

25 March 1974

1948

Chapter <sup>7</sup>/<sub>6</sub>

TWO MILES TALL

- They understood that a certain quirkiness of character was required to spend 40 hours a week, year after year, surrounded by corrosive and poisonous and explosive materials, without even the incentive of eventually becoming a wealthy scientist.

Though I returned as proletarian rather than bourgeoisie-aspiring graduate student, the University of ~~Washington~~ campus felt snug and homey after months pushing a handtruck in a warehouse. ~~For one reason~~ The routine of dispensing chemicals and equipment left much leisure for reading— institutionally condoned in this center of higher learning, unlike at Ernst Hardware. Customers of my basement stockroom, mainly seniors and candidates for master's and doctor's degrees, had grown accustomed in previous courses, served by stockrooms on other floors of Bagley Hall, to eccentric attendants. I fitted the tradition and enlarged it as an English major mysteriously transported across the gulf from "upper campus" to "lower." Chemists and chemical engineers were intrigued that someone in their reeking headquarters spent his days reading such arcane works as The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, The Decline of the West, and the Cambridge Medieval History. I gave the place class.

Due to life-interruptions by the war and ~~the years-long drudgery of thesis~~ ~~indefinite thesis~~ research ~~projects~~, most customers were about my age, <sup>Some,</sup> and despite the vast difference in cultural backgrounds, ~~some~~ turned out to have interests I shared.

There was, for example, Crazy Art, whose eerie eyes and chaotic chuckle seemed to thinly ~~mask~~ <sup>stark staring</sup> madness. ~~One of his equally unstable~~  
~~He~~ <sup>He</sup> introduced me to the glass-bead ~~pipe~~ <sup>cannon</sup>, a length of glass tubing connected by rubber tubing to a compressed-air outlet; flip open the air valve and a glass bead <sup>hisses</sup> ~~silently shoots~~ out with a muzzle velocity somewhere between that of a BB pellet and a .22 slug. I kept mine trained on Bagley's back door, directly opposite the stockroom service window. Art ~~and his cronies~~ <sup>and his cronies</sup> quickly became wary of exposing their rears but many a time a tight-skirted girl leaving the building flinched, threw a protective hand to her bitten bottom, ~~and~~ turned angrily to slam a fresh engineer — and found herself alone except for the stockroom boy in the distant window, engrossed in Gibbon.

when the inner cylinder rapidly pushes a cork through the length of the outer cylinder, violently discharges a second cork stuffed in the latter's mouth.

Art ~~They~~ also taught me the cork pistol, two ~~clown~~ <sup>nesting</sup> brass cylinders (from a set of cork-hole borers) which, ~~when the inner is thrust through the outer, a cork is discharged in a cork~~ As I was sitting on my stool pondering the Magian culture, a "pop!" would startle me into 20th century America, a cork would sting my cheek, and I'd grab my pistol and vault <sup>out</sup> ~~through~~ the window in hot pursuit. Noncombatants <sup>passing by in the hall</sup> learned to detour around the window ~~in passing~~ lest they be knocked flat by a flying ~~cork~~ <sup>stockroom boy</sup>. On occasion, feeling restless, I'd leave my post and stalk the corridors, pistol in belt, and would meet an <sup>armed</sup> ~~enemy~~ and we'd hold a fast-draw contest. Eventually nobody was bothered by a cork in the face and one day when I caught Art ~~weaponless~~ <sup>weaponless</sup> and backed him into a corner he laughed defiantly — until suddenly he was blinking and coughing, clown white from ~~chest~~ <sup>chest</sup> to ~~face~~ <sup>face</sup>.

roots ~~of his~~ hair. I'd escalated the arms race by inserting a charge of talcum powder behind the cork.

