

a week. Worse, the others, though properly somber for the hour and the weather, accepted the ~~idiotic~~^{lunatic} cheerfulness as a call to awake.

Vic was standing over me saying, "Everybody's ready to go. Aren't you going to get up?"

My eight comrades of the 1950 Climbers' Outing were fed, booted, packed, and hot to walk — and it wasn't yet 7 o'clock, the best sleep still ahead.

I addressed not Vic specifically but rather the entire gloomy, dripping Chilliwack valley and anyone within it who might care to hear: "Goddam^m_λit, it's too damn early to get up! We're just hiking today. On a trail. There's no damn need to get up so damn early!"

"Well, everybody's ready to go."

"Then GO goddam^m_λit! I'll be along later."

Seven left. Vic stayed.

"Go ahead!" I urged. "I'll catch up!"

"Rough country. Shouldn't hike alone. I don't mind waiting."

The trip was doomed. I'd felt it the day before, when those of us in the first car waited 3 hours at the Ruth Creek road-end for the second car, whose driver had stupidly taken a wrong turn and proceeded straight into the bloody ~~Creek~~. And when I weighed my pack and the scale registered 68 pounds. And when the second car finally arrived and we took up crushing burdens in late afternoon and climbed into dark fog blowing through 5066-foot Hannegan Pass. The sun never would shine again.

I hadn't wanted to come at all. Last winter, yes. This past week, no.

In winter, when I proposed that we schedule the Climbers' Outing for the Northern Pickets, the Climbing Committee looked blank. Some had heard of Challenger, Fury, Luna — several months earlier the American Alpine Club had published Fearless Fred's Bible and this first guidebook to the Cascades revealed secrets formerly known only to a handful of initiates. But the committee wanted a more famous area — Dutch Miller Gap, say, within ~~familiar~~ sight of Snoqualmie Pass summits. My enthusiasm derived only secondarily from the guidebook. Last summer Kermit had climbed Challenger and in raving about the glaciers ran completely out of German. His companion-leader was a new professor of geology at the University, none other than Peter Misch of the prewar Nanga Parbat Expedition, who said Luna Cirque reminded him of the Himalaya.

My eloquence won the day. But when time came for the Pickets I didn't want to go. Anywhere. I was pooped.

The week after Bonanza, over a 4-day Fourth of July holiday, I'd

I, as planner of the year's schedule,
had

gone on an experience climb ~~plucked~~ plucked directly from Fearless Fred,
~~plucked~~ Betty and I and a ~~large~~ gang of yawker-full buddies rode the Toonerville
Trolley-like train up the Skagit Gorge from Newhalem to Diablo Dam,
crashed brush from Thunder Creek to a meadow camp atop Pyramid Ridge,
and made the third ascent of 8350-foot Snowfield and perhaps the second of
7800-foot Colonial. Never had I had a better grandstand for viewing the
wild heartland of the North Cascades — north to the Pickets across the
Skagit River, partly drowned in the 1930s by Diablo Lake and more of it now
being flooded by Ross Lake; south to the array of neuntausers and
achtausenders from Eldorado to Boston to Goode.

The following weekend Tom and I were defeated in an attempt on
bad weather, a confusion of trails, and
Boston by ^A the mile-wide jackstraw dumped by the forest-ripping Forbidden
avalanche, ~~the mile-wide jackstraw dumped by the forest-ripping Forbidden~~ — actually, we didn't
even make Cascade Pass.

Rainier, on my 25th birthday, was a disaster. Familiarity with the
big heap having bred contempt, Friday night I helped the jolly boys close the
Blue Moon. Saturday, leadenly on the way to Camp Muir, I almost
disgorged the lunch unwisely eaten at Paradise Lodge: gristly roast beef
and cold and lumpy mashed potatoes and greasy gravy and soggy string beans.
At midnight, when Leader Vic gave the rising call, I plainly informed him
I wasn't going to climb. Lardy Bob, who had cavalierly arrived at 10
o'clock, boisterously eaten supper at 11, and humbly barfed ~~at~~ at 12, decided
he, too, would sack out. But in herding his 40-odd sheep onto the Cowlitz
Glacier, tricky Vic left a girl in camp, telling her Bob and I were her

ropeleaders. She shivered and whined as we lay in our bags telling her she wouldn't like Rainier. She persisted. With dire warnings we got up. The intended route was the Ingraham, which I'd described to the Climbing Committee as a cinch; this year it was the challenge I'd sought in 1949, in fact was impassable, and we had to make a long detour onto the Emmons. Our girl slowed, became disenchanted; vengeful Bob and I refused to let her quit; when she finally collapsed we yoked the rope over our shoulders and dragged her, moaning, on her belly, ~~the last few hundred yards~~. We were 12 hours from Muir to the crater rim and I ran out of sun~~burn~~ lotion; Monday my face swelled up like a balloon, nearly closing my eyes, and all week I exuded disgusting yellow liquid and shed leprous skin, layer after layer.

