

Little Mother up the Morderberg

H. G. Wells

I think I mentioned, when I was telling how I sailed my first aeroplane, that I made a kind of record at Arosa by falling down three separate crevasses on three successive days. That was before little mother followed me out there. When she came, I could see at a glance she was tired and jaded and worried, and so, instead of letting her fret about, in the hotel and get into a wearing tangle of gossip, I packed her and two knapsacks up, and started off on a long, refreshing, easy-going walk northward, until a blister on her foot stranded us at the Magenruhe Hotel on the Sneejoch. She was for going on, blister or no blister—I never met pluck like mother's in all my life—but I said "No, This is a mountaineering inn, and it suits me down to the ground—or if you prefer it, up to the sky. You shall sit in the veranda by the telescope, and I'll prance about among the peaks for a bit."

"Don't have accidents," she said.

"Can't promise that, little mother," I said; "but I'll always remember I'm your only son."

So I pranced...

I need hardly say that in a couple of days I was at loggerheads with all the mountaineers in that inn. They couldn't stand me. They didn't like my neck with its strong, fine Adam's apple—being mostly men with their heads jammed on—and they didn't like the way I bore myself and lifted my aviator's nose to the peaks. They didn't like my being a vegetarian and the way I evidently enjoyed it, and they didn't like the touch of colour, orange and green, in my rough serge suit. They were all of the dingy school—the sort of men I call gentlemanly owls—shy, correct-minded creatures, mostly from Oxford, and as solemn over their climbing as a cat frying eggs. Sage they were, great headnodders, and "I-wouldn't-venture-to-do-a-thing-like-that—"ers. They always did what the books and guides advised, and they classed themselves by their seasons; one was in his ninth season, and another in his tenth, and so on. I was a novice and had to sit with my mouth open for bits of humble-pie.

My style that! Rather!

I would sit in the smoking-room sucking away at a pipeful of hygienic herb tobacco—they said it smelt like burning garden rubbish—and waiting to put my spoke in and let a little into their minds. They set aside their natural reticence altogether in their efforts to show how much they didn't like me.

"You chaps take these blessed mountains too seriously," I said. "They're larks, you've got to lark

with them.”

They just slued their eyes round me.

“I don’t find the solemn joy in fussing you do. The old-style mountaineers went up with alpenstocks and ladders and light hearts. That’s my idea of mountaineering.”

“It isn’t ours,” said one red-boiled hero of the peaks, all blisters and peeling skin, and he said it with an air of crushing me.

“It’s the right idea,” I said serenely, and puffed at my herb tobacco.

“When you’ve had a bit of experience you’ll know better,” said another, an oldish young man with a small grey beard.

“Experience never taught me anything,” I said.

“Apparently not,” said someone, and left me one down and me to play. I kept perfectly tranquil.

“I mean to do the Morderberg before I go down,” I said quietly, and produced a sensation.

“When are you going down?”

“Week or so,” I answered, unperturbed.

“It’s not the climb a man ought to attempt in his first year,” said the peeling gentleman.

“You particularly ought not to try it,” said another.

“No guide will go with you.”

“Foolhardy idea.”

“Mere brag.”

“Like to see him do it.”

I just let them boil for a bit, and when they were back to the simmer I dropped in, pensively, with, “Very likely I’ll take that little mother of mine. She’s small, bless her, and she’s as hard as nails.”

But they saw they were being drawn by my ill-concealed smile; and this time they contented themselves with a few grunts and grunt-like remarks, and then broke up into little conversations in undertones that pointedly excluded me. It had the effect of hardening my purpose. I'm a stiff man when I'm put on my mettle, and I determined that the little mother should go up the Morderberg, where half these solemn experts hadn't been, even if I had to be killed or orphaned in the attempt. So I spoke to her about it the next day. She was in a deck-chair on the veranda, wrapped up in rugs and looking at the peaks.

"Comfy?" I said.

"Very," she said.

"Getting rested?"

"It's so nice."

I strolled to the rail of the veranda. "See that peak there, mummy?"

She nodded happily, with eyes half shut.

"That's the Morderberg. You and me have got to be up there the day after to-morrow."

Her eyes opened a bit. "Wouldn't it be rather a climb, dearest?" she said.

"I'll manage that all right," I said, and she smiled consentingly and closed her eyes.

"So long as you manage it," she said.

I went down the valley that afternoon to Daxdam to get gear and guides and porters, and I spent the next day in glacier and rock practice above the hotel. That didn't add to my popularity. I made two little slips. One took me down a crevasse—I've an extraordinary knack of going down crevasses—and a party of three which was starting for the Kinderspitz spent an hour and a half fishing me out; and the other led to my dropping my ice-axe on a little string of people going for the Humpi glacier. It didn't go within thirty inches of anyone, but you might have thought from the row they made that I had knocked out the collective brains of the party. Quite frightful language they used, and three ladies with them, too!

