

5 March 1974

1948

Chapter 8

HALFWAY TO THE SKY

Master of my fate, captain of my soul — what a pile of crap! There's no such thing as free will. Granted, nobody physically forced me to pursue the logic of my doom by signing up for Rainier, but everybody conspired — Monie and The Mountaineers, Kermit and the Bagleyites, the Boy Scouts and the whole damn world.

I did what was expected of me and had a right to expect something in return — mercy. Surely the Climbing Committee would give me a reprieve if not a full pardon, taking into consideration I was a sick man and abject coward.

Admittedly I'd climbed a major, but a minor major, only 10,541 feet high, 3869 feet below Columbia Crest, and those last thousands of feet are the tough ones. Rainier rises 2 3/4 miles above the tides. Even healthy Puget Sounders ascending on a weekend from sealevel homes to thin-aired upper slopes grow listless, nauseated, dizzy, sleepy. Some have odd dreams and visions. Or even faint. And I wasn't healthy, I could die.

Monday evening, July 12, Monie called from the clubroom, where the Committee had just completed its star-chamber "ax session" to sort out certain losers from possible winners. I was among the chosen. She was

exultant — and why not, now she was to savor the final jest by killing me?

I couldn't blame Glacier; because of the Adams storm the Committee had waived the major rule and a dozen other first-year students also were accepted — probably to be obliterated in the catastrophe for which the disasters of spring had been the overture.

Friday afternoon, July 16, my 23rd birthday, I picked up my one assigned passenger, a chattering-giggling teenage idiot named Richard, and drove to 5500-foot Paradise. Past rushing before eyes, I remembered how in 1931, after Thanksgiving dinner at Longmire Inn, we hiked far up those meadows to the top of a peak. Later, in school, I bragged to the teacher that I'd climbed Rainier and she politely expressed doubts and the class laughed and I got mad. Eventually I realized my folks were kidding me.

I'd tried for the mountain once and failed. Seventeen years later, here I was again. *Déjà vu, déjà vu.*

I completed the summit-climber form at the ranger station, listing my alpine exploits and next of kin. Next of kin! The landlady would yell "Phone!" up the stairwell and Betty would run down from the garret and hear some total stranger say . . .

The ranger inspected my gear, spread out in the parking lot. I winced as he pounded the pavement with my \$12 ax, chuckling, "Last week I broke three axes in one party. Better here than on the mountain! They should have thanked me, but they didn't."

The Idiot and I loafed around the porch of Paradise Inn licking ice cream cones, watching tourists click Brownies and stuff nickels in pay

telescopes for close looks at glaciers; back in Iowa they'd spend the winter boring friends. We drove down to Longmire Campground to join the assembling party, cook supper, try to sleep.

In a bright Saturday morning I left Paradise at 7:15 with the crowd of 45, about a quarter survivors of February's beginner mob, the others veterans. Leader Ed was a former Rainier guide and Mountain Trooper; his second-in-command was Chairman Cam, whom I'd not seen since Adams.

The day's destination was 11,500-foot Camp Hazard, 6000 feet above Paradise and higher than all but two peaks in the state, Adams and Rainier itself. A dip along the route brought the total elevation gain to 6500 feet. With heavy packs. Into the zone of queer air. Monie had told me the traditional rule: if you make Hazard the summit is a cinch. By no means everybody makes Hazard.

Babbling bunches of comrades, silent loners (me), climbed snowcovered meadows past the wooded knoll of Alta Vista (was that my 1931 conquest?) to the base of Panorama Point (or that?) and glissaded to the Nisqually Glacier, the group loosening from a tight pack to a half-mile string. I didn't try to keep up with the frontrunners. This was not a day for competing but for surviving. To finish last would be satisfactory — the important thing was to finish. I maintained a steady, conservative rest step, nibbling by inches at the thousands upon thousands of feet.

From the far side of the glacier the way ascended the Nisqually Snowfinger through cliffs of volcanic rock and morainal till, then proceeded to the ridge crest and across upper slopes of the Wilson Glacier.

As early as Alta Vista I wanted to halt but denied myself, and kept denying myself, and grew constantly stronger, impelled by a building elation. Four hours I rest-stepped without pause and at 11:15 reached crumbling towers of The Castle, 9500 feet. In a single haul I'd gained 4500 feet and only 2000 remained — and the whole afternoon to grind them out. By God! I felt purely fine and tremendously confident and sat superbly content in sun-warmed rocks to eat lunch. Breezes were mild, the sky decorated by pretty fluffs of amiable cumulus and here and there a majestic cumulonimbus. I'd have enjoyed a nap but decided to wait, camp was so close.

A bit after noon I shouldered pack and happily started up the wide ridge-straddling whiteness of The Turtle. But something had gone terribly wrong. Cooled muscles wouldn't loosen. Walking didn't wake me, only deepened drowsiness. Lunch was a lump in my gut. Pack had doubled in weight. Lungs couldn't get enough air.

A few steps and I rested, resuming at a slower pace to let legs and lungs settle into easy rhythm. They refused. The 2000 feet would require maybe 5000 steps and I could scarcely take 10 without stopping to gasp.

No need to despair, not yet. An advance group had left Paradise at dawn and was far above, but many who set out with me were far below, just emerging from the Snowfinger. I passed others who had raced ahead earlier and now were humped over, sadly studying boots. As I paused to wipe sweat from goggles I saw companions collapsing face down in the snow.

. . . An attractive idea, stuffing face in snow. Sun is blistering.  
The Turtle is an oven. Strength oozes from pores.

A hurricane from the poles sweeps the oven. While broiling on a spit I drip icicles of quick-frozen sweat.

Wind drops and sun sizzles away ice and thawed meat spoils.

Now sweating, now shivering, I rest-step by pitiable wrecks sitting in the snow mourning the loss of dear friends — themselves. I cannot help. Each must make his own solitary way.

