

DISTANT COUSINS OF THE ABOMINABLE SNOWMAN

By J. MONROE THORINGTON

IT is now the claim of some that the Abominable Snowman is a bear. In Canada this would not be hard to tell. When bears cross the high snowfields from one pass to another, as they frequently do in summer, their tracks are straight as a surveyor's line and no human being can equal this. A bear deviates only when some feature interests him, like a pool of water, or where an obstacle is to be avoided, such as a crevasse. The tracks of a climber, even when unfatigued, will show many falterings from the direct line. Two feet instead of four have something to do with this.

It is largely forgotten that there are legends in the Alps of two-footed inhabitants of the snow-world. But a century ago the central alpine chain of the Tauern was the principle habitat of the ice-dwarfs, variously known as Eismanndl (Eismänner), Eismännlein, Ferner-Norggen, Fernerzwerge and Kösmannlein. The forces of nature exhibited in the glaciers of Tyrol caused the local peasantry to attribute the inexplicable occurrences to superior beings. In all of the legends there is a seriousness, created by the austerity of the snow and ice regions. What follows is largely taken from Ritter von Alpenburg's *Mythen und Sagen Tirols* (Zurich, 1857).

The form of the Eismanndl is dwarfish, but his strength is enormous ; he can assume giant stature and transform himself into anything else at will. The ice-dwarfs push the glaciers backward and forward, and revel during the most violent snowstorms in making arabesque and shingle-like patterns on the snow. They bring about the so-called 'Schnee-grugeln,' so that on the hottest summer days there will be thunder without lightning, and green alpine valleys are decked in sudden snow and hail. The ice-dwarfs are the cause of the rolling cracking in the heart of a glacier.

The ice-dwarf is ancient in appearance, with snow-white hair and beard, both long, the beard down to the ground. His weathered countenance is earnest and wrinkled ; his eyes are blue, his gaze penetrating, his nose aquiline. His clothing is grey-green, like old leaves ; a slouch hat with down-turned brim shades his face.

The dwelling places of the snow-dwarfs are the crevasses, connected for long stretches beneath the glacial ice. The ice-dwarf likes to sit on a snowy peak or on the edge of a precipice, brooding upon the eternal world of ice needles and pyramids—letting the fog shapes dance about him, watching the mists form into balls, cloud upon cloud, compressing them, tearing them, blowing them into flakes, weaving them into veils and curtains, sending them down like smoke upon the névés, brewing weather, strewing hail, hurling avalanches. He builds glistening

bridges over abysses, carries honest men safely across, but hurls evil-doers to destruction. The ice-dwarf is endowed with an ethical streak for assisting good and punishing evil. He allows the fleeing malefactor no respite, but pursues him through storm and wind, hurling him to death in the icy night, to damnation in the icy chasms. But lost wanderers of noble character are shown the proper path, while frozen unfortunates, who cannot be saved, are taken and buried in the consecrated earth of the nearest valley cemetery.

Once upon a time a peasant youth of the Rofenthal made love to a girl of the Schnalserthal, swearing eternal fidelity and an early marriage. But it was not long before he forgot his vow and, blinded by the pursuit of Mammon, courted a rich maiden of Schnals who was otherwise a bad lot. The forsaken one mourned constantly and, when her faithless lover celebrated his wedding in Schnals, and the bridal procession with song and tumult, crossing the Niederjoch to the Rofenthal, met the sorrowing damsel.

Then the ice-dwarf of the Niederjoch took revenge. A storm arose suddenly in the gorges of Finail, spread over the Niederjoch and the glacier cracked. A crevasse yawned before the newly-married pair and they sank hopelessly in the depths. When all was over, the deceived maiden lay in the path, dead of a broken heart. The ice-dwarfs lifted her and carried her down, and buried her at Unser lieben Frau in Schnals.

The Eismanndl has a second-cousin called the Venediger-Manndl. This little man is found at the upper ends of valleys, and has to do with the traces of gold that are found in springs and brooks. Every year this dark-clothed, quiet dwarf would come up from Venice to spend the summer in the mountains, particularly at the Sonnwendjoch, in the Rofan mountains near the Achensee. He used to stay with the Senner at the Kothalpe, but when that kind-hearted landlord died and was replaced by a hard-hearted successor, the Venediger-Manndl had no place to spend the night. But the herd-boy took him in, and thereafter the Venediger-Manndl was seen no more in that region.

However, the herd-boy was sent to Italy in military service and, chancing to be in Venice, heard his name called from a window in a palace on the Grand Canal. There was the Venediger-Manndl in a satin robe, offering the herd-boy fulfilment of any wish. But the boy disdained gold and asked only to be home again with his sweetheart. This, of course, was at once granted, and, because it was a good wish, there was plenty of money along with it.

Why go looking for a bear in the Himalayas, who may or may not be the Abominable Snowman, when as near home as the Alps one can seek the reliable company of the Eismanndl, who is sure to guide the footsteps of an honest climber?