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1952

Chapter ~~22~~ <sup>23</sup>

THE TERRIFIC PERSDEX TRAVERSE

On clear winter days I inspected my Cougar Mountain horizon with comfortable feelings of proprietorship. There was Whitehorse, the first mountain whose name I knew, and the Tolt River valley, where I first went hiking with Troop 324, and Glacier, my first volcano. Standing squarely in the center and prominently in front was the long ridge anchored at either end by Persis and Index. I smiled. I had plans for that ridge.

While still a hiker reading the shape of the land on U. S. Geological Survey maps, seeking weaknesses in mountain defenses, I made an exciting discovery. Though contour lines on north and east sides of Persis and Index merged in masses of solid brown ink, portraying the fierce cliffs seen from the Stevens Pass highway, on the west side of Persis the lines were quite wide apart; the Sultan Quadrangle, surveyed in 1919-21, actually showed a trail to the summit. Moreover, even the brute Index seemed to have a flaw — a white lane along the crest of the ridge from Persis. I might conquer brown ink by dodging it, might sneak to the top through the back door

In June 1947, alone, I <sup>sought to</sup> test the hypothesis. The Sultan Quad was far behind the times, the trail up Proctor Creek obliterated by logging roads the whole valley skinned, not a tree left. Persis forests, though, too steep

and  
Pitcheck,  
my first  
summit, and  
also with the  
troop

for heavy equipment, were unmolested. Wiping rain from glasses I gazed into black clouds a while and by early afternoon was back with my bride in the garret.

After 1948 I'd no need for easy back doors. Yet simple peaks can be interesting enough during the pre-season and in March 1950 Tom and I and friends walked the Proctor Creek logging road to the foot of the west, or trail ridge; by then we were sufficiently drenched to go honorably home.

Nordgipfel gave Persis new appeal as a close viewpoint of those wicked walls and in April 1951 Tom and I and a group set out in sunshine to relive the memories and take pictures. We foolishly tried the northwest ridge, ran into more trouble than was appropriate for a sackout day, and quit.

Three defeats made me wonder if Persis were not defended by forces more sinister than ~~mere~~ <sup>g</sup>topography. However, impelled by status as El Supremo and sex object, in May 1951 I led 25 girls (and 13 others) to the summit with not one problem. Nothing remained of the trail except scraps of fading ~~thread~~ <sup>l</sup> but the forest was virtually brushfree and the angle moderate.

The view exceeded even my high expectations. The enclosing ridge of Anderson Creek's enormous north-facing cirque was a giant horseshoe, Persis and Nordgipfel on the horns, their precipices plummeting 4000 feet. More thrilling was to see my hiker's hypothesis confirmed: the horseshoe crest was a snowy avenue, Index a 2-hour stroll away.

<sup>hearing my news,</sup>  
Tom <sup>A</sup> christened the route the Persdex Traverse and in summer and fall our plot intrigued the entire Climbing Committee and half the faculty.

Everybody wanted a part in subverting Index, though all understood we'd give the peak a sporting chance by doing the trip very early, before it was of interest purely to hikers.

Along with other yawkers and most everything else, I forgot Persdex in the dreamless, schemeless, dying months of 1951. But on Cougar Mountain the ridge stared me in the face every clear day. I could not live here without walking there.

When Tom and I <sup>set out</sup> ~~left Seattle~~ Saturday afternoon, May 3, so many friends were committed to the year's first batch of experience climbs the party was not the planned human wave. Our companions were loud-mouthed, joy-bubbling Krup, Rover Paul, and taciturn Franz, a stranger recently come from the East for graduate work in physics at the University.

We <sup>deposited</sup> ~~left~~ Paul's car at the Lake Serene trail, the traverse exit, and drove the Jeep around to the head of logging-road navigation up Proctor Creek, 1000 feet. On this fifth visit I was amazingly fond of the valley's bleakness, perhaps because here I saw how Cougar Mountain had looked 50 years ago, in the wake of the loggers. Life systems of Puget Sound lowlands are too exuberant to be crushed by man — except through covering them over with houses and highways. Of course, not for 500 years would another such forest grow in Proctor Creek as was traveled by surveyors of the Sultan Quad.

