

A Middle-Aged Mountain

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SOME mountains seem particularly ancient, austere, and noble. Others seem hard and young and defiant. But in 1955 I ran across a mountain which I can only think of as middle-aged. The glittering array of snow- and ice-fields which had once adorned this peak and the surrounding ridges have withdrawn in recent years, leaving gleaming miles of balding granite surfaces. One stormy February day, some 25 years ago, the upper part of the sharp tooth-like summit-ridge collapsed into the valley, lowering the peak by fifty feet. Once a challenging ascent in its own right, today it is more of a landmark which German and Austrian tourists traverse en route from one alpine club hut to the next. I refer to the Ankogel, in the High Tauern range of Austria.

For several years prior to 1955 I was living in places too remote from the mountains to permit of any climbing. During this time I built up my modest library of alpine literature and became perforce an armchair mountaineer. These were difficult and exhausting years for the sedentary expert. Following the French success on Annapurna the great eight-thousanders yielded one by one. I suffered in print the agonies of frozen, gangrenous extremities with Maurice Herzog; I dragged myself on hands and knees through the bitter lunar landscape of the South Col; I shared the awful loneliness of Hermann Buhl's bivouac below the summit of Nanga Parbat. Finally, reaching the limits of endurance, I determined to seek refuge in a modest mountain expedition myself. In 1954 my work had taken me back to Europe, so the mountains were available.

The next step was to find the right mountain, the two major factors being accessibility and—let us face it—ease of ascent. I was not seeking out unclimbed north walls, but a respectable peak of medium height, reasonably interesting, and, human nature being what it is, not totally unknown. My armchair years came to my aid. From the depths of my memory there emerged the name "Ankogel."

In the 1890's the great English mountain-climber, Sir Martin Conway, conceived the original idea of traversing the whole chain of the Alps from the Maritimes, in France, to the Tauerns, in Austria. He recorded his tour de force in an alpine classic, "The Alps From End to End." The Ankogel

is the eastern "end" of this title. It is 10,670 feet high, surrounded by snowfields and small glaciers, and boasts an airy summit ridge.

Since my visit to the Ankogel I have reread "The Alps From End to End," and I am somewhat surprised that Sir Martin should have ended his epic tour on the Ankogel. For to the east of the Ankogel there looms a higher, icier, and in every respect more impressive summit, the 11,010-foot Hochalmspitze. Conway, however, calls the Ankogel "the last of the snowy alps." He admits that "the Hochalmspitze does indeed jut out beyond it to the southeast and is slightly higher, but is a mere buttress point." I suspect that Sir Martin simply got fed up with slogging through the Alps in one of the coldest, rainiest summers on record, and suddenly decided to call it quits. No doubt his Victorian sense of orderliness impelled him to rationalize just a bit.

The Ankogel lies above and to the east of the great Tauern railroad tunnel, which burrows more than five miles through the range from Bad Gastein at the northern end to Mallnitz at the southern. This is one of the loveliest parts of Europe, and whether you approach the Ankogel from the north or from the south you cannot avoid traversing interesting and beautiful country.

Bad Gastein is an old and famous resort with huge palace hotels tumbling over each other in the narrow valley. Gastein enjoyed its heyday in the nineteenth century. Its waters were reputed to have rejuvenating properties, and the ultra-smart Austrian court nobility used to descend on Gastein with eagerness before the opening of the imperial social season in Vienna, and then drag themselves back for a cure after the season had ended.

By contrast Mallnitz, on the south side of the range, is a quiet Austrian alpine village lying among green meadows in a broad valley. Over the Labor Day weekend of 1955 my wife and I drove through the old Austrian province of Kaernten and up to Mallnitz. Ruined castles looked down from the hilltops on ancient towns, and snowy summits looked down on the castles.

I never like solo climbing on a strange mountain, be it ever so easy by reputation, so I set about finding a guide in Mallnitz. After considerable effort I located an old man of seventy, who seemed to be the last guide left in the valley. Old Johann was mightily surprised that anybody should want his services as a guide, particularly on the Ankogel. He maintained his composure, nevertheless, and, claiming that even one day away from his harvest (we found him cutting grass along the highway) would spell economic ruin, persuaded me to offer twice the usual fee for the Ankogel. It still

wasn't very much, however, and we arranged to meet Johann up at the Hanover Huette that evening. The Hanover hut is one of the older cabins belonging to the Austrian Alpine Club. It is airily situated on a big spur of the Ankogel at 8800 feet.