At 11,000 feet I topple into a rockpile, aware the esophagus is a two-way street and keeping mouth pointed away from body to avoid a mess.

Was that a flapping of giant wings? Or was I dreaming? Neither deep asleep nor fully awake, I am drifting through a misty mid-region where nightmares dare to prowl in daylight.

If I die nobody will notice. The survivors will come off the mountain and Betty will ask and they will say they never heard of me. I don't blame them, that's the way it is up here. Only by achieving Hazard can I be saved, can I return to sealevel and Betty.

This morning I was in the low valley breathing rich air and this afternoon I am higher than Glacier and there's not enough oxygen to clear fuzz from brain and a vertical half-mile of mountain remains above with less sustenance at each step.

The rest stabilizes lunch if not head and I again creep up, and up, and up into a realm more of sky than Earth. At 3 o'clock the ridge of

rubble and snow ends in the Kautz Ice Cliff. Camp cannot be above the cliff, must be here. But where are the people? Bodies are scattered amid the disorder of frost-wedged rocks, cold and silent bodies lying where the plague felled them. Some have not yet succumbed to contagion, are tottering about in the gale, parka hoods hiding faces. Who are they? Maybe not dying companions at all, maybe hooded Killers that lurk in crevasses and when we mortals invade their domain come out to eat our souls.

I must fall down forever at high camp, 11,500 feet, farthest I ever have climbed from the salt sea that gave birth to life, to me, closest I ever have approached the sterile sky that is the enemy of mankind, of me. Let them eat my soul . . .

Long, long I lay inert — breathing, breathing, breathing — while whine of wind gradually shivered away visions.

I found a low rock wall built by some previous sky-pioneer, protecting a soft bed of pebbles and sand, and snuggled in. I looked down the ridge to sullen cloud wisps, and down, down ice and snow to green meadows and forests, and out, out to the Goat Rocks, roots of an ancient volcano, and tall Adams and St. Helens, and cloud masses covering Oregon and the Pacific Ocean, where the sun was sliding.

In a nearby nook Chairman Cam stared over thousands of square miles of Earth, philosophizing profoundly, I supposed, until he dolefully spoke (to me, to himself, to whatever gods may be?): "Why do I keep coming up here? Why can't I learn? I'm always sick at high camp, sick all the way to the top, sick all the way down."

Leader Ed came to sit by Cam and they began planning rope teams. Some names on the roster were motionless specks far below. And the violent retching around us cut through loud wind. Anywhere else in our civilized nation such agony would bring the Red Cross rushing, ~~to render~~ ~~service~~. At Hazard, though, everybody was sick, nobody was rushing anywhere for any reason. When climbers stirred at all they moved deliberately, like aged folk with brittle bones, or corpses arisen from the grave after putrefying a month.

How could this suffering band climb 3869 more feet? The summit was a fantasy. Ed and Cam nevertheless drew up a list of three-man teams, agreeing to let ropeleaders worry in the morning, if morning ever came, about who made camp and who expired in the night.

Fourteen ropeleaders were selected but one more was needed. The effort of thinking was making Cam sicker, he obviously wanted Ed to go away and leave him alone. He glanced despairingly over the rockpile, saw me near, and said, "Oh hell, give Manning a team."

Living one breath at a time, suddenly I was promoted from the ranks! Of the hundreds who started the Course in February only a dozen were at Hazard, or struggling toward it, and only one had been chosen to lead a rope. I couldn't die now. I had responsibilities.

I tried to cram a tomorrow-sustaining supper down my throat — but what malignant deceiver seduced me into believing baby food pampers a delicate appetite? The stench of chopped beef flipped my stomach, the look of strained peas made me think I'd already thrown up. Aided by

pineapple juice I managed to swallow the chocolate custard.

I gazed out to the everywhere sky — who would have thought the old world had so much air in it? Seen from 11,500 feet the forests and rivers were disconnected absolutely from my bed on the shore of outer space.

I crawled into my bag and wrapped up in liferaft sail. And then morbidly watched neighbor Cam stuff as much super-long body in bag as would fit and cover leftover shoulders and head with sweater and parka and tarp. I forgave him for <sup>Lundin</sup> ~~Commonwealth Basin~~ sadism.

Tiny orange ball fell into ocean. Summit flame of Adams snuffed out. Sky glow lingered above, reflecting <sup>brightness of</sup> high snows — Rainier always is the last of the Northwest to go dark. The close-looming, skull-white ice cliff leaned over camp. Faint lights of cheerful Paradise sparkled in meadowland night.

. . . Paradise is not for the likes of us. Our fate lies elsewhere. Sky glow fades. Stars race through ominous swift mists. Wind assaults foundations of the mountain. Camp Hazard has neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.

A brilliance! A boom! I snap awake. Oh dear God, the Russians have pounced on Seattle and the garret is gone forever and the last war has begun. Another brilliance-boom, and another. Not The Bomb — worse. Creep deeper in bag. Hailstones batter liferaft sail. Roaring wind soon will rip stones from cliffs and roll them around the sky like billiard balls, snatch dreamers off Earth to fly through lightning and thunder. I press cells of flesh into minerals of rock.

I doze — and again awake in terror. What horrid noise is that? The shriek of a lost soul staring into the pit of Hell. By flashlight I consult watch — 3:30. It's the rising call.

Someone has blundered but not mine to reason why, not mine to make reply. Storm is the normal condition of the sky and a man who loves peace should not venture above the flowers.

Still deep in bag I open a can of fruit cocktail and shudder as a cold grape slithers down throat, sticks halfway. I gulp. Will it stay? I study a peach slice but with such reinforcement the grape surely would rise in rebellion. I stretch stocking cap farther down over ears, crawl from bag and tarp, teeth chattering, and pull on war-surplus Navy parka and frozen boots. I lash crampons and don mittens and brace against brutal wind. Lightning flashes amid rolling thunderheads, revealing doom-wild clouds swirling over ice cliff above.

