Home From The Eiger

LUKE HUGHES

'Great things are done when men and mountains meet;
This is not done by jostling in the street'

Blake

'Six weeks in plaster, six weeks physiotherapy; I don't see you climbing again for at least another four months.' We drove away from the casualty department of St Thomas's Hospital.

'There go our chances of knocking off the Eiger this summer,' said Stephen.

'Not if I can help it.'

That Sunday afternoon at Swanage had been expensive. Never mind sliding sweaty-palmed away from an easy traverse; I'd left a crab with all Stephen's wires swinging from a distant piton above the crux. Never mind the shattered bones in my foot; but to see our trip to the Alps go for a bag of chalk was too much. Stephen was hoping to write a book about the Bernese Oberland and needed more material. I had never been there and the thought of a fortnight's dash was a dewdrop in a barren summer of hard work. 10 weeks later, fortified by a diet of calcium phosphate we set off anyway, for the kind of jaunt that keeps one high for months; the kind you read about in books. Or used to.

Mountaineering literature has recently changed so much. Where are the buckram-covered gold-tooled accounts of jolly ventures to the Playground of Europe? What has become of the *Alpine Journal*, now three-quarters full of Himalayan experiences? Coarse-cut papers and well-spaced print have given way to closely-set type and pure-coated paper. Climbers have forsaken their tweeds and sensible shoes for thermolactyl fibres and plastic boots that make your feet sweat. Who could have foreseen matching Goretex separates, psychedelic footwear, designer salopettes with stripes down the leg and the ubiquitous Sony 'Walkman'? Gone are the days when Whymper hurled rocks from the summit of the Matterhorn on to the felted heads of his Italian rivals. Gone are the days when Leslie Stephen could send down for a ladder to cross a crevasse on the Jungfraujoch.

It's not that I think it's good form to hurl rocks at other climbers; there's something about using ladders on cruxes that's not quite 'on' either, and I have to own up to Helly-Hansen underwear. But it is not just fashions that have changed; it is values, too. Some for the worse. In particular, there is a propensity amongst modern mountaineers to take themselves too seriously. We are not a bit surprised when a Frenchman describes the commitment shared by delegates at the Mont Blanc bicentennial celebrations as a common pursuit of 'La verité'. We are confirmed in our expectations when Poles brave all conditions and all

weathers to battle with some fearsome route to stress an ideological point. But matters are out of hand when British mountaineers write sentences like this:

> 'We merged with and moved through this strange environment, a capsule passing over a wild uninhabited unique universe . . . We were a cohesive entity now; only the sheer professionalism and trust within the operative parts of the whole permitted the luxury of debate over the price of titanium.'

What has become of that anarchy, charm and wit that used to be such a characteristic of British climbing?

Stephen Venables is working hard to keep a few traditions alive. He indulges a little in anarchy, charm and wit, and, especially, he possesses that peculiar British characteristic of turning catastrophe into virtue and being congratulated for it. His hobby is collecting the names of other climbers who drop vital equipment from near the tops of mountains; he purchases the minimum of climbing gear on the grounds that someone else will provide. He is a delightful guest who washes up, shops, feeds babies, cats and dogs spontaneously, brings flowers and chocolates to bribe hostesses (or their mothers), and spends whole afternoons gossiping knowledgeably about horticulture (also seducing fathers). Meticulous about bread-and-butter post-cards, no one with a house near a crag (or with a word processor when he's writing a book) can resist the charm. He has developed the art of cupboard love to its zenith. He is passionately devoted to the mountains, women and music, the choice depending on the time of year. This can confuse. An able pianist himself, he was once carried away by the slow movement of Beethoven's 'Ghost' trio by his feeling for the music, and then by the cellist. I was recently concerned to see him discard his Oxfam climbing gear and squander the Boardman Tasker prize money on more streamlined outfits, but at least with his 'Walkman' he still carries an impressive collection of opera and early chamber music.

To the enervating strains of *The Marriage of Figaro* we sped off to the midnight ferry; screaming children, Sealink sandwiches, leaden eyes and snatches of sleep before the overnight romp across Europe.

Zürich greeted us with those bursts of drenching rain and lingering mists that spell doom to alpine dashes. For the next 10 days we darted about Switzerland in search of dry climbing, progressively more depressed about the weather. 'The trouble with dropping things and not reaching summits is that what you've nearly done never really counts!' moaned Stephen. It began to look as though this trip was not going to help. He was going to have to own up to being a cabinet-maker, not a climber at all. How we wandered. From the limestone needles of the Grignetta in northern Italy to the Gorge de Moutier in the Jura (where the penalty for failure was to dangle amongst the high-tension cables of the railway line), from the Sphinx at Leysin to the slabs of Handegg. We were even arrested for vagrancy in Solothurn one morning. Suffering from Oberland Fever, I made up a rhyme. It began

> 'I must go back to the Alps today,
> To the rock, the snow, and the ice.

