

Operation Operation

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THE operation was a success. I would live. But the doctor ordered me to remain a month longer in the hospital. He even encouraged me to hope that my insides would stop floating around and eventually settle back in their accustomed places. In the meantime, however, I must lie flat on my back and contemplate a perfectly blank ceiling.

The prospect for the summer was not pleasant.

I am one of those queer people who climb mountains under the impression that they are enjoying a particularly exhilarating sport. I had planned a Swiss climbing holiday with Pete and Mort, two other Alpine enthusiasts. My ice-axe stood ready in a corner of the closet; the battered hat which had preceded me up many a climb was poised on a near-by hook; and even my boots were pointed out toward the high places. But this summer we should not hear the ring of steel on ice and the crunch of hobnails on frozen snow; nor should we see the blue skies and the glittering, silvered peaks. While Pete and Mort swarmed over the Alps in disgustingly healthy animation, I would be smelling iodoform.

Ah, but all was not lost. There was this mind-over-matter business, and there was Baedeker's *Guide to Switzerland*, a fat little red book, much thumbed and torn. With the right attitude plus a Baedeker you can have the world at your feet. It was not easy to read flat on my back, but I picked up the little red book from the night stand and ran the pages through my fingers. Zermatt, Grindelwald, Pontresina, Chamonix—what magic names! What pictures they brought to mind! The hospital and iodoform faded away.

"I'll put one over on them," I gloated. "I'll have my climbs even if I never leave these antiseptic surroundings, nor escape from the sanitary ministrations of the impersonal young women in white."

Let's go. What shall we climb? Let's start on something easy, to limber up. Baedeker lists "Ascents from Zermatt." The Breithorn? Child's play. "Can be ascended from the Theodule Hut in 3 hours." A mere hill. The Apfelstrudel? No, wait—it's the Alphubel. Don't

like the name. It sounds mushy. Aha, here it is. The Weisshorn: "Ascended from the Weisshorn Hut by the Great Eastern Arête in 8 to 10 hours. Difficult. For experts only." The way I feel, this is my meat.

Now for a guide and a porter. I shall be orthodox even in a hospital bed. At least three men should be on a rope. By right of conquest and occupation everything above the snow line in Switzerland is part of the British Empire, and all good guides are engaged months in advance by English parties. But in this kind of climbing I can take the best guides from under Anglican noses. This delights me, for I've always wanted to do it.

I'll close my eyes and point to the list of Antons, Ottos, Adolfs, and Wilhelms which Baedeker has so thoughtfully included. Who is it? Hieronymus Julen. He'll do. I can trust a man with a name like that even if I can't pronounce it. So with Hieronymus as guide and Anonymous as porter, we are ready for the ascent of the Weisshorn, the noblest of all the Alps.

Just at this point, as we are busy about men's affairs, my starched feminine genius pokes her head into the room.

"Oh, I see you are reading. That's nice. Shall I get you another pillow?"

"No thanks," I reply, fixing her with a stern look. She little knows what dangers are ahead. "I'll ring if I want you."

She disappears. But it is comforting to know that we shall have nurses, doctors—and iodoform—handy if we slip off the Great Eastern Arête.

We start off in high spirits. The weather, strangely enough, is perfect. As the three of us swing with effortless strides along the barren slopes above the Weisshorn Hut, the upper rocks of our mountain's huge southern face catch the first shafts of the rising sun. It towers above us, incredibly high—a challenge. We are well aware of it, but say nothing.

At the Turtmann Glacier—wait a minute, let's look at the map. I thought so. Baedeker is never wrong: it's the Schalliburg Glacier. Anyway, we rope. Hieronymus is lead man, *Mein Herr* in the center, Anonymous last but not least. He has the lunch and a flask of brandy.

We skirt the yawning crevasses of the glacier, scramble up the rocks, giving a leg up here and there, circle a huge snow basin,

and finally reach the foot of the Great Eastern Arête, after straightforward going in the couloir. (Never speak of gullies or ridges in the Alps. Presumably they do not exist.)

All morning, hour after hour, we work up the glorious peak toward the indigo sky: now clambering down the south face for a short distance to turn a gendarme (not the Paris kind), then cutting steps in the upper snows past a nasty schrund and a mauvais pas or two. At last, with a "Verdammte Dummheit"—meaning "Excelsior" or "I have found it"—from Hieronymus, the summit is well within our grasp. It is all very exhilarating, with tremendous precipices dropping nearly a mile down either side of the knife-edged arête.

My enthusiasm hardly slipped a notch when Nurse brought my broth. It became for me a hero's fare of bologna, black bread and strong chicory-flavored coffee from a thermos. The view from my bed was utterly magnificent. I celebrated with a nip from Anonymous' flask as soon as the door closed.

The triumph of reaching the top of the Weisshorn in perfect condition, barely even tired, was soon forgotten in the breathtaking expanse of valley, peak and glacier spread out before us in gigantic confusion. We recognized all our old friends, and Baedeker's too, resplendently snowy in the brilliant sunshine. Across the Visperthal were the great pointed peaks of the Dom and Täschhorn, the vast rounded bulk of Monte Rosa, and south, the upper crags of the Matterhorn. An army of others stretched away to the dim horizon, running off the edges of Baedeker's map.

We were just about to examine the dizzy Zinal side of the mountain . . . "Have you had a good day?" said Nurse, entering with that professional gaiety I find most aggravating.

"Oh sure," I answered as pleasantly as a man can who has been suddenly caught in his pajamas at an altitude of 14,804 feet. "But I'm a little stiff from my—"

I was about to say "climb," but I realized that this would never be understood in a practical institution. So I sighed instead.

"Poor man. I thought you would be lonely and bored with just that old red book for company. So after I wash you—"

Imagine a grown man being washed by a nurse on the summit of the Weisshorn!

“—and rub your legs—”

Donnerwetter! What will Hieronymus and Anonymous say to this?

“—I’m going to read you a most entertaining book. You’ll love it. It’s called *Speaking of Operations.*”