The next day there was something very like an organised attempt to prevent our start. They brought out the landlord, they remonstrated with mother, they did their best to blacken the character of my two guides. The landlord's brother had a first-class row with them.

“Two years ago,” he said, “they lost their Herr!”

“No particular reason,” I said, “why you shouldn’t keep yours on is it?”

That settled him. He wasn’t up to a polyglot pun, and it stuck in his mind like a fishbone in the throat.

Then the peeling gentleman came along and tried to overhaul our equipment. “Have you got this?” it was, and “Have you got that?”

“Two things,” I said, looking at his nose pretty hard, “we haven’t forgotten. One’s blue veils and the other vaseline.”

I’ve still a bright little memory of the start, There was the pass a couple of hundred feet or so below the hotel, and the hotel—all name and windows—standing out in a great, desolate, rocky place against lumpy masses of streaky green rock, flecked here and there with patches of snow and dark shelves of rhododendron, and raising perhaps a thousand feet towards the western spur of the massif. Our path ran before us, meandering among the boulders down to stepping-stones over a rivulet, and then upward on the other side of the stream towards the Magenruhe glacier, where we had to go up the rocks to the left and then across the icefall to shelves on the precipitous face on the west side. It was dawn, the sun had still to rise, and everything looked very cold and blue and vast about us. Everyone in the hotel had turned out to bear a hand in the row—some of the deshabbles were disgraceful—and now they stood in a silent group watching us recede. The last word I caught was, “They’ll have to come back.”

“We’ll come back all right,” I answered. “Never fear.”

And so we went our way, cool and deliberate, over the stream and up and up towards the steep snowfields and icy shoulder of the Morderberg. I remember that we went in absolute silence for a time, and then how suddenly the landscape gladdened with sunrise, and in an instant, as if speech had thawed, all our tongues were babbling.

I had one or two things in the baggage that I hadn’t cared for the people at the inn to see, and I had made no effort to explain why I had five porters with the load of two and a half. But when we came to the icefall I showed my hand a little, and unslung a stout twine hammock for the mater. We put her in this with a rug round her, and sewed her in with a few stitches; then we roped up in line, with me last but one and a guide front and rear, and mummy in the middle carried by two of the porters. I stuck my alpenstock through two holes I had made in the shoulders of my jacket under my rucksack, T-shape to my body, so that when I went down a crevasse, as I did ever and again, I just stuck in its jaws and came up easy as the rope grew taut. And so, except for one or two bumps that made the mater

chuckle, we got over without misadventure.

Then came the rock climb on the other side, requiring much judgment. We had to get from ledge to ledge as opportunity offered, and here the little mother was a perfect godsend. We unpacked her after we had slung her over the big fissure—I forget what you call it—that always comes between glacier and rock—and whenever we came to a bit of ledge within eight feet of the one we were working along, the two guides took her and slung her up, she being so light, and then she was able to give a foot for the next man to hold by and hoist himself. She said we were all pulling her leg, and that made her and me laugh so much that the whole party had to wait for us.

It was pretty tiring altogether doing that bit of the climb—two hours we had of it before we got to the loose masses of rock on the top of the arete. “It’s worse going down,” said the elder guide.

I looked back for the first time, and I confess it did make me feel a bit giddy. There was the glacier looking quite pretty, and with a black gash between itself and the rocks.

For a time it was pretty fair going up the rocky edge of the arete, and nothing happened of any importance, except that one of the porters took to grouching because he was hit on the shin by a stone I dislodged. “Fortunes of war,” I said, but he didn’t seem to see it, and when I just missed him with a second he broke out into a long, whining discourse in what I suppose he thought was German—I couldn’t make head or tail of it.

“He said you might have killed him,” said little mother.

“They say,” I quoted. “What say they? Let them say.”

I was for stopping and filling him up with a feed, but the elder guide wouldn’t have it. We had already lost time, he said, and the traverse round the other face of the mountain would be more and more subject to avalanches as the sun got up. So we went on. As we went round the corner to the other face I turned towards the hotel—it was the meanest little oblong spot by now—and made a derisive gesture or so for the benefit of anyone at the telescope.

We did get one rock avalanche that reduced the hindmost guide to audible prayer, but nothing hit us except a few bits of snow. The rest of the fall was a couple of yards and more from us. We were on rock just then and overhung; before and afterwards we were edging along steps in an ice-slope cut by the foremost guide, and touched up by the porters. The avalanche was much more impressive before it came in sight, banging and thundering overhead, and it made a tremendous uproar in the blue deeps beneath, but in actual transit it seemed a mean show—mostly of stones smaller than I am.