Firecrackers came next, but not for long, since each blast brought a dozen professors running with fire extinguishers and first-aid kits. ~~Usually, designed~~ <sup>Other</sup> bombs continued popular, though, and I sent Art and company diving for cover by tossing one in their lab; the victory was the more complete because it was merely a paper bag puffed full of cigarette smoke curling out ominously. Retaliation was swift and savage. I heard running feet and maniac laughter and Art hastily set a ~~2~~ <sup>two</sup>-liter beaker on the window counter and fled. The cauldron boiled <sup>violently</sup> and blurped bubbles and steam and I hit the floor. No explosion forthcoming, I warily approached the hellish device; an innocent bystander, patiently waiting to buy chemicals, explained it was <sup>a piece of</sup> dry ice in ~~a detergent solution.~~ <sup>soapy water.</sup>

The favorite weapon was the washbottle, a glass jar into which air is pumped by squeezing a rubber bulb <sup>and</sup> from which a stream of water <sup>then</sup> issues through a glass nozzle. Depending on how lovingly the nozzle is fashioned by stretching out glass tubing half-melted in a gas flame <sup>and</sup> ~~then~~ cutting the cooled constriction with a steel file, the range is anywhere up to 15 feet or so. Typically a stealthy marauder would make a surprise attack and thoroughly wet my face and I'd leap through the window for <sup>a</sup> shootout. But once as I chased Art, his washbottle empty, the soaking of the back of my head revealed he'd lured me into an ambush; I turned to confront three enemies and another three burst from a lab behind <sup>me</sup> and I was so drenched by the pitiless crossfire I had to go home and change clothes.

I gained revenge by scaling the outside wall of Bagley to the window ledge of Art's lab and sniping at him and his gang. Busy with individual experiments, they didn't spot me, hiding behind a column, and <sup>each,</sup> when hit, stared suspiciously at lab-mates. The overall mood <sup>of the group</sup> was rather ugly by the time my water was exhausted and I triumphantly revealed myself.

A couple days later I was a millenium away with Otto the Great when the herd came pounding down the corridor, laughing hysterically, and Crazy Art <sup>shoved</sup> ~~pushed~~ a fire hose in my face and howled to an unseen accomplice, "TURN IT ON!" ~~Coming at the back of the stockroom, I hid from~~ the face-mass crowding the window to enjoy my <sup>humiliations</sup> ~~loss~~ that the hose wasn't hooked up.

I abjectly surrendered. Art's army was too many and my window too vulnerable and <sup>I wasn't at all</sup> ~~I wasn't~~ <sup>potentially homicidal</sup> sure he wasn't truly insane, Yet second only to several genuine lab disasters I produced the biggest noise in this Bagley era. Somebody stupidly reminded me that sodium <sup>enthusiastically</sup> metal combines with water to produce hydrogen, the reaction emitting enough heat to ignite the hydrogen and ambient oxygen — explosively. It was amusing to drop a sliver of sodium in a beaker of water, see the furious bubbling, hear the ~~surprising~~ "thip!"

If a "thip!" was good a "bang!" would be better and at 5 o'clock one winter evening, as the day's last classes were emptying from Bagley, I lugged a large glass jar full of finely-diced sodium around to the front of the building and flung it in Frosh Pond. No "bang!" nor even a "boom!" but an instantaneous "KA-POW!" Chemists and engineers ran in panic

I fell off my stool and scuttled on hands and knees to the back of the stockroom and covered, awaiting the bruising blow of high-velocity water. Only then did I realize, examining

as the yellow flame leapt a hundred feet into the night sky and molten sodium rained down all around. Resident mallards flew off quacking, not to return for a week. The blinding flare illuminated an unsuspected police car parked across the pond and as red lights flashed and siren wailed I plunged through shrubbery to escape years in prison and abandoned forever my career as a mad bomber.

Interludes of war gave respite from wranglings of Popes and Holy Roman Emperors. Weekends, though, were what I lived for. Spring-time Mondays I generally came to work with puffy red face — an endemic disease hereabouts, I noted. A suffering customer would ask where I got my awful sunburn and I'd ask where he got his and we'd talk by the hour about places in the hills we'd been, places we wanted to go. Bagley, I found, was infested with climbers.

For a number of reasons, including an ~~indecapacity~~ <sup>incapacity</sup> to converse except in a semi-shout and such gymnastic skills as being able to tie his shoelaces standing up without bending his knees, Kermit was the most conspicuous.

He loved yodeling, an art he never could master; as compensation ~~incessantly and loudly~~ <sup>incessantly and loudly</sup> he played Swiss records in his lab ~~loudly and incessantly~~, giving an Alpine air to the entire Bagley basement, whether it wanted it or not. He also had been frustrated in attempts to learn enough German to justify his Prussian haircut. The dozen words and phrases he knew formed half his ordinary vocabulary: "bergshteiger" and "gletscher" and "gipfel" and "schneefeld" and the like; any very large peak he called "der meisterberg."