We drove our car up a convenient little valley above Mallnitz, parked it overnight at a rustic inn, and set off for the Hanover hut. It was early afternoon, the sun shone, our peak was just visible behind a nearer ridge, while the Hochalmspitze dominated the end of the valley immensely. Before us stretched the pleasant prospect of a leisurely afternoon's ramble through pine woods and alpine meadows.

At this point I almost wrecked our little expedition before it got started. It has long been understood in our family that, while I may be incapable of driving around a city block without advice and guidance, in the mountains my keen alpine instincts render me omniscient and unerring. This was the first time I had ever been able to persuade my wife to accompany me into the Alps. The main selling point was the unique beauty of the easy, unhurried ramble through lovely alpine meadows to the cabin. There were two paths leading from the inn where we left our car. Without the slightest hesitation I chose the wrong one, following it for a whole hour before a peculiar feeling in the pit of the stomach warned me that something had gone wrong. We had walked up a flat valley into a cul-de-sac. There was nothing for us but to reverse our steps and walk back another hour. Two hours behind schedule, knowing we should not make the cabin before dark, wondering whether to go on! Make it we did, however, with a borrowed flashlight, tired and worried. Old Johann, in comfortable slippers, came out to meet us as far as the front porch. He was unperturbed by our alarmingly late arrival in darkness and fog, but he was a nice old gentleman and made us feel right at home. I was somewhat consoled to read later that Conway, too, had lost his way, and in exactly the same manner, approaching the Hanover hut from the other direction sixty years earlier.

Conway devotes a sentence and a half to the actual ascent of the Ankogel: "We . . . followed the path to a little glacier. A scramble up the slippery ice, and an easy rock-arête above it, brought us in an hour and a half to the top of our peak . . ." I have nothing to add; that is the ascent of the Ankogel. Except that it took us a little longer, because Johann had not been up a mountain in ten years and tired easily.

We had started out at dawn, as if the goal had been Monte Rosa. We were rewarded for our eagerness by having the summit all to ourselves for a whole hour in the golden early morning sun. The Grossglockner, Austria's highest mountain, dominated other Tauern summits in the west. On

the other side, close by, the Hochalmspitze glittered superciliously. To the south Triglav, in Yugoslavia, loomed darkly. Odd corners and angles of the Dolomites were visible. This impressive view was strictly for the early bird, for clouds soon started up around the horizon. As we set off down the ridge we could not forbear commiserating just a little with the ascending parties (all guideless) over the rapidly disappearing panorama.

Sir Martin didn't think much of the view from the Ankogel. Disappointing, he called it. A few days earlier, complimenting the fine view from the summit of the Grossglockner, he had stated ponderously that "no near intrusive mass disturbs the progress of the circumambient eye. Probably the Ankogel's easterly buttress, the Hochalmspitze, kept intruding itself uncomfortably on his circumambient eye. Baedeker agrees with me, calling the panorama "very fine."

I look back with warmth on my brief acquaintance with the Ankogel. This expedition involved only slight physical effort, no hardship, no glory. It was a walk plus a scramble. One would hardly urge A.A.C. members to include the Ankogel in their European itinerary. And yet this return to the Alps revived unchanged all the old familiar and unique pleasures. The high meadows with the tough little alpine flowers; the warm, smoky evening of good talk in the mountain cabin; the alpine sunrise and the quiet moments on the summit; the feel again of snow and rock; the surprising views of nearby peaks when seen from the upper levels rather than from the valley below. All of these wonderful experiences belong to all mountains, differing in degree rather than in kind. Even when the mountain stands at the opposite end of the scale from the august eight-thousanders that are making most of today's mountaineering news.

Well, the Ankogel may be a middle-aged mountain, but it is still an awfully nice mountain for middle-aged mountaineers!