“All right?” said the guide.

“Toned up,” I answered.

“You suppose it is safe, dear?” asked the little mother.

“Safe as Trafalgar Square,” I said. “Hop along, mummykins.”

Which she did with remarkable agility.

The traverse took us on to old snow at last, and here, we could rest for lunch—and pretty glad we were both of lunch and rest. But here the trouble with the guides and porters thickened. They were already a little ruffled about my animating way with loose rocks, and now they kicked up a tremendous shindy because instead of the customary brandy we had brought non-alcoholic ginger cordial. Would they even try it? Not a bit of it! It was a queer little dispute, high up in that rarefied air about food values and the advantages of making sandwiches with nuttar. They were an odd lot of men, invincibly set upon a vitiated and vitiating dietary. They wanted meat, they wanted alcohol, they wanted narcotics to smoke. You might have thought that men like these, living in almost direct contact with Nature, would have liked “Nature” foods, such as plasmon, protose, plobose, digestine, and so forth. Not them! They just craved for corruption. When I spoke of drinking pure water one of the porters spat in a marked, symbolic manner over the precipice. From that point onward discontent prevailed.

We started again about half-past eleven, after a vain attempt on the part of the head guide to induce us to turn back. We had now come to what is generally the most difficult part of the Morderberg ascent, the edge that leads up to the snowfield below the crest. But here we came suddenly into a draught of warm air blowing from the south-west, and everything, the guide said, was unusual. Usually the edge is a sheet of ice over rock. To-day it was wet and soft, and one could kick steps in it and get one’s toes into rock with the utmost ease.

“This is where Herr Tomlinson’s party fell,” said one of the porters, after we’d committed ourselves to the edge for ten minutes or so.

“Some people could fall out of a four-post bed,” I said.

“It’ll freeze hard again before we come back,” said the second guide, “and us with nothing but verdammt ginger inside of us.”

“You keep your rope taut,” said I.

A friendly ledge came to the help of mother in the nick of time, just as she was beginning to

tire, and we sewed her up all but the feet in her hammock again, and roped her carefully. She bumped a bit, and at times she was just hanging over immensity and rotating slowly, with everybody else holding like grim death.

“My dear,” she said, the first time this happened, “is it right for me to be doing this?”

“Quite right,” I said, “but if you can get a foothold presently again—it’s rather better style.”

“You’re sure there’s no danger, dear?”

“Not a scrap.”

“And I don’t fatigue you?”

“You’re a stimulant.”

“The view,” she said, “is certainly becoming very beautiful.”

But presently the view blotted itself out, and we were in clouds and thin drift of almost thawing snowflakes.

We reached the upper snowfield about half-past one, and the snow was extraordinarily soft. The elder guide went in up to his armpits.

“Frog it,” I said, and spread myself out flat, in a sort of swimming attitude. So we bored our way up to the crest and along it. We went in little spurts and then stopped for breath, and we dragged the little mother after us in her hammock-bag. Sometimes the snow was so good we fairly skimmed the surface; sometimes it was so rotten we plunged right into it and splashed about. I went too near the snow cornice once and it broke under me, but the rope saved me, and we reached the summit about three o’clock without further misadventure. The summit was just bare rock with the usual cairn and pole. Nothing to make a fuss about. The drift of snow and cloudwisp had passed, the sun was blazing hot overhead, and we seemed to be surveying all Switzerland. The Magenruhe Hotel was at our toes, hidden, so to speak, by our chins. We squatted about the cairn, and the guides and porters were reduced to ginger and vegetarian ham-sandwiches. I cut and scratched an inscription, saying I had climbed on simple food, and claiming a record.

Seen from the summit the snowfields on the north-east side of the mountain looked extremely attractive, and I asked the head guide why that way up wasn’t used. He said something in his peculiar German about precipices.

So far our ascent had been a fairly correct ascent in rather slow time. It was in the descent

that, that strain in me of almost unpremeditated originality had play. I wouldn't have a rope returning across the upper snowfield, because mother's feet and hands were cold, and I wanted her to jump about a bit. And before I could do anything to prevent it she had slipped, tried to get up by rolling over down the slope instead of up, as she ought to have done, and was leading the way, rolling over and over and over, down towards the guide's blessed precipices above the lower snowfield.

I didn't lose an instant in flinging myself after her, axe up, in glissading attitude. I'm not clear what I meant to do, but I fancy the idea was to get in front of her and put on the brake. I did not succeed, anyhow. In twenty seconds I had slipped, and was sitting down and going down out of my own control altogether.