Someone had chalked in giant letters on his lab wall, "KERMIT THE HERMIT — FRIEND OF THE LAND," celebrating notoriety he and his buddy Dick had gained from testifying, at a 1947 Congressional hearing, in opposition to a proposed reduction in <sup>the</sup> size of ~~8~~<sup>nine</sup>-year-old Olympic National Park. I'd never met a conservationist before.

But what mainly fascinated me was that in the single climbing season of 1947 he'd conquered all six "major" peaks of Washington — the five volcanoes plus ~~the~~ Olympus. He'd set as his grander goal for 1948 a feat never before accomplished, skiing all six majors from top to bottom. (Rock did not excite him. Hearing ironmongery exploits of the new breed of wall engineers he sneered, "Nein gletscher, nein gipfel." If it wasn't white he didn't give a damn about it.) His Faustian ambition, so vastly exceeding my humble aim to become a super-hiker, filled me with awe. He even dared talk about McKinley and boldly declared he wished he was <sup>a</sup> Englishman so he'd have a chance for a crack at Everest.

When this spectacular person invited me, in early June, to join him on an ascent of Baker, <sup>northernmost of the Cascade volcanoes,</sup> I of course declined, staggered he should think me fit to be his companion.

After the invitation, though, I began asking myself why he shouldn't see me, however mistakenly, as a potential Baker climber. At Camp Parsons, <sup>in 1940,</sup> social pressure had ~~bulldozed~~ <sup>forced</sup> me <sup>to take</sup> ~~into~~ the lifesaving class. <sup>in the waters of Hood Canal</sup> Despite being so wretched a swimmer that death was a daily risk, I bowed to the group expectation ~~to avoid humiliation,~~ somehow survived the week without drowning, and in recognition <sup>of</sup> ~~one~~ life saved — mine own <sup>1/2</sup> was

awarded the Lifesaving Merit Badge which enabled me to achieve the supreme rank of Eagle Scout.

Now, in the Climbing Course, there was a similar expectation that as an apparently eager student I was pointing toward the <sup>climactic</sup> ~~supreme~~ experience climb, Rainier. The Northwest-domineering mass absolutely and positively had been no part of my hopes since 1940, yet as long as I continued delaying my departure from The Mountaineers I must keep up the pretense. So far as any stranger, including Kermit, could tell, I was on track — graduating from the Elementary Course and attending the Intermediate, going to the Nisqually Ice Practice, and hiking to high camp on Adams; the only chance to satisfy the final Rainier requirement of first climbing some other major.

The Adams storm was a relief — being blasted from camp meant neither I nor any other beginner would be accepted for the Rainier party of 1948. I could relax. I hadn't flunked the test — it was canceled.

Honor was safe.

Honor! How long would that be my concern? A few months more, <sup>to the impossible heights of</sup> unfortunately, because ~~Huckleberry~~ <sup>to horizons unconceivable</sup> enlarged my dreams. Not ~~to the impossible~~ Rainier, but ~~tremendously beyond what I conceived possible~~ in February. Next year, super-hiker according to plan. This one summer ~~modestly~~ <sup>of my life,</sup>

Betty and I signed up for the <sup>three</sup> ~~7~~-day Fourth of July experience climb of Eldorado. I'd never heard of <sup>the peak</sup> ~~it~~ but everybody was going — all the Course leaders, all the surviving students — and there surely would be openings

to the extent possible without getting hurt, a little bit of a hero.

in the aftermath of Huckleberry I felt myself subtly infected by the climbing disease — a mild case, it would soon pass. Meantime, however, the fever had

to brag discreetly about Huckleberry.