I bully ropemates from sacks and we tie up and report to Leader Ed. Other teams are still partly or entirely moribund and we stand shivering while Ed and Cam perform the miracle of shouting life into climbers who seem fit only for burial. Incredibly, all 45 are on their feet.

Mingling in the wail of gale are howls and curses and whines and moans and whimpers. Ropes tangle, rocks rattle, flashlight beams aimlessly probe blackness. . .

At 4:30, as night was thinning, Ed descended rubble to the snow gully under the Kautz Ice Cliff. Cam followed with his team and I with mine. I waited on the near side of the gully as the others crossed, clearing

the way for a quick dash — <sup>two</sup>2 years before, a Mountaineer party missed by minutes being wiped out here by an avalanche of ice blocks as big as box cars.

Once over the gully we dropped around the base of a lava cliff and entered the Kautz Chute, a narrow channel of the Kautz Glacier plunging between enclosing walls. The rising sun warmed white crests of Adams and St. Helens and Hood, tamed the gale, dispelled night fears. We were two score sturdy heroes rhythmically crunching crampons into crisp snow and our leaders were wise and brave. And I was a ropeleader!

Lowlands lay hidden beneath a sun-gleaming sea of cloud, only volcanoes and the nearby Tatoosh Range riding above the swells. But the dreaded cloud cap of Rainier, which throughout the night had swept the summit with violent storm, melted as we approached, the last rainbow-rich mists ~~rolling~~ <sup>sweeping</sup> over Wapowety Cleaver.

The head of the Chute tilted too steeply for cramponing, required stepcutting. Ed struck up the right side into a jungle of ice towers, swinging ax with the easy skill of an old guide. To avoid a bottleneck, Cam cut a second line of steps in the center, where a closed crevasse provided an upward angling ramp that needed only minor improvements. He told me to cut a third route between Ed's and his.

Again a field promotion, from ropeleader to routemaker! I chopped a ladderway up a gully until it pinched out, traversed a serac ~~to~~ to another gully. But as I entered, ice rubble battered my head. Cam was crossing above me and every stroke of his ax loosed a volley. When the

gully was quiet I cut to its top, traversed a serac to another gully — and another assault by Cam's garbage.

Cam's path was the fastest and his team, followed by most of the party, emerged atop the Chute while I was still chopping. From third rope, a position earned by loyal eagerness at Hazard, I'd fallen near the rear. And not a single other team used my beautifully-crafted staircase. It wasn't fair, it made me sick.

We were above the Chute on smooth slopes of the upper Kautz, 12,500 feet high, and with the stimulation of routemaking replaced by bitterness, I was sick. Slack accumulated in the rope behind me as disrespectful Number Two walked faster than his leader. I had to yell at him to keep the rope stretched out and I'd no breath to spare for yelling. I hated Number Two but despised Number Three, Idiot Richard, for his running exchange of adolescent inanities with fellow teenagers; every giggling shout made me sicker. I called a halt.

I breathed, and breathed, and tentatively sipped grape juice. Stomach did not erupt, rather seemed grateful for the thought. Spots cleared from eyes. Grape juice raced through arteries, feeding sugar and oxygen to muscles. Onward and upward, and now I found the proper rhythm, one deep breath for each deliberate step. Though we barely moved, no teams were passing us and we were passing some.

Wind was cool-delicious, sun was life and hope and glory. The cloud-sea was rising, submerging all but the highest Tatoosh peaks, islets poking through cloud-waves. The Goat Rocks stood higher, and

Adams and St. Helens higher still; beyond the Columbia River in Oregon boldly rose Hood and Jefferson and dimly, 175 miles away, the Three Sisters.

At 13,000 feet the route left the Kautz Glacier, crossing the uppermost rocks of Wapowety Cleaver. We rested in boulders feathered with hoarfrost, fragile faery sculptures. The Tatoosh and Goat Rocks had been finally drowned and St. Helens was engulfed as we watched. Only Adams and Hood were left, and one more: now at last we saw Columbia Crest, a sharp edge dividing brightest of whites from truest of blues.

We traversed the top of the Nisqually Glacier, detouring around a frightening-huge bergschrund whose interior blue twilight deepened toward full black night of the unguessable bottom. Slowly, slowly we plodded to the 14,000-foot saddle between Point Success and Columbia Crest. One final white rise.

I was breathing not once for each step but three times and lungs were weary of pumping worthless air in and out, in and out, and at this standing-still pace the crest was forever unattainable.

Yet the sky grew. Once above, then below, now it was all around. And now no white remained, only an infinity of blue denser and cleaner than Plato dreamt of in his philosophy.

. . . And if I die this moment in the middle of the sky, leaning against the purifying gale, here in space where centrifugal force of Earth's rotation easily can fling a mote of humanity over the continents, what cause would I have for complaint?

It is 10 o'clock in the grandest morning of the world and legs are solid, heart steady, mind whirling not in fear but from the joy of belonging to the wild sky.

I am 14,410 feet, plus 5 feet 11 1/2 inches, above Puget Sound where I was born, taller than all but a handful of the millions of North Americans. My life plans once were based on the assumption I'd never make 25 but I am 23 years and 2 days old and the way things are going maybe I'll never die . . .

We signed the register book and sat on warm rocks of the crater rim, partly sheltered from the wind. The cloud-sea reached out to every horizon. The colors of reality were white snow and cloud and blue sky and brown volcanic rock, green utterly drowned. All Earth, all humankind, were gone. Rainier remained. And us.

Steam leaked from rocks — the volcano lived. And so did I.

I was alive, enormously tall, and remembering dreams abandoned for years.

As I drank grape juice, Idiot Richard opened a can of dead fish and began gobbling ~~chamomile~~.

I might be immortal but only if the stinking sardines didn't kill me on the spot. Exercising rights of ropeleadership, I called for the descent to begin.