Now, most great discoveries are the result of accident, and I maintain that in that instant mother and I discovered two distinct and novel ways of coming down a mountain.

It is necessary that there should be first a snow slope above with a layer of softish, rotten snow on the top of ice, then a precipice, with a snow-covered talus sloping steeply at first and then less steeply, then more snow-slopes and precipices according to taste, ending in a snowfield or a not-too-greatly-fissured glacier, or a reasonable, not-too-rocky slope. Then it all becomes as easy as chuting the chutes.

Mother hit on the sideways method. She rolled. With the snow in the adhesive state it had got into, she had made the jolliest little snowball of herself in half a minute, and the nucleus of as clean and abundant a snow avalanche as anybody could wish. There was plenty of snow going in front of her, and that's the very essence of both our methods. You must fall on your snow, not your snow fall on you, or it smashes you. And you mustn't mix yourself up with loose stones.

I, on the other hand, went down feet first, and rather like a snow-plough; slower than she did, and if, perhaps, with less charm, with more dignity. Also I saw more. But it was certainly a tremendous rush. And I gave a sort of gulp when mummy bumped over the edge into the empty air and vanished.

It was like a toboggan ride gone mad down the slope until I took off from the edge of the precipice, and then it was like a dream.

I'd always thought falling must be horrible. It wasn't in the slightest degree. I might have hung with my clouds and lumps of snow about me for weeks, so great was my serenity. I had an impression then that I was as good as killed—and that didn't matter. I wasn't afraid—that's nothing—! But I wasn't a bit uncomfortable. Whack! We'd hit something, and I expected to be flying to bits right and left. But we'd only got on to the snow-slope below, at so steep an angle that it was merely breaking the fall. Down we went again. I didn't see

much of the view after that because the snow was all round and over my head, but I kept feet foremost and in a kind of sitting posture, and then I slowed and then I quickened again and bumped rather, and then harder, and bumped and then bumped again and came to rest. This time I was altogether buried in snow, and twisted sideways with a lot of heavy snow on my right shoulder.

I sat for a bit enjoying the stillness—and then I wondered what had become of mother, and set myself to get out of the snow about me. It wasn't so easy as you might think; the stuff was all in lumps and spaces like a gigantic sponge, and I lost my temper and struggled and swore a good deal, but at last I managed it. I crawled out and found myself on the edge of heaped masses of snow quite close to the upper part of the Magenruhe glacier. And far away, right up the glacier and near the other side, was a little thing like a black-beetle struggling in the heart of an immense split ball of snow.

I put my hands to my mouth and let out with my version of the yodel, and presently I saw her waving her hand.

It took me nearly twenty minutes to get to her. I knew my weakness, and I was very careful of every crevasse I came near. When I got up to her, her face was anxious.

“What have you done with the guides?” she asked.

“They’ve got too much to carry,” I said. “They’re coming down another way. Did you like it?”

“Not very much, dear,” she said, “but I dare say I shall get used to these things. Which way do we go now?”

I decided we’d find a snow-bridge across the bergschrund—that’s the word I forgot just now—and so get on to the rocks on the east side of the glacier, and after that we had uneventful going right down to the hotel...

Our return evoked such a strain of hostility and envy as I have never met before or since. First they tried to make out we’d never been to the top at all, but mother’s little proud voice settled that sort of insult. And besides, there was the evidence of the guides and porters following us down. When they asked about the guides, “They’re following your methods,” I said, “and I suppose they’ll get back here to-morrow morning sometime.”

That didn’t please them.

I claimed a record. They said my methods were illegitimate.

“If I see fit,” I said, “to use an avalanche to get back by, what’s that to you? You tell me, me and mother can’t do the confounded mountain anyhow, and when we do you want to invent a lot of rules to disqualify us. You’ll say next one mustn’t glissade. I’ve made a record, and you know I’ve made a record, and you’re about as sour as you can be. The fact of it is, you chaps don’t know your own silly business. Here’s a good, quick way of coming down a mountain, and you ought to know about it—”

“The chance that both of you are not killed was one in a thousand.”

“Nonsense! It’s the proper way to come down for anyone who hasn’t a hide-bound mind. You chaps ought to practise falling great heights in snow. It’s perfectly easy and perfectly safe, if only you know how to set about it.”

“Look here, young man,” said the oldish young man with the little grey beard, “you don’t seem to understand that you and that lady have been saved by a kind of miracle—”

“Theory!” I interrupted. “I’m surprised you fellows ever come to Switzerland. If I were your kind I’d just invent theoretical mountains and play for points. However, you’re tired, little mummy. It’s time you had some nice warm soup and tucked yourself up in bed. I shan’t let you get up for six-and-thirty hours.”

But it’s queer how people detest a little originality.

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