July 2,

However, Friday afternoon Kermit and Dick visited me in the stockroom. Something big was up — they didn't come to the window, they entered my sanctum through the door, an unprecedented invasion. It was particularly odd for Dick to be there. As Kermit's friend he was welcome, but our sole previous encounter had been when he tried to return borrowed equipment in such poor condition I insisted he had to buy it and he got red in the face and stomped off in a huff. Otherwise I only knew of him that as an undergraduate he'd been the center on the University basketball team — no crime in itself, but my policy was to distrust persons a foot taller than me.

he was a notoriously irascible bastard, always feuding with the Powers of Bagley and Earth, and

~~the~~ proposition ~~was~~ <sup>Kermit put the</sup> ~~put~~ <sup>Last year</sup> They'd ~~been~~ <sup>scout</sup> ~~ed~~ Glacier for a ski-ascent route. Trial and error had eliminated most ways, ~~proposed~~ <sup>suggested</sup> one excellent possibility. I was invited to join the next attempt <sup>starting tomorrow</sup> on boots or skis, as I pleased. Again I felt flattered, but with Huckleberry in my bag did not consider the notion preposterous. I pondered the implications.

Unlike Eldorado, Glacier was a mountain I knew, having seen it from distant summits, most recently Huckleberry, and close up from the ridge of Sulphur in 1946 — my northernmost venture into the Cascades. The peak ~~undisputedly~~ <sup>definite</sup> was a major, almost precisely <sup>two</sup> miles high, surpassed in Washington only by Rainier, Adams, and Baker.

There was no guarantee we'd make the top — the route might not go. Yet in that case I'd lose nothing but a ~~chance~~ <sup>dubious</sup> chance at obscure Eldorado.

the summit was a half-mile farther from sea level than I'd ever climbed.  
Perhaps the route would go but not me. Well, I'd thereby ~~climbed~~ climbed.



~~my limitations~~ never in future be nagged by the thought I'd failed to push myself to full potential.

Suppose the route and I both went. Wouldn't it be wonderful to treasure a volcano through all my super-hiker ~~to~~ <sup>years</sup> to come?

However, winning or losing Glacier was not the ~~heart~~ <sup>core</sup> of the matter. <sup>Fundamentally it</sup> ~~It is~~ reduced to a test of nerve. I was being offered a bonus opportunity to qualify for Rainier. Actually attempting Der Meisterberg was unthinkable, but to maintain respectability in the climbing community — at Bagley where I had to live, if not in the club I could leave any time — I was <sup>compelled</sup> ~~forced~~ to play out the game.

~~Success on Glacier~~ <sup>irrevocably</sup> wouldn't ~~necessarily~~ commit me to Rainier — I could come down with a bad cold, sprain an ankle, <sup>eat some bad oysters,</sup> ~~murder a superfluous relative to compel my attendance at a funeral and a~~ ~~gambler.~~

Examined from every standpoint, Glacier ~~couldn't be~~ ~~much~~ ~~was~~ the only honorable path. So Betty went with the mob to Eldorado and I went with the Bagley bunch.

<sup>morning</sup> Saturday brought <sup>immediate</sup> ~~quick~~ regrets. When Kermit picked me up I <sup>1939 Buick</sup> was one of six people, plus packs, stuffed in his ~~sedan~~ sedan. We couldn't move, could hardly breathe. Why hadn't he accepted my offer of the V-8 as supplementary transportation? Grumbings among fellow sardines who knew him of old gave the answer — he was thrifty. The Mountaineer rule was for each passenger to pay the car-owner a penny a mile. Was it the penny rather than my personality that led Kermit to invite me?

I learned we were not headed directly to Glacier. Kermit was applying for a professorship at the college in Bellingham and instead of making an appointment for Wednesday or Friday had thriftily arranged one for Saturday; Dick, whose mouth was as big as Kermit's, loudly wondered if he was charging us a penny a mile for the side-trip.

Our long wait in Bellingham, while Kermit ducked into a gas-station restroom to put on suit and tie, then met with the college president, made us ravenous for overdue lunch. But <sup>afterward</sup> he stonily refused to stop at a restaurant and we had to stave off pangs with ryetack and cheese, miserable fare when whizzing by hamburger stands. Dick explained his pal Kermie hadn't seen the inside of a restaurant since the price of a hamburger skyrocketed to 15¢.

Appropriately for the Fourth of July, the overloaded car popped thin-treaded tires like a string of firecrackers; after both spares blew we spent hours beside the road while Kermit fiddled with tire irons and cold patches and pump. Dick asked when he was going to stop buying tires at a wrecking yard for two bits apiece.