25 March 1974

1948

Chapter <sup>9</sup>~~8~~

BUDDY, BUDDY, WHO'S GOT A BUDDY?

Shortly after noon, joyfully breathing Hazard's rich air, I gladly said farewell forever to Number Two and goodbye for a while to Number Three, the Idiot, whom I'd later have to endure several hours in the V-8. Hard labor was over, there only remained a relaxed saunter. The last laggards reached camp and the yell went out we were free to go home. At 1 o'clock, having finished off my grape juice and even nibbled a candy bar, I began.

The rules of descent were traditional, simple. As on the ascent we'd be unroped, crevasses never having been observed in the sections of the Wilson and Nisqually Glaciers on our route. We could leave Hazard whenever we liked and set any pace we pleased, the sole restrictions being we must stick to the established track and travel in "buddy" teams of two or more. Leader Ed and Chairman Cam would rearguard, sweeping the mountain.

I didn't know or like anyone well enough to want him for a buddy; anyway, people were leaving constantly and a crowd surely was an acceptable substitute. In a single sitting glissade I swooped 2000 vertical feet, a third of the distance to Paradise, diving from bright sunshine into the cloud-sea and deepening darkness, dimness. I shot past several halted, confused-looking buddies.

Then I, too, stopped. Glissade grooves continued into fog, leading to what obviously, from the shouts and laughter, was a large group. However, my inner eye seemed to recognize the surroundings as those of The Castle. If so, the correct route didn't drop steeply right toward the (unseen) gang but veered left past (invisible) towers and sidehilled the ridge slopes.

As a first-year climber I was impressed by so many wise and happy heroes being where they were, yet as a 10-year hiker I'd learned to heed my inner eye. I tried to discuss the situation with potential buddies but the laughter was irresistible and one by one they slid down to join what hereinafter will be referred to as Splinter Group #1.

Veering left, alone, I found, or thought I did, our ascent track and was delighted to see my opinion shared when I caught up with five buddies led by a veteran named Rudy. We sidehilled together in thickening fog, then glissaded a long, fast slope. At the bottom Rudy commenced sidehilling again but after a short way my inner eye said we probably were at or near a key turn in the route, left and down into the Nisqually Snowfinger. I called a question forward. The buddies proceeded straight ahead at high speed and the girl immediately in front of me, another veteran, disdainfully answered over her shoulder, "Rudy knows where he's going." I stopped and the climbers hereinafter referred to as Splinter Group #2 instantly vanished.

Now I was alone for real in darkening gloom. And now I dared not move because if I missed the Snowfinger entrance to the left I'd stumble into the dangerously-crevassed Wilson Icefall and if I missed to the right

I'd teeter atop moraine cliffs falling precipitously to the Nisqually. Also, it was possible Rudy did know where he was going. It was even possible Splinter Group #1 knew where it was going.

Much time passed — three cigarettes worth. I explored short distances this way and that and found old bootprints — but whose boots? Obviously somebody was lost; Splinter Groups #1 and #2 couldn't both be on course. On a day when some were lost, all might be lost, no tracks could be trusted.

What mainly worried me was lack of a buddy; I was carrying a rope and two of us could tie in and get to Paradise somehow but alone I was helpless. Then, peering upward, I dimly made out a pair of climbers. I yelled and they answered.

They were awfully slow, apparently heeling down instead of glissading — why on earth would they throw away so fine a slide? Then they paused for an interminable rest and that was annoying — why didn't they join me for sociability? They sounded so friendly, too, answering my every shout.

I was disillusioned with my two buddies even before I recognized them from the ascent and realized why they were so slow. Two rocks. Two rocks and an echo.

By now I'd been a half-hour or more alone <sup>in world-consuming, bone-chilling fog.</sup> and did the only logical thing — I panicked. But as cold sweat was starting to flow, genuine voices <sup>materialized from grey nothingness and</sup> came from above and a gang of 10 solid people <sup>ripped</sup> and roared past me into the Snowfinger, which was exactly below, precisely where my inner

eye suspected.

My troubles were over with so many buddies, including Leader Ed and Chairman Cam. Not until later did I wonder about the discrepancy in numbers between the 10 "mountain-sweepers" plus Rudy's 5 and the full 45-member strength of our party.

Visibility was less than 50 feet as we galloped <sup>through premature twilight</sup> across the Nisqually Glacier and scrambled up the far moraine into snowfields a simple skate and hop from the parking lot. Ed and Cam dissolved but plenty of buddies remained. Most turned sharply right, into the valley of a little creek leading in the presumed direction of Paradise.

Once more I stopped. A month earlier, returning from the Nisqually practice, I'd learned something about this little valley that was not known, or not remembered, by Splinter Group #3, which melted into fog down the creek.

Again I was buddyless, close to (unseen) Alta Vista and only minutes from Paradise — if I could figure where Paradise was. Avoiding the tricky creek I traversed some, descended some, staring into dense grayness trying to spot the Inn, listening for sounds of automobiles.

A buddy <sup>suddenly took shape</sup> ~~materialized~~ in the mist and we discussed the options but couldn't agree. He, hereinafter referred to as Splinter Group #4, chose to traverse a bit before descending; I decided to descend a little before traversing.

Immediately after our separation the Inn <sup>crystallized from the void</sup> ~~took shape~~ below and at

6:30, 5 1/2 hours from Hazard, I conquered Paradise. Apologetically I entered the ranger station, afraid searchers might already be out looking for me.

Not at all — I was an early arrival. Mountain-sweeping rearguards Ed and Cam had checked in with two buddies but 40 of our party were still wandering somewhere in the fog — the fog and now the <sup>cold, miserable</sup> drizzle. How could this be? The expression on Cam's face reminded me of Harborview Hospital, when he'd been speculating if any bodies remained in the Lundin avalanche.

I washed up and changed clothes and had a milkshake at the Inn and settled down to wait.