At the agreed rising hour of 4 o'clock the sky was starless, showing not a single watery flicker. Back to sleep. In dawn, heavy clouds rode low against Persis. The traverse was lost. The Nordgipfel view was lost.

But we couldn't go home so early, ~~and~~ besides, I was the only one who'd conquered Nanga Persis. At 6 o'clock we hoisted rucksacks.

We walked the logging road to the foot of the west ridge, battled slash and brush between clearcut and virgin timber, and ascended open forest, here and there taking a few steps on vanishing trail for old times' sake. At 3000 feet we entered clouds and left bare ground for snow, rain-hardened at first, then new and sticky-powdery, sloppy soft. Continuous trees gave way to scattered clumps and in fog-dimmed parkland we dipped into the tiny white basin where I'd planned to camp on my <sup>aborted</sup> solo assault of 1947. At 10:30 we were atop Persis, 5452 feet, shivering in cold-driving gray.

Suddenly wind blew open a hole and from swirling mists emerged violent Index, footed far below in spring-greening brush, plastered on high with fresh snow. There was our old antagonist, Nordgipfel, and the Middle Peak, climbed just once, by Pete and Fearless Fred in 1950, and the Main, or South Peak, 5979 feet, 2 miles distant for a crow, perhaps twice that for us.

The traverse was on!

We'd broken the back of it in gaining 4700 feet (gross, a bit more than the net) from camp, and now faced naught but fun, romping around the horseshoe. The new snow would require more time than my estimate, we might not reach the top of Index until 2 o'clock or even 3, yet that would leave 6 hours of daylight, more than plenty for the quick run down to Lake Serene and Paul's car.

At 11 o'clock, sunflashes igniting white cliffs of Index, snow

underfoot a brilliance of crystals a-flame, we began the grand tour, pausing often to click cameras at alpine trees erupting green from fields of clean white, cornices jutting over the cirque void, and ever-changing perspectives of the Index Aiguilles.

The ridge dropped gradually to a 4800-foot saddle and a particularly fine view. From there, to round a 5300-foot secondary summit, we plowed benches that would be ponds and heather meadows come summer. Progress was slow, boots sinking deep. A spur from the secondary summit blocked our way and we plugged 400 feet to the top, expecting to return to the horseshoe crest and resume ridge-walking. Wrong. The crest was serrate. No ridge-walking today.

We plunged to a cozy nook to begin sidehilling. Wrong. Beyond was a minor spur and when we climbed that, another nook, another spur. No sidehilling today.

On the ~~10000~~ flats we sank merely to the calf. On the ~~constant~~ ups and downs the stepkicker (pit-wallower) was buried to thighs, could advance only by shoving and grunting. Even descending was hard labor. We changed the lead frequently, the exhausted front man falling to the rear to follow the trench.

Hours passed. The snow seemed to be getting softer; legs and guts certainly were. No more brilliance of <sup>sun-bursting</sup> crystals, no more blueness in thickening sky.

We hadn't seen the aiguilles since the 4800-foot saddle. Our views were strictly south over headwaters of the Tolt to Phelps, whose wire-gold caves awaited, and <sup>Big</sup> ~~Si~~ Si. Out in cloudless lowlands shone Lake Washington

and Lake Sammamish; ~~and~~ above the <sup>m</sup> ~~mountain~~ <sup>stood</sup> Cougar Mountain. With a telescope I might almost have spotted the 200-meter hut. Was Betty, now, looking from the mountain toward us? How was she feeling? Had she vomited again this morn<sup>n</sup>ing? As close as I could figure, the night I brought home my first suit-and-tie paycheck she got pregnant.

I felt tenderness for the little mother of Cougar Mountain — and damn well wished I were with her. At 2 o'clock, when we should <sup>ve</sup> ~~have~~ been approaching the summit of Index, we didn't know where the hell we were and flopped in mush to eat lunch. Soaked to waists yet thirsty, here our canteens went dry, henceforth only snow to moisten mouths. And wind blew <sup>available</sup> and clouds lowered and snowflakes slapped faces. Shit! This was no fun.