At 4 o'clock we reached the end of the Whitechuck River road. <sup>By then</sup> Dick had <sup>diverted</sup> ~~switched anger~~ <sup>bile</sup> from Kermit to the U. S. Forest Service. On his first hike up the Whitechuck, with the Scouts in 1940, he'd hoisted pack right by the junction with the Sauk River. In 8 years the loggers had devastated 9 miles of the valley and were continuing inexorably upstream; we parked <sup>(and thus all of us)</sup> in a raw clearcut. Already Dick had lost a whole <sup>day's worth</sup> ~~lot~~ <sup>trail.</sup> of wildland. If we

returned next year the ~~time~~<sup>hike</sup> to our planned camp wouldn't be 9 1/2 miles but 8 or 7, and in a few years more, 0. This afternoon we would walk a doomed forest. Sick with the helpless fury I'd felt staring <sup>down</sup> into the ruins of Silver Creek, I asked Dick what ~~people~~<sup>be done</sup> could ~~do~~<sup>^</sup> to stop the obscenity. "Outside of making Glacier Peak a national park," he said bitterly, "Not a goddamn thing."

At 8 o'clock, <sup>Saturday night,</sup> having rushed <sup>through the forest</sup> ~~along the trail~~ with too little leisure <sup>and huge</sup> to say proper farewells to ancient <sup>^</sup> Douglas firs and hemlocks and cedars, <sup>3300-foot</sup> we arrived at Kennedy Hot Springs. Dick's brother and three friends had been there for hours; the group was shaping up as practically a Mountaineer mob and the invitation no longer seemed much of a compliment.

At 5 <sup>o'clock Sunday morning,</sup> ~~when we should~~<sup>we</sup> ~~have~~ been arising to climb, no sign of life came from sackbound Bagleyites, not even Everest-worthy Kermit. Why not? Because a light rain had begun; one thing you could say for The Mountaineers, it took more than a drizzle to discourage them.

Gray <sup>day</sup> ~~morning~~ drearily half-lit forest. Sky dripped, trees dripped, and the bunch settled down to cook breakfast — and cook, and cook, and cook. I walked the footlog over the river to the hot springs and watched ~~and~~ several dozen mountain goats slopping up steaming iron-red ooze — my best view ever of goats and doubtless the weekend's climax because I'd never in hell get out of the woods (with these sluggards). And it would be my luck for The Mountaineers, including Betty, to make Eldorado.

When breakfast was finished the Bagleyites commenced an elaborate lunch that obviously would continue to supertime. I <sup>sullenly</sup> packed rucksack and headed toward the trail to 5700-foot Lake Byrne, which would be snowed in and fogged in but at least would work off frustration. Kermit asked if I wouldn't rather go up the mountain ~~with him~~. What for? To see if there was a route out of the trees onto the ice. Why? So we could climb tomorrow if the weather was better. Well, now!

pulled a handful of sandwich from his mouth and

At 2 o'clock, rain having ceased, five of us climbed ~~the~~ steep trail to about 4200 feet, then struck off into untracked forest; a scattering of very old blazes showed Kermit wasn't the first to have this idea. <sup>One by one the</sup> others dropped out ~~and he~~ and I continued, at 6000 feet breaking from alpine scrub onto open snowfields. Clouds were thinning below, allowing glimpses of gloomy-dark valley. Above was whiteness-grayness, no hint of a mountain. We plugged steps in snow along a series of shelf-basins, then the ridge crest, and crevasses dimly appeared ahead. At 7000 feet the ridge ran into the still-invisible mountain and doubt was resolved. In ~~excited~~ German gibberish Kermit <sup>excitedly</sup> explained that from here we easily could traverse the west side of the peak and intersect the regular south-side route, which he'd done the year before. If the weather improved, we had ourselves a major.

That evening, washing dishes in Kennedy Creek, I <sup>noted the white-rushing</sup> ~~felt a sudden~~ ~~strange radiance~~ raised eyes from pots and pans, and far above ~~white~~ ~~torrent and~~ green-black trees saw a shimmer of sunset-pink snow —  
Gletschergipfel!

water suddenly glowing strangely

Monday

Precisely at the agreed <sup>^</sup>rising hour of 2:30, not having really slept, only dozed, I made the night hideous with screams and ran about the camp harassing the four who'd decided to climb with Kermit and me. Not among them was Dick, who awoke long enough to tell me to shut up, adding that nobody but a nut would go 7000 feet up and down a mountain and hike out 9 1/2 miles and drive home all in one day. I was trembling-eager to start but Kermit <sup>^</sup>couldn't move without cooking a pot of Zoom. At 3:20 we finally set out by flashlight, stars bright in ~~the~~ treetops.