And all I ask is a bomb-proof nut and a belay bolted thrice.
A tense move, a thin ledge, a knee that's shaking,
Dry mouth, cold toes, and a heart that's quaking.'

One evening the weather looked as though it might be clearing further north. 'I don't know about you, but I'd like to see more of the snow and ice and less of the shaking knee.' Having tired of getting damp in lay-bys, Stephen hit on the idea of placating a young lady of Meiringen (near the Oberland), to whom he had once behaved badly. He rushed to the nearest flower shop and, balancing *blumen* on his knee, urged us on to the young lady's home. She was out. We picnicked outside, and completed memorizing the first act of *Figaro*. Her neighbours were not appreciative and threw a bucket of water over us. It was still raining, and there was no climbing

'I suppose there's some consolation in thinking that if all this precipitation has a chance to settle, the Eiger should be getting nicely into condition.' Then one evening the clouds cleared, the temperature dropped, and the Oberland was clear. We sped off to Lauterbrunnen at first light.

As we wandered up to the Rottal hut Stephen poured out information about previous pioneers, great routes and personal memories which made it clear what an interesting book his would be were he to find a suitable publisher. We had the hut to ourselves and woke to a perfect morning; small puffy clouds, a view of every range in the Alps, and Stephen with a story about most of them. We climbed the Rottal ridge to the summit of the Jungfrau, a route that my great-grandfather Claude Schuster had pioneered a century before. I've always admired his writing, but I'd never been convinced about his climbing prowess. I was rather impressed that morning.

The temperature rose overnight and we retreated to Stechelberg, to the Naturfreundehaus. At eight francs a night, these hostels are a cross between Ruskinian ideals and the YHA. However, in winter all 'freunde' turn up with their smocks, roll-ups and müsli, then jump into the designer ski-wear and drive off in the Mercedes to catch the lifts to Wengen. On this occasion our companions included three Green women from Berlin who had predictable reactions to Mrs Thatcher, and a pair of Dutch students, one of whom used to hover athletically in the shower area.

Undeterred, we spent one afternoon taking the little train to Mürren. It seemed a twee thing to do, and neither of us wanted to admit that we actually enjoyed the ride. The Swiss are to kitsch as Shakespeare is to cliché; they invented it, and it is perpetually re-enacted. We sat in meadows taking pictures of trains and mountains, cows and mountains, rowanberries and mountains, old biddies carrying brand new alpenstocks and mountains, guards on trains and mountains. In front of a memorial to Arnold Lunn we sipped kirsch at five francs a thimble. My forebears used to go to Mürren every year with the Lunns, and even now there are gullies around Mürren named after them. But, apart from laying ghosts, what we really wanted to see was the condition of the Eiger after all the bad weather. We scoured the face with our telephoto lenses whilst Stephen took me through the 'naming of parts' on the face.

I must confess to considerable innocence about the literature and legend

that has built up about the Nordwand. Tony Saunders, who made a winter ascent, has told me since that he felt as though he was carrying two rucksacks – one with all his gear, the other with all the stories that have been told. Happily I was carrying just the one sack, my innocence being such that I had hardly liked to ask Stephen why Death Bivouac was so-named when we settled down there for the night three days later. To climb the route seemed a jolly enough idea at the time, and it looked pretty as we sipped our kirsch at Mürren, gazing past the trees, cows, rowanberries and railway trains.

The next morning was glorious – just the day for the Eiger, we thought. One of our safety valves was a hotline to the Zürich weather centre. There would be a storm that night, we were assured. Looking at the cloudless sky, we could be forgiven for doubting the forecast, but we didn't and spent the day falling off a climb at Handegg. We drove to friends in Meiringen (the *blumen* had served their purpose) when the storm began. It raged and bucketed for hours. How we blessed that weather centre. How miserable, how vulnerable, how dispirited we would have been at the first bivouac.

When we did arrive at Grindelwald to catch the train there was still heavy cloud. Leaving the train at Eigergletscher Station, we could not even see the mountain, let alone the foot of the climb. There was no one to ask the reasonable question, 'Excuse me, which way is it to the Eiger?' So we just waited and waited for the cloud to lift, munching chocolate and listening to the alpenhorn serenading the tourists as they boarded the Jungfraujoch railway. Suddenly it cleared. We were off. The weather improved steadily throughout the remainder of the afternoon (we had started about 4pm) as we climbed solo to the bottom of the 'Difficult Crack'. My faith in Venables's route-finding had been sorely tested in the last 10 days, so it was with some relief that we came to the crack and the cosiest bivvy ledge a man could have desired. The sunset was classic, and we settled down to the roar of the gas stove, the trundle of the railway in the valley below and the warble of that alpenhorn. We crammed in noodles and Mars bars, cheese and salami; the lights of Grindelwald twinkled beneath us, the stars twinkled above . . . a perfect alpine bivvy. We purred, then snored.