The squall passed but clouds hung heavy, ready any moment to coagulate into pure concentrated meanness. Ahead rose a 5200-foot summit, too steep to go over. However, unless the planet had swung out of orbit and 1 plus 1 no longer equalled 2, once beyond it we'd surely be on Index. Powered by hope we plugged upward to a final spur and at 3 o'clock gasped onto the crest, dashed-staggered through a patch of trees, and for true, for sure, again saw Index. Dear God!

We'd been sweating and straining 4 hours from Persis, gaining a gross (not net) of perhaps 1500 feet, for a day's total of 6200 feet — not what a rational person undertakes for an early-spring conditioning walk. And where were we? At 4800 feet, lower than Persis. And still a crow-flying 3/4 mile from Index. Silent, we looked <sup>over</sup> ~~down to~~ a cold basin — doubtless a charming retreat in July, creeks babbling, flowers waving — and up up up

the 1500 steep feet of white morass between basin and summit.

It was not an hour to sit upon the ground and sing sad songs. One chorus of groans and we flung weary bodies upward. The certain knowledge the mountain had run out of evil surprises, this was positively the last hill, the end of cruel and unusual punishment, gave strength and cheer. And the merciful Lord granted time off for good behavior. Rounding onto gentle slopes of the summit ridge we walked from deep swamp into thin, light powder and naked rocks.

We walked in wonder. Scattered alpine shrubs were fretworks of hoarfrost. Giant cornices overhung fluted snow walls of the east face. Clouds had mostly melted, sky was mainly blue, low sun bright. At 5 o'clock there was no more up and we looked down to white crags of Middle Peak and Nordgipfel, and far far down to the Skykomish River.

✓ In the valley, as on Cougar Mountain, alders and maples bare-limbed a few weeks ago now were interlacing canopies of new-green leaves, dogwoods wore great white flowers, wild currants were radiant with red blossoms, and on the forest floor yellow violets and trillium were blooming, ferns uncurling fresh fronds. From hoarfrost, powder, cornices, fluted snow walls, and freezing wind we looked down to springtime.

We'd done the Terrific Persdex Traverse and deserved a celebration sackout and badly needed one after 11 hours on the hoof, gaining 7700 very gross feet. But though the way home was easy, a simple matter of following Paul down the dog route he'd climbed last summer, we were pooped to the verge of collapse and still 6000 feet high in winter with night 4 hours away. At 5:30, between-clouds horizontal shafts marking the sun's approach to the

We know  
(if only in  
imagination  
could we see)  
that

sword

^

western horizon, we backtracked the summit ridge to the head of the descent couloir. And stared.

"My gosh!" said Paul ~~saying~~. "It sure didn't look like that last summer."

A cold-shadowed, cliff-walled chute of incredibly steep snow, that was our easy way home. We'd feel a shudder underfoot, hear a groan of mountain coming apart, and be engulfed in a roar.

"There's another gully along the ridge a way," said Paul. "Shorter."

Hope!

~~Hope~~ "A lot steeper, though." No hope.

A classic trap, the more perfectly admirable because we walked into it unsuspecting. The book says an experienced climber always can sense danger in time to turn back; either the book needed revision or we did. Our choices were two. Forward into the chute — an avalanche. And retreat? Somewhere on the horseshoe we'd be caught by night. Exhausted, soaked, no chance of building a fire, we'd huddle together in the snow, praying dawn came before shivering stopped.

Without discussion I took frantic action. I tied into the rope <sup>120-foot</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>with</sup> Paul ~~and~~ Krup <sup>and they</sup> jammed axes deep for a stout double belay and I stepped downward onto the precipice, kicking and wallowing, daring the slope to avalanche. One ropelength was enough — the new snow was inert muck solidly glued to a raincrust. (What if we'd had the bad luck of good weather, basking all day in hot sun?)

We unroped and joyously sat down to glissade — and asses stuck in bathtubs. So we plunged — and the crust under the slop was not strong



enough to hold body weight but was sharp enough to bruise shins as we struggled thigh-deep in garbage.

The couloir debouched onto an open, sloping shelf and we descended leftward in chill shadows of Index walls, warmed within by sunset-glowing Skykomish forests. A five-throated yell! There, 1500 feet below, was the end of sorrow, the start of trail — the white plain of frozen Lake Serene, so close we could spit on it.