But dawn was dull and <sup>upon</sup> ~~we~~ emerged <sup>ing</sup> from forest we <sup>SAW</sup> ~~discovered~~ a thick stratum at <sup>about</sup> 12,000 feet and gray snakes coiling up every valley. In our narrow zone of clear air the wind was <sup>winter-</sup> vicious and snow hard-frozen. We paused to strap crampons to boots.

It was a race with the weather. Rarely halting, and then only to blow for a minute, we stamped steadily up the west side of the volcano. Low clouds rose, high clouds dropped. Never had I been <sup>as far above saltwater as</sup> 8000 feet and now, gasping to keep <sup>up</sup> ~~pace~~ with ~~myself~~ Kermit, I was at 9000. Northward, where Betty and the mob probably were just hitting the Eldorado down-trail, Baker alone stood clearly above and below converging darknesses.

We rounded onto southwest slopes and through shifting holes in the cloud-muddle saw Rainier and Stuart and Chimney Rock. We gazed down on nearby summits higher than any I'd climbed. Mountains so tall should be above me, to look down upon them was disrespectful, perhaps dangerously blasphemous. One might accidentally step off the top of the world and be doomed to climb eternally into hostile clouds.

Wind was frightening-loud as we cramponed the final gully. The ominous ceiling nearly touched the summit and valley clouds overtopped every lower peak, coalescing in a bleak sea from which evil squalls were billowing and beginning to go prowling.

As we came onto flat summit snows <sup>an enormous</sup> black-hearted storm reared up, swallowed the entire western quadrant, and moved swiftly toward Glacier to chew us up and spit us out.

I called Kermit's attention to the menace <sup>through</sup> and he yelled ~~the~~ the gale, "DOWN! DOWN! DOWN!" One <sup>whirling</sup> ~~minute~~ minute at 10,541 feet, one <sup>frantic</sup> ~~survey~~ survey of the scene, and at 10:20 in the violent morning we plunged down.

The summit vanished as we ran — carefully, what with <sup>ten</sup> ~~the~~ iron daggers on each boot. The horrifying storm swerved, missed Glacier, and we relaxed a bit. When we reached Kermit's skis, which he'd cached at 9000 feet in recognition it was no fit day to ride boards from the summit, he gleefully announced, "Now the fun begins!" Yes, it did. We <sup>booters</sup> ~~skiers~~ enjoyed watching the skier chatter across ice until eyeballs were rattling in sockets and he quietly returned skis to back, crampons to boots. We descended into blowing fog, wandered confused and worried, then found our ridge and sheltering trees and at 2 o'clock sagged to sweet earth in the safe old home of Kennedy forest.

Everything had happened so fast — 10 1/2 hours from bottom to top to bottom again — that the day's immensity was an undigested lump,

, which had blizzard and frostbite and loss of route and murder written all over it,

and so remained as I packed gear <sup>into Trapper Nelson</sup> and with a meager half-hour rest headed out. Dick was right — 9 1/2 miles were more <sup>extra</sup> exercise than <sup>a Glacier climber</sup> needed. At 6:30 I ~~staggered to the car~~ <sup>by the car</sup> and fell to the ground. Here in the low valley, body utterly destroyed, I began to understand how high I had climbed.

At midnight, heavy pack on back, I slowly ascended the final pitch of the trip, the ~~three~~ <sup>two</sup> grueling flights of steep and narrow steps to our garret. There Betty told how the Climbing Course kept intact its miserable 1948 record. Minutes from camp the mob disintegrated <sup>under the punishment of</sup> fog and rain and freezing wind; ~~and~~ though a snail's-pace advance was continued for hours, nobody, not even the elite scouts, got anywhere near Eldorado and it was a miracle anyone survived the retreat.

And meanwhile I had won Gletschergipfel.

In following days I strode the campus <sup>two</sup> miles tall, a giant pitying sealevel dwarfs.