I stayed home the weekend after Rainier — my first weekend in town since last December. A month away was our departure for the glory of the North and I was burnt out. I didn't know if I even liked mountains anymore. I certainly hated climbing. It was a rational sport for a Ted, who by obeying Optimum Frequency kept the mania under control. But for me it was all or nothing and no real choice and by the all I was totally consumed.

What sort of life does your true-blue gung-ho climber live? He doesn't read Jane Austen and ~~Plato~~ ^{Dostoevsky} anymore, only climbing journals and maps; he doesn't go to ~~concerts~~ ^{chamber music} recitals and Shakespeare plays, only interminable slide shows. All winter ~~he's~~ ^{he's} researching peaks and organizing parties. Then he starts getting legs in shape trenching spring snow and fingers in shape on lowland rocks. Then begins a months-long succession of 18-24-hour Sundays, bending the body so badly out of shape that Monday

is walking death, Tuesday trembling resurrection — and Wednesday the start of telephoning around to get the next trip on the road Friday night or early Saturday. Every day of vacation is programed months in advance — and not an hour wasted on such frivolity as walking barefoot in sands beside ocean surf. There's no energy to waste on the work of the world, except that necessary to fake out the employer, who if smart soon cans the mountain bum off the payroll. There's hardly time for love, and never enough to drink a decent amount of beer.

The Pickets had been there a long while and could wait another year. I had to save something of what little I had left, had to try to retain the gleam for the North.

The problem was, the Picket adventure no more excited the top climbers than it had the Climbing Committee. I'd envisioned a magnificent cream-of-the-crop mob of 15 or 20; and five ^{or} ~~of~~ six ascents a day by small attack groups. A regular jamboree. Insane campfires. Yet as July 29 neared, only seven besides ^{Climbing Chairman} Vic had signed up. One was a new club member, along solely for the hike. Silent Don and Rover Bob were beginners, abilities unknown. Rovers Yorick and Paul were in their second year and very promising, but untested. Roy and Avalanche Ray were experienced ~~and steady~~, but not leaders for the pitches expected in the Pickets. At a planning meeting called by Vic I assessed the group, and that was another reason I didn't want to go.

Vic, the bastard (and he was a bastard, and up and down Rainier, whenever close enough, I told him so), appealed to my sense of responsibility. The Pickets had been my idea. And the party had only one

trustworthy leader — Vic. Surely I wouldn't send the Climbing Chairman out alone on a mission like this?

So, on this 30th day of July I was deep in the bag in the ruins of the Hannegan Pass shelter and several feet away on the trail was Vic, sitting patiently, munching a first instalment of lunch. How could a man sleep with that goddam munching? At 7:30 I was driven from the sack.

Clouds were low and thick and ~~was~~ were tall and ~~drippy~~ ^{sodden} and the Chilliwack trail fell toward nowhere. At a creek we caught the crowd, and still too early for rational hikers to be awake, stopped to rest. I slipped free from shoulder straps and the rucksack atop the Trapper Nelson slipped free from lashings and tumbled a hundred feet down a waterfall. If a Rover had so much as ^{grinned} ~~smirked~~ I'd have skulled him with my ax. Down mossy slabs and mud and thorns to the plunge basin. The jam jar had busted; crampons and pitons and carabiners and slings were strawberry-slimy. Worse, the toilet roll was water-saturated. A wet toilet roll never dries, every morning all week I'd be facing (so to speak) the soggy mess. The trip was doomed.

At the 2500-foot Chilliwack crossing, via footlog, we met a fisherman. He turned out to be camp cook for a U. S. Geological Survey party running a ground-control line for a contour map. ^{That was surprising!} Good news! The Forest Service hadn't sent a crew within miles of the Pickets since before the war and I expected a ^{crummy} ~~lousy~~ alder-busting windfall-crawling afternoon; however, the surveyors, to make way for their horses, had in crude fashion reopened the trail from the Skagit to the Chilliwack. Other ^{intriguing} ~~fascinating~~ news: while

the Douglas firs and hemlocks and western redcedars

Creek

fishing ~~the~~ Little Beaver [^] several days ago the cook saw a grizzly bear. ~~That's~~

~~what's~~ Grizzlies were supposed to be long gone from the Cascades, but who knew the secrets of the Pickets?