Tom was twitching with impatience. He surveyed steep forest leading to the basin and said, "A cinch — we can go straight to the lake."

"NO!" cried Paul. "Don't even think of it!"

During a fall storm in 1946 two hikers had disappeared on Index. Last summer their skeletons had been found below tree-hidden cliffs on Tom's proposed line of descent. Paul, having helped evacuate the bones, was convincing.

The regular climbing route wasn't much longer anyway. We plunged <sup>the shelf</sup> down onto the ridge separating the lake cirque from the cirque of <sup>eastward-draining</sup> Index Creek. The gentle crest abruptly dove into vertical forest. The others waited while Tom and I went ahead. He now was ~~thoroughly~~ angered by the obstinacy of Persdex and when I stopped, doubtful, ~~he~~ continued over the brink, out of sight.

No sound. "How's it look?" I yelled.

No filthy language — a bad sign. "Uh, well, actually, not too good."

"Okay," I yelled, "Let's look for a way around."

No splutters of rage — "Uh, well, actually, I'd just as soon not have

to climb back up."

In shouts we discussed the situation. The forest scramble of summer was now a snow cliff. However, trees were closely spaced and Tom had the 60-foot nylon (the "Sir Donald rope," we called it; after that climb we'd bought a 120-footer and cut it in two lengths ideal for such routes as the Northwest Ridge) and felt he could tree-crawl and rappel safely to the pass, only 400 feet down. But we agreed five people blind-staggering clumsy would get dangerously tangled. Tom, anyway not sure he could up-climb what he'd down-slid, would take the quick way. I'd seek another.

In parting I yelled, "You be damn careful!"

"I will! I will!"

Wearily I returned upward and reported. Paul and Krup moaned. Franz was indignant.

"We've got a 120-foot rope. Why can't we follow Tom?"

I was indignant at a new boy questioning my decision. I gave a curt answer ("Because I say so!") and walked off to find a route from the ridge onto the shelf — and was stopped by a short cliff belt. Shit! I started up our descent trough. Paul and Krup fell in behind. Franz stood thinking. Tom was too far below to be caught. <sup>I</sup> had the rope. He followed, glum.

Franz struck me as a typical ~~wealthy, hearty~~ Easterner. Why the hell had Tom invited so complete an outsider to share Persdex? Presumably to study him as a possible partner for future big climbs. That was okay, I didn't envy friends their moves toward greatness. But damned if I wanted strangers fouling up my fun. Moreover, a disturbing suspicion nagged. At

camp in Proctor Creek, when we were drinking Krup's beer and three of us were laughing like idiot children at thoughts of crazy tomorrow, and Franz was uneasily slumming, obviously considering Tom the only true gentleman in this gang of Western barbarians, Tom had been exceptionally sedate and his language uncommonly clean. Franz was a wrecker.

Up, up the ridge 400 feet to the end of the cliff belt, off onto the shelf, and immediately down, down to the bottom. Shit! We couldn't drop directly to Index Creek. Between shelf-brink fringe of cedar trees and valley-floor snows was an airiness — we didn't have to see the cirque headwall to know it was there. We'd have to march directly away from our goal, Lake Serene, traversing the shelf to a break in the headwall, if any.

Discussion unnecessary, three barbarians commenced the traverse. The Easterner's civilized facade fractured. "Why," asked furious Franz, "Can't we go straight down?"

"Because it's a goddamn cliff!"

"Can't be much. The valley isn't that far."

"You're right. One jump will do it."

I had no time to fiddle with Eastern fools. We'd blundered by dropping to the deeply-dissected bottom of the shelf, a succession of plunges into gullies, struggles out of gullies. Sun was gone from the world, night near, and

The gullies were killing us and I turned toward the smoothness far above. Immersed in steep slop I swam upward — and every few yards slid down the trench and bumped against Paul, A small fir, the only solid object in the white swamp, was my goal, my hope. Closer, slowly closer,

both hands and boots loose from the slope and I

back

was was

nearly dislodging him.

fearing I'd slip at the last second and carry away <sup>both</sup> Paul and Krup. I couldn't do the swim again. Nor could they. Paul, the ever-cheerful Rover Boy, was dull of eye. Krup, whose mouth never before <sup>had</sup> stopped flapping in the 3 years I'd known him, was dumb. I lunged for a branch, pulled myself hand over hand to the trunk, climbed to the top, and leapt out onto gentle <sup>smooth</sup> slopes of the upper shelf.