Splinter Group #4 appeared, glumly trudging up the highway from Edith Creek Basin. He'd traversed too far and in descending completely missed Paradise.

Splinter Group #3 arrived by ones and twos. They had followed the little creek nearly to the Nisqually Glacier into which it drains before realizing they'd been swindled. They climbed wearily to Paradise by various routes and straggled into the parking lot from many downhill points.

Idiot Richard was among them and we piled in the V-8 and headed home. At the Nisqually River ~~Bridge~~, below the snout of the Nisqually Glacier, we saw Splinter Group #2 sitting on the railing in drenching rain, trying to hitch a ride <sup>up</sup> to Paradise. The decent thing would have been to help them but I drove on; a soaking wouldn't hurt the smart-asses.

What about Splinter Group #1, the bulk of the party and still not at Paradise when Idiot and I left? I didn't learn their fate for weeks and some questions never were answered.

It is easy to understand the side-trip glissade, a seemingly logical continuation of the 2000-foot slide. The group's being bypassed by the rearguard also is easily understood, the fog being thick and this stupid side-trip invisible and inconceivable to climbers running down the correct route.

Some members (#1-A) claimed they had so much surplus energy they took the extra glissade for fun, knowing it wasn't the right way; if so, why didn't they leave their packs at the top? (Idiot Richard was a #1-A before he became a #3 and in his case the story <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ credible. The laughter <sup>I'd heard</sup> doubtless was largely his.) Others (#1-B) admitted they were misled; at the bottom, finding the terrain unfamiliar, they climbed back up. According to unverified rumor, some (#1-C) dumbly plunged to <sup>meadows of</sup> Van Trump Park before turning around to begin a despairing 2500-foot return ascent. It was said the sharper of them (#1-D) made the best of a bad job by picking up the Van Trump trail ~~in meadows~~ and hiking it to the highway, but no one ever so confessed.

Whatever the details, at the moment I greeted Betty in our garret some of my companions hadn't yet attained Paradise.

Monie had said about the Kautz route: if you make Camp Hazard, the summit of Rainier is a cinch. Standing on Columbia Crest, I felt it must

30 March 1974

1949

Chapter 10

ONCE MORE UNTO THE PEAKS, DEAR FRIENDS, FOR ENGLAND AND ST. GEORGE!

Days and weeks at a time, summer and winter alike, Seattle sits beneath low (gray) clouds, sees neither sun nor stars nor horizons. Natives go grayly about gray business, immigrants from California despondently inspect armpits for moss, those from the Great Plains develop acute claustrophobia. Then the north wind blows the sky clean and blue and The Mountain emerges, the biggest damn thing in America.

Except for these moments, <sup>of miracle</sup> lowlanders ~~for the most part~~ <sup>generally</sup> ignore Rainier, <sup>treating it as</sup> ~~considering it~~ a banality, no more awesome than the sun. To hikers, though, who sweat <sup>and pant to a summit</sup> ~~at the top of a~~ <sup>are confronted by</sup> ~~the stupendous white heap~~ <sup>rising</sup> a mile above the sea and ~~standing~~ <sup>standing</sup> nearly two miles higher, the shining crest perfectly symbolizes the unattainable. I'd long been used to the taunting mass, had gotten over being bothered. So it was there, so what? So was the moon. If you can't hike it, screw it.

However, the death-fearing hiker who left Paradise on a Saturday descended changed from Columbia Crest on the Sunday. I returned to Seattle with the dreadful strength of Tamburlaine the Great, who, from a Scythian Shepherde, by his rare and woonderfull Conquefts, became a moft puiffant and mightye Monarque, And (for his tyranny, and terrour in Warre) was tearmed, The Scourge

of God. Within me was the power of the volcano whose hot guts might burst forth any moment in a catastrophic eruption, and the power of the largest glacier system in the 48 states, and the power of the most enormous sky any groundling ever will know. In ~~the~~ Bagley Hall ~~struckdown~~, whenever I felt merely mortal, I'd only to step out the door and look south and see how high I'd climbed and (the) strength was renewed.

Rainier made me a one-man barbarian horde. Constance fell easily, as did Anderson and LaCrosse, which ~~both~~ had defeated our Parsons bunch in 1939. The Graywolf Ramble now would be a relaxed saunter -- in fact, practically all my beloved Olympics were <sup>simple</sup> apple-pie. For greater challenges I looked to the new range, the Cascades. Particularly I lusted after volcanoes and soon eased my appetite with 12,276-foot Adams and 10,778-foot Baker -- the latter twice, by two routes. Famous Shuksan, one of the nation's favorite calendar mountains, went under my boots. Filling odd weekends of rest and recuperation were Denny, Tolmie, and Granite and tours high on the Nisqually Glacier to whack lines of steps up seracs. When heavy snows of early November closed the highlands I had 20 summits in my 1948 bag. Even Betty, frequently content with a hike to basecamp, had 5, including her first volcano, Adams.

So, why settle for super-hiker? Climbing wasn't that much different from ridge-running, was no more mysterious than clambering about in trees. As on trails and in trees, the basic tools were hands and feet. The ice ax ~~was~~ essentially was a device for turning an arm into a third leg. The rope ~~was~~ brought a number of hands and feet together for mutual support.

The critical added ingredient, of course -- and ~~what indeed~~ what separated climbing from hiking -- was exposure. But I found tolerance for air grows quickly. In fact, once hands and feet are trusted to maintain

secure attachment to Earth, exposure becomes exhilarating. The likes of Icarus, Leonardo, Wright Brothers, and Lucky Lindy might envy the birds and build noisy machines to war against gravity. Climbers don't ask for unnatural wings, they walk through the sky, and quietly.

There were other rewards. As a hiker I considered 10 hours on the hoof a strenuous day; as a climber 16 hours were routine and 20 or 24 not unusual. Having reached total exhaustion, I now plodded, stumbled, crept another 4 or 8 hours -- and with flesh punished so severely, often edged up to a genuine mystical experience. What climbers Byron and Shelley would have been! And what poets had they been climbers!

