

May 1948

Chapter 17

SHOOTING THE CHUTE

Few students, perhaps none except Betty and me, suspected the turmoil behind the faculty facade of Olympian sangfroid. Doubtless they were better off. Certainly our meager lingering confidence was shaken by learning many a Climbing Committee meeting of April and May was ~~as~~ stormy as the mountains. Monie tried to conceal the fact. I forced it out of her.

The Commonwealth Basin snow practice, scheduled for May 16, was postponed. ~~At the preceding lecture~~ Chairman Cam didn't make the announcement orally (not trusting his voice?); ~~but~~ without a word of explanation <sup>he</sup> scribbled it on the blackboard (breaking the chalk twice).

I confronted Monie. "What kind of show are you people on the Committee running? Why the hell do you schedule these trips if you're not going to hold them? Aren't we ever going to get ~~over~~ this damn Course over with?"

Uneasy ~~snicker~~ cackle. Overtones of anguish. ~~REMARKS~~ Painful for her, surely, to witness civil war amongst the gods. "You sound like Cam."

He had argued, she unwillingly revealed, that climbing skill is half toughness and smartness and half pure nerve, that the only product of a gutless school would be a bunch of pansies. His opponents, a cabal

of former Climbing Chairmen, argued that to take innocent, trusting beginners into avalanche-roaring mountains was premeditated mass murder. The ex-Maximum Leaders had the power, they were members of the club's ~~omnipotent~~ Board of Trustees, they won.

The first two rounds (McClellan Butte April 18 and 25) they won. And the third (Commonwealth Basin May 16). Not the fourth. Memorial Day and the first Experience Climb were close. What, asked Cam, did they have in mind? Dispatching beginners to a peak lacking any knowledge of snow technique? Or canceling the first Experience Climb? And then the second, the third? Why not the whole Course? At the next lecture he announced with a hard smile that come earthquake or hurricane, hell or high water, we were going to Commonwealth.

Cam puzzled me. Was he one of the Good Guys -- or the chief Bad Guy? In lecture hall and at Little Si he seemed our devoted tribune laboring to preserve us from ~~abuses~~ blundering fools. At First Monitor and now Commonwealth he seemed ready to kill us if necessary to maintain the orderly progression of the curriculum.

Monie disturbed me. I was planning, as was most of the student body and faculty, to camp overnight in Commonwealth Basin. Did she want a ride with us to Snoqualmie Pass?

"Oh gosh," she cackled, "The only reason for going camping in snow is to learn never to camp in snow if you can avoid it."

That was true enough. I changed my mind. So maybe she'd like a ride up Sunday morning?

"Oh gee, I don't know. Sloppy snow doesn't do a thing for my neurosis. I got a lot of stuff to do at home."

Yeah? What about the "terrific time we always have at Commonwealth"? And the instructor shortage?

"Oh heck, I've been on every practice this spring. <sup>Going</sup> ~~Setting~~ kind of stale. Guess I've done my share. You'll get along fine. We always do. Nothing can ruin Commonwealth."

I withheld remarks about sinking ships and rats.

An hour and a half from the garret, at 6:30 in the chill dull-overcast morning of May 23, Betty and I arrived at Snoqualmie Pass and looked for Mountaineers.

None to be seen. Nobody to be seen. The pass, <sup>3000</sup> feet above the warm-lush lowland spring, <sup>deep</sup> in dispiriting winter, ~~the~~ somber highland forests crowding the ~~road~~ two-lane highway weeks short of <sup>budding out</sup> ~~putting forth~~ the light-green branch-tips of new growth, was empty-silent, only an occasional passing car (on what mad errand at this desolate hour?) reminding that man inhabited Earth.

Whatever other city-sleepers there were among our comrades must've gotten an earlier start. But there was no trouble finding where everybody went. With the crummy little ski area buttoned up for the year and the trails not due to melt out until July, the sole available entertainments hereabouts were drinking coffee at the <sup>ramshackle</sup> ~~desert~~ Summit Inn, sustained by over-the-hump truckers, and taking a piss in the WPA-built Travelers' Rest. ~~WPA~~

Unless you were a Mountaineer. Some 30 cars were parked on the highway shoulder next to the 10-foot snow wall rising above the <sup>narrow</sup> rotary-plowed ditch. From them a boot-kicked ladderway led up the wall to the start of a 2-foot-deep trench in sparkling-clean snow, the surface layer so fluffy it couldn't have been more than a couple days old. The track stomped by 200-odd boots climbed a wooded ridge to <sup>abrupt cliffs</sup> ~~the foot~~ of Guye Peak, traversed the base ~~of cliffs~~ into Commonwealth Basin, and meandered through subalpine hemlock-fir forest. At 7:30, precisely the announced hour of assembly, we entered a city of tents and tarps.

A deserted city. Damn Mountaineers! The first time they get us in the real mountains and they run off and hide. Bastards. Almost I ~~turned around~~ ~~and~~ went home. But then, what of the 3 months? The waste of all that agony? No, a dozen hours and we'd be free.

