a stream, our memories fade in the rush of modern life. What can we do to preserve them?

Having spent the better part of my life in trying to transfer mountains to canvas, I will pass by the camera and speak to those who have felt the desire to draw or paint the grandeur their eyes behold.

The ability to paint, starting from the mere wish to try, prospers on the recognition of past mistakes. And these mistakes, let me add, continue long after our ability to recognize them, has failed. As cold comfort one can cling to the thought that no mountain has been painted as well as it could be painted. Perfection in Art is a spiritual summit that no hob-nailed boot has disfigured.

The desire to try is the thing, for as long as you keep it alive it will guide you unroped and free to heights of happiness you never dreamed of.

At first you will draw or paint for your own pleasure. As your goal is knowledge you need not search for infallible rules. Be it paintbrush, pencil, or art's most primitive tool—a piece of charcoal from your campfire, it will bring you knowledge if reverently used.

The English possess to a high degree the gift of painting for their own pleasure. Just why this should be is baffling. The quiet tempo of English country life, early training or their method of teaching art may have played their part, but the fact remains that many English men and women have found lasting happiness in sketching the scenes that appeal to them.

From the point of view of the average American this might appear like carrying amateur rating a bit too far, but in the last

analysis, with due respect to sales and prizes, it is the attempt to paint that brings the richest award.

Lest my lifelong allegiance to the paintbrush should lead me too far I hasten to add that I am not asking my reader to irrevocably toss his ice-axe aside to pick up his painting tools. There are limits beyond which the bravest dare not venture!

When you begin to paint you may still be a mountaineer and breast the long slopes upward to the everlasting snow and, as Browning said: "Look down on all that had looked down on us."

It is true that your attitude towards mountaineering will change to some extent, depending on your own reactions. You may experience fewer actual ascents, but you will travel more mountain miles. You will have acquired a new and strange outlook, for instead of altitude accomplished you will think of objects not only seen, but studied.

Across the evening campfire you will listen, with the old thrill to your companions' talk of ice-slopes and hand-holds, but on your side of the day's score sheet will be the hours you stood in Nature's laboratory watching the cloud forms in their making, the bull moose with head submerged groping the floor of a sapphire lake and other forms and colors bewildering in their numbers and beauty.

More important still, you will have made notes in line and color. They will appear weak and valueless in the presence of reality, but the crudest line on paper may represent a vast step forward in knowledge, such as the subtleties of reflected lights on snow and how shadows are formed or why one peak appears to tower above its fellows.

Many years ago I led my tired pack-horses along the timbered ridges that break downward to Lake Magog. Mt. Assiniboine towered into the clouds, its vast form reflected dimly in the glacial water. I was looking for a place to camp and glancing through a fringe of stunted spruce I saw a young cow elk lying in a sheltered glade below me. An ice-cold stream splashed downward through its bed of mossy boulders, and flowers covered the hillsides.

After cutting some slender poles I pitched my teepee and rolled out my sleeping-bag in the soft, dry grass where the elk had rested. Soon the evening fire was started; the music of the horse-bells drifted up from the slopes below and while I smoked

and drank my tea the night shadows crept upward on Assiniboine's shoulders.

The sound of footsteps brought a young Austrian guide to my fire and while the night deepened he talked of his native hills and these strange new mountains where there were wild animals instead of hardy peasants. He urged me to join him in an ascent of Assiniboine on the morrow, as he wanted to qualify as a "Swiss" guide.

I refused on the grounds that having come so far to paint Assiniboine I would be in debt to my conscience if I climbed instead.

Thus began a companionship with the noble peak that has continued through the years. There is scarcely a valley or buttress in the region that I do not know. Even the trout that now flash their rainbow tints in Lakes Magog, Cerulean, Sunburst and Wedgwood, my son and I claim as stepchildren, for with the aid of Jack Martin, Alberta's fishery expert, we packed the eggs in moss-covered trays (to the disgust of our horses) and sowed them by hand in these waters that since the dawn of time had been barren of fish life.

"But," I can hear my reader say, "What have fish eggs got to do with pictures?"

The answer is plain—the feeling of kinship, even to a fish, is leaven to the love of rocky shore-lines, the shapes and colors taken by wind-stirred water and the laws that govern the reflections of peaks and snowfields on a lake's glassy surface. Recognition of beauty grows with intimacy. You may pass a certain spot a score of times and see nothing till a day comes when you stand aghast at your former blindness. While I have never stood on the summit of the "Canadian Matterhorn," the mention of its name conjures up as many memories in my mind as if I were indeed a guide who knew each hand-hold on its summit ridge.

Beyond the shadow of Assiniboine or any of its brothers there are vast stretches of little-known mountains that roll eastward to the plains or westward to the wilds of British Columbia. Here one may find only an occasional peak of qualifying height, but among their seemingly modest ramparts one will discover spots of unsurpassed ruggedness and beauty. You will lay aside your ice-axe for the axe of the woodsman and hew a trail through the windfalls of virgin timber. You will find lakes and streams that no fisherman's eyes have rested on and high mountain valleys where your horses stand knee-deep in mountain "feed" and snort

their disapproval of the moose or elk that disturbs their rest.

You will feel the same mental exaltation in reaching such a spot that you would feel in being the first to gain a difficult summit, and on these painting trips you will have adventures aplenty, for in packing horses beyond the blazed trail you will lead the life of early pioneers.

For the past twenty summers I have taken my family into the mountains surrounding Banff. On each trip we have tried to reach places we have not seen before, but vast stretches of untried country still beckon us on.

So grasp your paintbrush firmly, courageous reader, for, while its strange whims may lead you to the belief that you have clutched a witches' broomstick, it will carry you to visions you will never glimpse otherwise.