And as a hiker I'd stoically endured the ~~crummy~~ weather of my ocean-exposed home hills but frankly preferred sunshine and starlight and whenever possible avoided storms. Now I adopted the Puget Sound climbers' rule to leave town even if the world is ending, to set out from camp except during a simultaneous hurricane and earthquake, and never to retreat until the next step forward and upward can only be into the grave. <sup>crummy</sup> ~~If one truly loves the sky, one must accept~~

~~the fact that they did a good job~~

When <sup>low</sup>landers asked the old question ("Why do you climb?") I solemnly explained that for ecstasies of self-flagellation the sport surpassed anything tried by early Christian martyrs or the Marquis de Sade. They weren't surprised, had always suspected Mallory was covering up some <sup>perversion</sup> with his <sup>joke</sup> answer ("Because it is there"). The ~~point~~ <sup>I wasn't lying</sup> was ~~it was there~~ -- never had I felt so purified as at the collapsing end of a 24-hour grind. (After great pain ~~the~~ a formal feeling comes, the nerves sit ceremonious like tombs.)

As a true lover of the sky, I gloried in its "harsh passion."

evasive

Yet climbing gave still more. Atop Shuksan I gasped at the rough and icy sprawl of the North Cascades, whose existence I'd barely suspected. From Baker I was staggered by distant white giants of the British Columbia Coast Range ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> in imagination I could almost see McKinley, the summit of North America. The climber's wildland was <sup>far</sup> vaster than my hiker's dreams -- and that was damn good to know, because from Silvertip I'd looked down to ruins of Silver Creek, in Gold Creek I'd battled through bones of an ancient forest freshly vandalized, <sup>along</sup> ~~on~~ the Whitechuck River I'd <sup>witnessed</sup> ~~seen~~ Dick the doom of ~~his~~ youth and thus mine. You have to keep on the run when trees are falling all around, in loggers' country you can't go home again. It was some ~~a~~ consolation to <sup>realize</sup> ~~see~~ there was enough wilderness -- of ice and rock, if not forest -- to last my lifetime.

In 1938 the Scouts had opened the high trails. Now the Climbing Course had unlocked rocks and snows and glaciers and storms and the full potential of human flesh and spirit. One evening while browsing in The Mountaineers library I came across an <sup>idea expressed by a</sup> ~~contemporary of Mallory~~ contemporary of Mallory: ~~that~~ ~~in~~ medieval times the greatest honor that could be conferred upon an alien was the "freedom of the city," ~~and that was the way that~~ when a person became sufficiently wise in ways of the high country he <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ granted by the Powers the "freedom of the hills."

For these ~~and~~ sufficient reasons 1948 was not the end. There was another, as well. Not since Lincoln High had I belonged to a group, or wanted to. But in October Cam, who'd accepted a second year as Climbing Chairman determined to restore order to the postwar-chaotic Course, invited me to be one of the nine members of the Climbing Committee -- a premature honor, I

on Baker  
I'd seen  
bulldozers  
slashing their  
way nearly  
into the  
meadows,

while speaking little,  
listening much,

thought, but part of his strategy, he explained, to fill the war-caused leader shortage by quickly training a new crop. Every week from fall through winter I attended ~~some~~ committee meetings to plan for 1949, and ~~became~~ <sup>member</sup> firmly a/~~part~~ of a group, the group.

In February a trembling-eager multitude set forth on the rough road traveled by Betty and me the year before. No faceless mob of threatening strangers, this, but nervous novices to be offered kind encouragement, and old pals to be boisterously greeted.

From the ~~very~~ moment of reunion ~~after~~ a special camaraderie existed among those few of us from the Class of 1948 -- no more than a dozen or so -- who returned for a second go. Huckleberry was my bond with Bill, though I wasn't sure if my affection was based on pity for his school-dropout, juvenile-delinquent youth in streets of an Eastern city, <sup>on</sup> or respect for his rapid adaptation from flatlands to mountains. Red Jim, a forestry student at the University, ~~was~~ <sup>in 1948</sup> distinguished as Betty's "human toboggan" on Lundin, was, with me, a junior member of the Climbing Committee and had become a buddy over the winter. On climbs he was impossible to ~~ignore~~ ignore amid the war-surplus khaki monotony, a ~~symphony~~ symphony in green from socks to trousers to shirt to parka to cap covering red hair.

Three high-school teenagers were particularly prominent. Idiot Richard, <sup>sickened</sup> who ~~was~~ ~~me~~ in 1948, now was a ~~constant~~ constant entertainment. For major events he supplemented spontaneous clowning with planned shows, such as appearing at a trailhead wearing double-breasted suit, white shirt and tie, shined ~~oxford~~ oxfords, slicked-down hair, flower in buttonhole, and pack. Lardy Bob, frankly aiming to be the world's greatest climber, emulated the

demigods by inventing a personal "mountain yell," producing a sound he imagined <sup>was</sup> awe-inspiring, but actually remind<sup>ed</sup> ~~ed~~ of a cow with the bellyache, a poignant "MOO-OO-OO!" Spring was his purgatory: if any snowbridge over any creek was going to collapse it would be when he was crossing; in fields of rotten snow he found unsuspected holes and tottered like a dinosaur in a tar pit, <sup>whining</sup> ~~whining~~ obscenities. Tom, envying ~~the~~ artless Idiot and Lardy, often tried to put on a teenager act but convinced ~~no~~ no one, he was too mature. Once, in a bitter <sup>moment,</sup> ~~moment,~~ he complained he'd been born an old man, incapable of childhood. Maybe that was why he sometimes displayed a filthy temper.