If, that is, we could win the game of hide-and-seek. One trench led into the city. Scores led out. We followed a dozen to bowel movements more or less snowcovered before finding the unmistakable mob trench. Indignation at being abandoned by the Mountaineers pushed my pace. Fear of being abandoned by me pushed Betty's. Onward we rushed, at last emerging from trees in open snow and spotting, on the lowermost slopes of bleak-white Lundin Peak, the distant ant-swarm.

A running-staggering half-hour and we caught up with a handful of laggards, a group of playboys and playgirls tumbling about on steep slopes of a knoll. Watching the foolery, smiling ironically, was Limber Jim.

Respect for the best rock-climber in the club (said Monie) couldn't cork my rage. "What are you guys up to? If you mean 6:30, why do you say 7:30?"

Wry chuckle. "Makes the day more interesting to warm up with fox-and-hounds. Why are you sore? You outsmarted us. Think of the poor children still ~~was~~ wandering in the woods, or maybe falling through snowbridges and trying to crawl out of Commonwealth Creek."

*Always a core of gallows humor.*

Climbers' wit! "Well, that's Lloyd. Some people are always late. He's always early. ~~That's why he's probably the greatest climber in the history of the club.~~ <sup>sniffs</sup> He goes nuts when he smells a peak. Can't sleep. He figured most everybody would find us and those that didn't probably didn't want to anyway."

Some apology. I'd do better with Chairman Cam, standing a couple hundred feet above at the top of the knoll, ~~he watched us plug steps,~~ doubtless preparing to soothe his star examination writer.

"Hi!" I ~~huff~~ <sup>puff</sup> huff. Why is he glowering? Angry at Leader Lloyd? No! For unknown reasons, at us.

"All right!" he barks. "Do a sitting glissade and try a self-arrest."

I gasp for breath, mentally rehearsing the braking technique described in textbook and lecture. Grasp ice-ax head in right hand with adze toward body, pick away, hold ax shaft in left hand.

"There'll never be a better time to go than now."

Ready or not, ~~slide~~ <sup>here I go sliding</sup> When ~~going~~ faster than a speeding bullet, roll onto stomach, press chest against shaft to push pick into slope, dig in toes. Thus stop.

Puff-puff up the hill. The rough beast waits.

"Kousy! Don't let the pick ride away from your shoulder -- you can't shove it in without your body weight on it. Spread those legs and kick ~~at~~ those toes. <sup>in</sup> Do everything fast! Pretend there's a cliff 100 feet down and you either stop in 99 feet or die."

Once more down. Once more up. Snow forces into pantslegs and shirtsleeves, melts, soaks clothing and coldly bathes skin. Down. Up. Hear acid explanations of how stupid-awkward I am. See how haggard are the other trapped playboys and playgirls. See Betty, whose favorite means of ~~mountain~~ travel is the sitting glissade, finally get <sup>too much.</sup> ~~a bellyful.~~

"That's a little better. Now try a real arrest -- the kind you have to do in a real fall. Sit down. This time put your legs uphill. Lay flat on your back. Now slide."

Something in a person hates to lead with the head, ~~to slide toward an unseen death~~. But rub your nose in it is the rule of the Tall Parka sans merci.

Prow-head churns snow which blinds, which chokes, which rams down <sup>flesh</sup> neck onto quailing ~~skin~~ of back and belly, <sup>shrinks</sup> ~~g. freezes~~ ~~tumbling~~ balls. That's plenty of speed! Roll onto stomach and jam pick in the slope. It doesn't grip. Not jamming in slope but in air. Where is the slope? Snow above, snow below, snow everywhere. Pick finds slope, grabs. Somersaulting! Tumbling, rolling. Somehow stop. Blink snow from eyes, shake snow from ears, spit snow from teeth, blow snow from nose. Climb the knoll.

"You never did get your boots downhill! <sup>!</sup> ~~!~~ Cock your body at the ~~wrist~~ waist and scramble with your feet! Don't paw the air with your pick -- ram it in! The only reason you stopped was you ran out of slope. Remember

the cliff that's going to kill you if you don't stop!"

Again cringingly down. Again wearily up.

"Great! Just great! You went over the brink going a mile a minute. You're now bouncing down a thousand feet of cliffs. The rescue party's going to have to bring rakes to pull you together. Try again."

How long would the hound of hell have tortured us? Perhaps eternally. But a latecomer, observing the carnage, attempted to bypass the knoll. Off in pursuit flapped Tall Parka. Betty and I stole away.

The main mob was lolling in pale sunlight eating second-breakfast-first lunch. But as we arrived Leader Lloyd began yelling orders. No rest or food for us.

Rope teams were formed. Instructors again scarce, each was assigned six or more students. Climbing Course policy being to preserve marriages by separating husbands and wives, Betty and I had different teachers. Her eyes pled with me not to leave her to face the Inquisitors alone.