Stephen led the first pitch of the morning. The ropes had frozen overnight and were like wire hawsers. He reached a belay at the top of the crack, and I led through. But the ropes were snarled on a projecting rock beneath his stance. He tried to pull them through, but that made it worse, and then he started swearing. Stephen has quite a vocabulary when he's cross, and what the words lacked in subtlety they made up in volume. Now the Eiger Nordwand is shaped like a huge auditorium, and the more he swore the more it echoed across the whole valley. People were startled. Suddenly there were voices: 'Ist du kommen in?', and a head popped out of the side of the face. There just below us was the gallery window of the railway, and the passengers were savouring every word. Did we want to be rescued? The appearance of a fellow wandering carefree on one of the lower ice-fields humbled Stephen and he shut up until we reached the Hinterstoisser traverse when he busied himself reminding me to take another photograph of him.

By now the world was awake, the valley was sunlit, the alpenhorn was

warbling the same tune, and we settled into the climbing; up the Ice Hose (in perfect condition), across the Second Ice-field . . . we were happy and moving well. Not a rock fell from above and we had only the Mountain Rescue helicopter touting for business after lunch to disturb us. We reached Death Bivouac at about half past three just as the sun was coming round to loosen all the debris above us. The sun was warm and we were sheltered, so we resolved to settle for an early night. As we bathed in the sun, we sharpened our crampons and discussed the complexities of some of the themes in *Figaro*. Still that wretched alpenhorn warbled away – the same tune. 'A couple of bars from Mozart's horn concertos wouldn't go amiss.'

A few rocks fell as we crossed the Third Ice-field the next morning, but, once in the Ramp, we settled into a rhythm. 'I love that bit in the last Act when the Duke realizes he's been caught out and there's that reconciliation between him and his wife . . . I wish I could find lovers so understanding.' 'Have you ever noticed that the tune when the maid comes into the garden near the end is a variation in the minor of Figaro's main aria in the first Act?' 'What name are we going to give this ascent . . . how about the First Oxbridge Ascent of the Eiger . . . no one would believe some of the aesthetic bullshit we've talked over the last fortnight.'

There was a little battle up the Waterfall pitch which Stephen cleared of anything a man could get an axe into, and some extremely solid blue ice on the Brittle Ice-field. We were beginning to forget Mozart and talk of Wagner as we approached the Traverse of the Gods, when the helicopter came back to see how we were getting on.

'Don't wave. He'll come and rescue us.'

The Spider was acting like an amphitheatre to that persistent alpenhorn. 'Someone has to tell him . . . He must have something else to play. He gets enough practice throughout the day to be concert standard. Three days on the trot, and he's still pushing out the same nauseous warble.'

Eventually we picked our way across a scary, skiddy band of loose rock below the summit ice-fields. All the holds were sloping down, and the rock was perilously loose. So this was where all the junk came from that rains down on to the route below. We'd had a pretty good run really.

Grindelwald was already in the dark when we reached the summit ridge, but the light on the mountains was as magical and rewarding as one could have dreamed after such a good route. It was half past seven and we clearly had another night on the mountain.

'Well, we made it,' said Stephen, waving his axe above his head for a photograph.

'Mmmm, up,' I said, 'but not yet down,' thinking of the tedium of a night on an ice-ledge with no sleeping bag and a temperature of 17C. In the moments when sleep seemed possible, an Irishman kept waking me up throughout the night to tell me to clip into that piton that was just above my head. Three times I pulled my hood from my eyes, just to check I was really awake. There was of course no piton. The fourth time I decided to put on the stove. Stephen had been having strange dreams, too. When in doubt, brew. That's always been a good rule in the mountains.

It seemed to take ages to flex our frozen limbs in the morning, but eventually we moved up the last 200m along the Mittellegi ridge to the summit, for me the most frightening part of the climb. The wind was screaming over the ridge, and we were painfully aware how far it would be to climb back up. Down the W face to Kleine Scheidegg took two and a half hours.

'Let's save the cash, not catch the train, and buy some wine when we get down to Grindelwald. Hang on a sec . . . before we go I just want to have a word with the fellow in a frilly waistcoat and white stockings who's playing the horn.'

We left the man who was undoubtedly the prime tourist attraction in Kleine Scheidegg bemused, confused, and a little put out, and pounded our weary toes into the fronts of our boots for the sake of a couple of bottles of plonk. The supermarkets were all closed.

'Oh well, I'd rather listen to that aria in the third Act again, anyway.'

Next morning I was back at work in London, high as a kite and overwhelmed with the beauty of it all. Quite suddenly my foot started to ache again, and every morning it was an effort to put weight on it. I indulged in a few telephone calls to nearest and dearest to let them know I was back, and what we'd been up to.

'You're mad. And with your foot just out of plaster, what on earth do you think you were doing? And why the Eiger of all things? Don't give me any of that "Because it's there" nonsense.'

'Well, actually, because it's fun.'