During the spring we survivors of the Class of 1948 felt ourselves subtly accepted by the veterans -- Burge and Lloyd and Limber Jim and the others -- and also by the inbetweeners <sup>with</sup> ~~with~~ three-to-five years of <sup>hill</sup> ~~hill~~ experience, such as Vic, Wild Bull, Sherpa Doc, and Ray, the shambling beast fondly known as "the avalanche that walks like a man." For our own part, as months went by we began spotting members of the Class of 1949 who promised to survive the ordeal and become future buddies, notably <sup>quietly</sup> ~~quietly~~ witty Marsh and the teenage, hyperactive Rover Boys, Yorick and Paul.

Having so recently been a supercilious anarchist, I was amazed by my ~~bug~~ enjoyment of Mountaineer mobs. My climbing was mostly done with small parties independent of the club, yet I looked forward ~~anxiously~~ to the great ~~and~~ circus congegations, the parade of freaks: equipment nuts and food-faddists, physical-culture fanatics and sun-worshipping exhibitionists, lechers and nymphomaniacs whose tent arrangements were unailing grist for giggles,

Communists and Nazis, Christians and flying-saucer cultists, and more than one outpatient ~~XXXXXX~~ of a mental hospital.

Aside from flagrant eccentricity, the climbing community was in other ways radically dissimilar to any I'd known. For one, lowland economic-social status was irrelevant. Whatever the sociological reasons, virtually all climbers were in professions or white-collar jobs, or were students aiming at the same, yet there was no prejudice against those few of us who worked with our hands. ~~XXXXXX~~ For another, ~~XXXXXX~~ sex ceased when ~~the~~ knots were tied and a female was only a "girl" when she chose to be; to so choose too often eventually brought a kind suggestion from a senior member of the Climbing Committee that hiking, too, ~~had a reward~~ <sup>was fun.</sup> Finally, except for purposes of the mating game, incessantly played on roads, trails, and in camps by both adolescents and elders, chronological age was insignificant. What mattered was climbing age and the ~~age~~ "young," ~~whether~~ <sup>whether</sup> 15 or 65, tended to stick together, and so did the "middle-aged," ~~whether~~ <sup>whether</sup> 15 or 65. (There weren't any "old" climbers, except ex-climbers.)

I sympathized with lowlanders confronting a Mountaineer gang -- a year ago I'd shared their dismay, disgust. We'd openly mock tourists whose only crime was gazing at the majesty of Rainier. We'd barge into a ~~cafe~~ restaurant and ruin the digestion of every adult in the place. We were as rude and rowdy as precipice and glacier, avalanche and blizzard, had all the social grace of <sup>a</sup> storm troopers.

But then, with the entire active climbing citizenry of Puget Sound numbering a mere several hundred, and with fewer than one in ten surviving from the hundreds who annually sought ~~us~~ to join us, we hardly could help being elitists, fascists. It wasn't our fault we were so damn superior.

Lowlanders should feel lucky we were ~~we~~ <sup>totally</sup> absorbed in mountains, because if we ever felt it worth our time we'd conquer the whole bloody world, just like that.

# # #

# → In 1948 cold clouds had continuously dumped snow halfway through May. In 1949 the sun began to win the sky war in March -- perhaps because by then, after four solid months of white deluges, and what oldtimers said were the most destructive avalanches in memory, the winter ~~was~~ wore itself out. By the middle of May I'd not only instructed at Monitor Rock, Little Si, two snow practices, Commonwealth Basin, Duwamish Piers, and the new rock practice in Tumwater ~~at~~ Canyon (where I first pounded pitons into a cliff and snapped in carabiners and rope), but had toughened legs and guts snowplowing to summits of Red, Kaleetan, ~~and~~ Kendall, and Big Si, where I led a thrilling route on the rock face of the Haystack.

Logistically, climbing was much easier this second year. In fall Betty had received her bachelor's degree in English literature and been rewarded with a job as file clerk at the University Bookstore; two paychecks helped us keep pace with galloping postwar inflation. Then, by pure dumb luck, we stumbled onto a genuine three-room brick-building apartment near the garret and ~~equally~~ <sup>equally</sup> convenient to Avenue, campus, Rainbow, and Blue Moon. Government rent-control held the cost to ~~40~~ <sup>\$40</sup> a month -- not counting the ~~\$~~ \$100 cash bribe demanded by the <sup>overbearing</sup> landlord, a former fullback on the University ~~and~~ football team and a power in the Republican Party. ~~City Salt thought~~  
~~became apartments were depressing; we wanted no better home, especially~~  
<sup>Being a basement apartment, it was ideal for</sup>  
~~tottering~~ tottering from car to bed late on a Sunday night or early on a Monday morning.

Best of all, my folks, flush with the postwar prosperity of the timber industry, to which Dad sold mill equipment, had celebrated the end of the Depression by giving Betty and me a stunning Christmas present -- a brandnew Jeep station wagon. Just like the mourned Model A, it had four cylinders, was square-built and tough-built, and stood ~~grandly~~ <sup>grandly</sup> high, giving plenty of clearance on rough logging roads, plus lordly views down upon Detroit's ~~big~~ big-assed sex symbols. But unlike the old A, it could carry four or five climbers and packs and even so loaded ~~barreled~~ barreled along highways at 50-55, bringing mountains closer than ever.

Our first important conquest of the year was 6800-foot Whitehorse, a very tall peak for one so low, <sup>abruptly</sup> rising 6300 feet above farms beside the North Fork Stillaguamish River. The ascent had deep personal significance for me -- this was the first mountain whose name I knew, <sup>learned on</sup> ~~from~~ a misty-remembered childhood camping trip. I vividly recalled looking in vain for the white horse.

Saturday, May 21, Betty and I, her friend Marilyn, a co-worker at the University Bookstore, and Idiot Richard drove to the end of the Mine Road and camped by old tunnels and shacks. In morning we stepped directly from road onto avalanche snow and slogged to the foot of a cliff. I went ahead to find the route and churned and chinned up a thousand vertical feet of cedar trees before emerging onto open snow again. I rested, awaiting the others, assuming Idiot was convoying the girls. Two hours I rested, wondering what the hell was happening below. Suddenly Idiot <sup>materialized</sup> ~~emerged~~ from a waterfall, alone. He said he didn't like climbing trees and had taken the wet route instead. Where were the girls? He didn't know. As I was raising my ax to commit homicide, they appeared in the cedars, dissatisfied with both Idiot and me.