Because of the horses Brush Creek was much less miserable than Kermit had described and in late afternoon we reached Tapto Shelter. After 11 miles and 8 hours, to drop the 68-pound stone was to turn into a bird. In evening I flew up the trail alone, away from Rover racket, through ^{subalpine} forest [^] to a field of glacier lilies yellow-blooming by the frothing creek. Clouds were breaking into billows, then wisps. A sunset-red peak emerged, rough cliffs draped with glaciers. And this was merely 7574-foot Whatcom, humble outrider of the Pickets. Thank God Vic was a bastard.

Next dawn I routinely cursed the Rovers for hollering around the woods but at 7:15 was on the trail [^] and not glum. The shadowed valley was ^{briskly} chill, sky clear blue. In a mile,, at 5206-foot Whatcom Pass, between the avalanche-torn valleys of Brush Creek flowing to the Chilliwack and the Little Beaver flowing to the Skagit, we entered sunlight. And sensed an enormous brilliance around the corner and ran up a heather knoll — and were blinded by the white explosion of the Challenger Glacier, ^{dazzling as the sun} [^] Kermit's sputtering was understandable — not even a German would have enough German.

The traverse around the east side of Whatcom Peak reminded me of last year's arctic day [^] the Blue and Hoh and Humes ^{Glaciers.} Snow all the way, with occasional holes that meant we were on the East Whatcom Glacier and

What magic had transported to my home hills a segment of the Greenland Icecap?

traveling from Olympus to Queets Basin over

maybe ought to be roped. Periodically avalanches roared down a Challenger icefall, over a cliff. At 2 o'clock we came to perfectly-named Perfect Pass, 6300 feet. On one side a cornice overhung the Challenger Glacier. On the other, cliffs fell to a meadowy headwater of the Baker River, ^{draining west to the Skagit.} Between lay a narrow fairyland of dwarf hemlock and fir, ice-scratched buttresses and lichen-covered boulders, and heather and snowmelt pools. Southward the ~~glaciating~~ ^{gleaming} glacier rose to 8236-foot Challenger.

But northward was a closer goal and at 3 o'clock I started kicking steps up steep snow. This was what the 3 days had been for, this was what Kermit's ravings had led me to dream upon in winter. The gang followed and at 4 o'clock we were atop Whatcom.

Challenger's bulk hid all the Pickets except outrigger Luna, but we looked south to nearby Triumph, Despair, and Blum, and to Glacier Peak on the far horizon and Three Fingers and Whitehorse standing over Puget Sound lowlands. Close to the west was Shuksan, from whose summit I'd first seen the Pickets 2 years earlier, and towering behind, ^{Baker} ~~Komo Kulehon~~, whitest volcano of them all. North were massive thrusts of Bear, Redoubt, Glacier (the other Glacier), and Twin Spires. East, range on range beyond the Skagit.

That evening I became one of the party. Together we watched the only living creatures we were to see in the harsh Pickets: a mamma ptarmigan trying to decoy us out of camp, away from her solitary chick. But pinfeather-sprouting chicky was too old and bold to freeze in heather at mamma's warning cluck. Indeed, as mamma screamed, chicky dove off

a cliff, flapping spindly wings and dropping like a rock. Mamma was disconsolate (was this how she'd lost the rest of her brood?) until chicky reappeared, walking up the hill.

From a nest under a clump of tight-limbed midget firs I watched the sun dip behind Shuksan, glaciers of Baker glow pink. Now 20 walking miles and 3 days deep in wildness, mankind (except us) nowhere to be seen or heard, I slept, content.

A moment later I awoke to see Shuksan and Baker glowing again, from eastern light — in one ~~moment~~ ^{instant} of sleep the Earth had turned half around on its axis. Today nobody had to irritate me out of the bag. (Laugh, Rovers! Manning laughs with you!) At 6:30 we were crunching boots in night-frozen snow, weaving through crevasses, asea on suncup waves of the Challenger. In 2 miles we gained the glacier divide between Little Beaver and Luna Creeks and dropped loads on a rock island at 6800 feet. Stunned by first glimpses of Luna Cirque, we made a lengthy second breakfast (first lunch), then packed rucksacks and plugged up simple snow, wondering where was the challenge of Challenger.

At 7800 feet the bergschrund answered the question — the upper lip varied from 20 to 150 feet higher than the lower lip. I scouted leftward to where ice overhung a rock cliff — no flaw there. Then rightward to where the schrund pinched out — but on a super-steep snow slope whose runout was an ice cliff.