Press hot face into cold crystals, a marvelous soft pillow, and fill burning mouth with sweet ice. Krup and Paul fell beside me on the ~~rough white~~ white bed.

After a while I asked, "Where's Franz?"

While I'd been busy <sup>swimming</sup> ~~barrowing~~, they'd watched him disappear through the fringe of cedars, over the brink of the headwall.

"Oh God!"

I should <sup>ive</sup> ~~have~~ overcome weariness and dislike and patiently explained <sup>lower</sup> the structure of a double cirque and why we didn't need to see the headwall <sup>was there.</sup> to know it ~~was there.~~ He would descend from cedar to cedar and if very lucky would find continuous greenery and be waiting with Tom when we arrived. But almost certainly there would be a gap. He'd clear it with a jump — and thus cut off retreat. Farther down would be another gap and he'd hang from a cedar, steadily weakening, one option left. A desperate leap to a tree a dozen feet below, branches slipping through fingers. This time, no picked-clean skeleton. We'd know where to search for the cold flesh.

Thus the denouement of the Terrific Persdex, of the months gazing

from Cougar Mountain. And thus the denouement of the dreaming years, the glory years. I remembered the scree island in the Graywolf, the rope pulling me toward a swandive from Huckleberry, the crevasse on St. Helens, the step through space on Castle, the cliff glissade on Thompson. And comrades falling from walls, sliding out of control down snowfields, tumbling in avalanches, disappearing in clouds of rockfall. None of us had been badly hurt and we enjoyed telling lowlanders more people are killed in bathtubs than on peaks, the most dangerous part of a climb is the highway.

And all along we knew. Shun the ~~company~~<sup>close companionship</sup> of death and it's not a climb, it's a hike. We celebrated life on the exciting edge, flaunting our victory over fear. Yet for many to win, some must lose. No sport, this, but a rite, empty of meaning without human sacrifice. Franz was paying for my hundred peaks.

"He thought we were gutless," I said. "Every time we came to a tough spot we turned chicken. That's how he saw it."

"I don't care how brave anybody thinks I am," said Paul. "All I want is to come home ~~alive~~<sup>✓</sup> from every peak I ever climb."

We plodded-tottered-trenched across the shelf. In the valley we'd search until dark, then bivouac — 8 hours to dawn, fighting to avoid becoming, ourselves, sacrifices. As dread was growing <sup>that</sup> there was no way down ~~to the~~<sup>to the</sup> valley we spotted a gully breaching the headwall and plunged to the entry. And suddenly saw far behind us, low on the shelf, a human figure approaching. Tom's route had failed; thank God he'd managed to get back up. No! It was Franz!

The snotty Eastern son of a bitch! He had a lot of nerve not dying!

We didn't wait but dropped to Index Creek and again faced a climb — to the pass and Tom — dear God, we hoped Tom.

With benefit of trench Franz caught up. I greeted him brusquely. "Why don't you kick a few?"

"Guess I have that coming," he gasped, "After the stunt I pulled."

What? No attempt to brazen it out? Was the haughty bastard apologizing? That didn't fit the pattern.

He wallowed a track — slowly, tangle-legged. All day he'd been the strongest of us and now was stumbling. He couldn't even hold the lead. Falling in the snow <sup>for a</sup> ~~resting~~, he told the story. The critical deviation from our scenario was that when he came to the first gap he pondered, and pondered, and refused the irrevocable leap.

"Doing pull-ups in the cedars, didn't think I'd make it <sup>back up.</sup> Arms giving out. Fingers still trembling — hardly can hold the ax."

No longer a stranger. Tom's instincts had been sound. Franz would be a friend.

At 9 o'clock we crept to the 3000-foot pass, day utterly gone but night not complete, snow reinforcing the fading light of sky. Tom materialized from darkness with smart remarks about hikers who aren't satisfied with two summits and a dozen miles of snowplowing and have to wipe out the whole countryside. We commented on his ancestry and sex habits.