We rest-stepped up steep snow, then ~~ascended~~ glacier, into dense fog, to the summit. There we met ~~Whitehorse~~ a shepherd dog, panting and laughing, and ~~Whitehorse~~ a dozen Mountaineers, including Tom and Marsh. They'd climbed by another route, hiker-simple but roundabout and intricate. Tom confessed ~~that~~ they'd never have made the top except for leadership of the dog, which lived on a farm by the <sup>Whitehorse</sup> trailhead and joined every party heading for the mountain. Thus the derivation of the generic term eventually absorbed in the Mountaineer lexicon, "dog route."

Memorial Day weekend we set out for Stuart, 9415 feet, second-highest nonvolcanic peak in the state. On Friday Betty and I, Bill, and Bagleyite Loo, a young professor, drove the North Fork Teanaway River road until stopped by snow, then plugged steps up the valley to a camp at 6200-foot Long's Pass, which to our <sup>revulsion</sup> ~~dismay~~ was crowded by a regiment of Cascadians, a Yakima club, and a division of Mazamas, a Portland club. Amiable freaks they were, but not our freaks.

Saturday we dropped to Ingalls Creek at 4800 feet and ascended a treacherous gully of granite boulders and pebbles and sand; later we were told it <sup>definitely</sup> ~~by no means~~ <sup>not</sup> was the customary "dog route." Betty wanted to quit but I kept her moving with curses and threats, ax whaps on the butt, and snowballs and rocks, to the consternation of bachelors Bill and Loo. Above the gully we were caught by Bagleyites Ted and Chuck, whom we'd expected to meet at Long's Pass; they'd gotten confused and ~~instead~~ crossed Ingalls Pass, farther up the valley, to a camp at Ingalls Lake. On top we met Mazamas, Cascadians, and the Sherpa Climbing Club of Ellensburg, which had crossed to Ingalls Creek via ~~the~~ Tunnpike Pass. I made a mental note never to climb Stuart again.

I learned something new about the Cascades on this, my first east-side summit. Cascade Crest peaks to the west were buried in black muck; the few ominous clouds that formed over Stuart evaporated harmlessly. However, the rainshadow country seemed vaguely alien -- I was subtly disturbed by the unfamiliar trees and shrubs and the more open terrain. Despite the better weather, I wasn't sure I liked it.

The next week Betty and Chuck and I climbed St. Helens, 9677 feet, the baby of the five Washington volcanoes ~~no longer a complete~~  
~~and standing~~ Bored by smooth snows of the dog route up the symmetrical cone,  
~~too~~ too young to be deeply dissected, we detoured to a small icefall which  
~~provided very good sport~~ provided very good sport indeed. During a rest stop I walked a few feet from my companions to look into a crevasse -- and my boots discovered another crevasse whose existence I hadn't guessed. Betty and Chuck wept with laughter to see me up to armpits in the hole, treading air, wearing a ghastly expression. My anguish was all the more acute because, as was the accepted rule for puny little St. Helens, we weren't roped.

In mid-June the ~~moment~~ <sup>moment arrived</sup> for my first week-long ramble as a climber. The goal? No question about that. Ever since The Tooth I'd been fascinated by 7680-foot Chimney Rock, king of the Snoqualmie region. To my surprise, the summit had been reached only four or five times -- partly because of difficulty but mainly due to remoteness, the standard approach from the east side of the range requiring two rough days. Limber Jim, who'd made the second ascent, thought I probably could handle the peak, though I might want a piton or two. Well, nice as it would be to ~~attain~~ <sup>make</sup> the top, I actually was more interested

in trying an ingenious new approach, starting at Snoqualmie Pass and staying high all the way.

The problem was finding partners. I'd supposed everybody craved Chimney. Not so. At the last minute I recruited two guys of dubious credentials -- and on the very first day, endlessly sitting on my butt waiting for them to catch up, realized the expedition was doomed. After five days we were close enough to Chimney  
 ^ to see my proposed approach was feasible, but with this bunch would take another week. On the way we'd climbed Thompson, Huckleberry (a stroll this year -- how could I ever have been scared?), and Chikamin, pleasant little peaks <sup>yet</sup> ~~but~~ scarcely the sort of excitement I'd sought. When a monster storm rolled in I was glad of the excuse to cut the trip short and run down Gold Creek to the highway.

<sup>The year's</sup>  
 ^ Momentum, slowed by the Chimney fiasco, was brought to a full halt by a weekend instructing on the Nisqually practice and a snowed-out, fogged-out experience-climb attempt on Little Tahoma. ~~Not~~ Not for long. Over the Fourth of July weekend, with a jolly experience-climb party of two dozen friends and freaks, I hiked 20 miles <sup>up the Boulder River to</sup> ~~to the summit of~~ the South Peak of Three Fingers, site of an abandoned fire-lookout cabin. The Forest Service hadn't maintained the trail since before the war and wilderness had reclaimed its own -- we were two days busting through 10 miles of blowdowns and brush, then tramping 10 miles of snow. The register book on the South Peak hadn't been signed in several years; when we dropped to the glacier and climbed the 6854-foot North Peak, a lovely scramble with delightful exposure, the book there recorded only some ten previous ascents.

From the summit I gazed over my broad new domain -- far into the North Cascades, up and down the line of volcanoes -- exalted by thoughts of past and future. July had ~~just~~<sup>merely</sup> begun and already I had a dozen peaks ~~and Betty~~  
~~even~~ and months of summer and fall remained to stuff the bag full. How could I ever have considered settling for super-hiker?