That was it. Put up or shut up. Vic and I studied the super-steep slope — and covertly, each other. Personally, I felt that with his being twice

as experienced and Climbing Chairman as well, he deserved the lead. Why the hell did he offer it to me? I was astounded, but couldn't refuse the honor.

Ropemate Roy and I were wearing Bramanis and since rubber lugs wouldn't stick to so steep a slope began strapping on irons. I wasn't happy, because within the past week a storm had covered the underlying crust with 4 inches of slop that was sure to ball up in our crampons — which were 10-pointers, lacking front-thrusting horns — and that wall was no proper place to be walking on snowballs.

Vic had been pacing up and down — impatient for me to start, I supposed. Abruptly he blurted, "Say, I'd like to lead this."

"Great!" said I, agreeing with all my heart that for the particular situation his old-fashioned tricouni nails were far superior.

Belayed by Rover Bob, he crossed the schrund on an airy bridge, chopped toeholds and fingerholds up a 10-foot face at the pinching-out point, then threw a leg over the corner and committed himself to the super-steep slope. Jamming ax shaft deep, kicking boots through slush to punch toe tricounis into the crust, standing carefully vertical, moving slowly, smoothly, he ran out the rope — and was still 30 feet from the top. Bob was forced to abandon his belay and follow. A slip by either and both were lost. A few more hard-swinging kicks and Vic was on the flat and he and Bob and the whole party were safe. Exhale.

Above a wind-scoop ^{and bowl} and a snow ridge was the foot of the summit tower, a ~~thin~~ splinter of fractured gneiss. Vic felt no qualms about

chortling
~~happily saying~~, "Your turn!"

I walked up for a preliminary look, leaving rucksack behind; the jumble was so simple a staircase I was nearly to the summit in a couple minutes. Not quite — a vertical 10 feet with small holds and a striking view straight down to a distant glacier would be more comfortable if I were connected to the mountain. My rucksack was far below so I retreated to Roy's belay, borrowed his hammer and pitons, drove a solid peg, and squirmed up and over. My 10 pounds of strawberry-sticky iron, laboriously hauled 22 miles on trail and glacier, remained virgin.

Soon all (except the hiker, waiting with the packs) were on top. The register was fascinating. In 1936 three Mountaineer heroes of Monie's epics made the first ascent. In 1940 two parties signed in — three members of the legendary, short-lived Ptarmigan Climbing Club, and Fearless Fred and his brother. In 1949, Kermit and Misch and a companion. We were fifth, our 8 preceded by just 11 other people.

The view included everything we'd seen from Whatcom plus the complete line of the Northern Pickets — Crooked Thumb and Phantom and Fury — and the entirety of Luna Cirque.

We'd have gasped at greater leisure but had to get down. A rappel made quick work of the summit tower. The schrund? Unthinkable to descend the super-steep wall. Fortunately, Vic recently had observed a demonstration of bollard-building — stamping a circle in snow and laying sling rope in the trench. Thus anchored we rappelled ~~to a~~ ^{solid} bridge.

directly off the upper
lip of the schrund

From Challenger to 8292-foot Fury
the 2-mile crest of the Northern Pickets was a continuous series
of sharp teeth.

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Though Challenger was only a two-pitch climb, four teams eat up hours moving through bottlenecks one man at a time and not until 6 o'clock, blistered and dehydrated from hours in hot sun, did we return to our packs. We'd planned to camp at Luna Lake, on the far side of Luna Cirque, but at 7, skating snow to heather benches at 5500 feet on Challenger Arm, were satisfied. Our home was in shadow, evening wind blowing cold and hard; any gear not anchored was flung off and away and down, down, down.

~~Sharp teeth and deep notches were continuous 2 miles from Challenger to 8292-foot Fury.~~
↓
plummeted
4000 feet to wasteland of the cirque floor, where a terminal moraine dammed mud-gray waters of Lousy Lake. This was the wall, the cirque, that reminded Misch of the Himalaya. Me too.

I remembered the South Pole entry in Scott's journal: "Good God, what an awful place." We were 6 miles of glacier and snow from the trail, 23 walking miles from the cars. Scott didn't make it back from his trip. In case of trouble, how long to fetch help? At least 4 days, I reckoned. We nine were on our own near the "pole of remoteness" of the Cascades.

No shrub, no flower grew on the cold wall, yet it lived.

At sound of a rumble, whirl to see the spectacle, scan plaques of fractured ice inert as death — and spot rubble fanning over an avalanche cone below. To turn your back is to miss the show. Therefore sit and stare. Now it starts! A lump breaks from an ice cliff, disintegrates in a white torrent pouring silently through air, smashing a lower glacier, spewing over another cliff, and down and down — and finally comes the roar.

Fury held western light longest. Then the whole ragged summit line was black-etched in sunset pink. Cozily wrapped in bag and liferaft sail, snuggled in heather nook, I lay eating a Mars bar and smoking a cigarette. Summits dissolved in night; the moon, red as a dying sun, sank behind the blackness; stars sparkled out one by one, cluster by cluster. Sleep. And in dreams hear the living wall.

The party voted to recuperate before trying Fury. Our rest-day objective was Luna — a walkup. Rovers slept in, their first chatterings at 7 o'clock. I was long awake by then — who could sleep with dawnlight flooding the wall, stirring it to more violent life?

Rovers and I had ~~become friends~~ ^{made peace.} I'd learned to tolerate their abnormal morning happiness and they'd learned not to come within 25 feet of me until I finished my Grape Nuts and cocoa. Much later Yorick told me he didn't fully appreciate the wall until he watched me watching it.

In warm sun, who could call this an "awful place"? The vivid wall, noiser than ever, was strength and joy. ^{enough to travel far there'd} Were I rich ~~there would~~ be places in the Himalaya I could so live, places I could so love.

At 11 o'clock in softly-cloudy morning we began the rest-day romp, traversing a mile closer to the cirque headwall over snow and scree and meadow ledges, by waterfalls splashing gneiss slabs, then skating down avalanche fans, losing 1500 feet — a poor way to start a climb.

The cirque floor quieted holiday glee. Up, down, up, down loose moraine. Summits were messy with clouds but the sun was hot for gravel-staggering. Beyond the garbage we climbed 1000 feet of honest snow to

Luna Lake, a white flat streaked with blue leads. A close view, here, of an icefall and a horrid couloir — the Fury route.

That was tomorrow's problem. Today's was 3500 more feet up snow sloppy in scorching sun, then a gneiss felsenmeer radiating heat like a stovelid. Where were clouds now we needed them? Picturesque billows towered in the west but no umbrella cooled our rest-day hell.

All was forgiven on the summit of 8285-foot Luna. There, Luna Cirque and the Northern Pickets — the Fury Group. And there, McMillan Cirque and the Southern Pickets — the Terror Group. Were we really in the Cascades? Such violence would be respectable even in the North.

Again an interesting register. A dozen years ago, in 1938, two Ptarmigans had been first, followed in 1940 by the same two parties which had done Challenger. We were fourth. Ours was the sixth party to penetrate the Northern Pickets — 12 people before us, and now our 9-man population explosion. Just 7 people had previously walked the floor of Luna Cirque, and none for 10 years.

Reflections on history failed to ameliorate the return — the endless upsy-downsy of the moraine, the grueling haul in shivering shadows to Challenger Arm. Gaining and losing 6000 feet is a routine task, but not for a "rest" day. At 8 o'clock we flopped on heather beds and I drank a gallon of Kool Aid. Ray, whose turn it was to cook, somehow got water hot enough ^{with hemlock twigs} to rehydrate a pot of sticky potatoes flavored with salami that had left the butcher shop a week ago, the sort of meal one remembers through the night.

Next morning, Fury. Only there wasn't any morning. At the hour

when Rovers should have been blaspheming dawn ~~peace~~^{the}, a low ceiling of swift clouds swept the peaks. Separate camps stirred. I drank cocoa and watched the dull, dreadful wall. No bird sang. Fury was out of the question, yet today was just Thursday and heroism demanded we tough out the storm in this awful place. 'Tis cold, 'tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart.

A sudden blizzard made cowards of us all and at 11 we were in full retreat, humbly aware how far it was, how very very far, to shelter. Stinging flurries of snow and sleet and slashing rain yielded to a general grim menace of clouds, but we plodded on. The Pickets didn't want us.

At 4:30 we walked off snow into heather and down to Whatcom Pass. Lord, what a marvel are trees! The lushness of green was a shock to eyes accustomed these 4 days to austerity of white and gray. What huge, tall vegetables! A greater mystery than glaciers.

The umbilical cord of trail led securely homeward. Deep in Chilliwack forests the exposed ledges of Awful Camp, the living wall of Luna Cirque, seemed a memory of another life in another world.

Saturday we ran loose-legged to the Ruth Creek road. On the way the hospitable USGS cook served us candy and coffee. We listened to his radio, with news of the debacle in Korea. Strange after the Pickets there could be a war in Korea. Stranger after Luna Cirque that a box could speak. Strangest of all to sit in a machine and watch trees whiz by at a dizzy 10 miles an hour.