Well shucks, it was policy, nothing I could do. ~~Even~~ Even if I wanted. And the fact was, I didn't. In uniting with a woman a man becomes no longer an integer but a fraction, incomplete and vulnerable. When ~~strangers~~ <sup>strangers</sup> laughed at my wife they laughed at me. ~~I was grateful to be for a few hours single again.~~ In the Unknown awaiting above I'd have enough problems evading my own humiliation, much less Betty's. I was grateful to be for a few hours single again.

I studied my instructor. A smiling, relaxed chap of 20 or less. Evidently no vicious Cam. He surveyed the mob scene, the other instructors commencing more self-arrest practice.

"Kind of crowded here," he commented. "Let's start off by practicing some rope-team travel."

We ~~climbed~~<sup>roped</sup> and in two teams climbed above the mob. And climbed. And climbed. Never stopping for instruction. No nitpicking nag was our teacher. He allowed as how we all seemed pretty good at stepkicking and also the "rest step," the technique of alternately unweighting the feet so that at each step one leg has a short complete rest.

"How you folks feel about the arrest?" he asked. "Think you got it down pretty well?"

We all nodded agreement that Cam had made us perfect masters. Of course, our knoll ordeal consisted solely of self-arrest, no team arrest. But what's a team arrest except the sum of three self-arrests? Doubtless there's a difference in a high-speed tumbling fall but superhikers don't go in for that sort of thing.

"Guess he covered the ice ax belay too, didn't he?"

He hadn't. Except for ~~not~~ textbook and lecture we were ignorant of how to jam ax shaft in snow, wrap rope around ~~shaft~~ shaft and body, and hold a fall. But none of us wanted to impose on our genial teacher.

"Seems to me we've touched all the bases. I'll tell you, us instructors get to climb the west ridge. I'd better head on down so they don't go off without me. You folks just mosey up the east ridge to the summit and wait. The route's easy. Just follow your nose."

He glissaded to the ant-mob far below, leaving six novices, six silences.

By chance I was tied to a rope-end and at the moment of his departure happened to be uphill from the other five. Forlornly I looked down to our



distance - diminishing  
~~distance~~ teacher -- and into five impassive faces looking up -- at me.  
 Waiting for me to take the initiative.

Orders were orders. I led up the final stretch of snow, a white peninsula jutting high amid cliffs of the peak. No more snow. Rocks. A hundred feet above and a hundred yards distant was the 6000-foot summit of Lundin.

I stop, stare. Starch goes out of knees. Knot forms in guts. They got me. My ticket out of the Course paid for and punched, the freedom train steaming at the station, and at the last minute they got me. Where's Monie now I need her? Where's anybody now I need somebody?

I look down the rope to my mates -- two impatient faces. And the second team -- three more. Undoubtedly five athletes, though we've <sup>together</sup> undertaken/no activity that would separate athletes from Bettys -- and Harveys. Athletes demanding action. If they feel that way, why don't they volunteer to lead? Because Teacher said the ridge is easy, a route to "mosey up." Not worth an athlete's thinking about, a cinch trip to be quickly and simply done.

Faces push. I guess this is how they get paratroopers to jump. Put hands on rock and scramble. Climb rhythmically, hell. Climb with the eyes, bullpussy. Climb like a cat with can tied to tail.

The ridge <sup>top</sup> ~~crest~~! That was nothing -- a 50-foot staircase. Bring up Number Two -- not on belay, unnecessary, just hauling in slack. He brings up Number Three, followed by the second team.

But now, Something Else. One of Monie's famous "cheap thrills" -- the Boiler Plate, a smooth, tilted, 50-foot-long slab forming the crest of the ridge. Wide, a dozen feet or so. Not steep. In tennis shoes on a dry summer day, a stroll. But we are wearing tricouni-nailed boots -- ice skates.

And a blob of snow from the storm of a couple days ago dribbles slab-slickening meltwater. And to the left is the substantial gulf of Commonwealth Basin and to the right is the ocean-huge gulf of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River.

Athletes are restless. Number Two doesn't ~~at~~ even offer a belay. Social pressure drives me onto the ice rink.

I'll be damned! Appearing flawless, the Boiler Plate is pocked with niches beautifully designed for hooking with tricouni edge-nails. <sup>the slab is</sup> And/so wide I can't see or feel exposure.

Now I see it. At the far end rises a 15-foot wall hanging high in the air. I look down short cliffs to left, down down long long cliffs to right.

Odd. Knees aren't jittering, heart not pounding, brain not whirling. I see, not feel, the exposure. Why not? Because with absolute inner <sup>firm</sup> certainty I know I'm not going to fall down any cliffs! The ~~is~~ 15-foot wall is a system of ledges, one hardly needs bother with handholds, one walks. Walks through air, but walks. Over the winter the inoculations of Tooth and Cruiser have immunized me against exposure! Well, this piddling exposure anyhow.

Where's the rest of Lundin? There ain't no more. I'm on the summit. All by myself I've conquered a genuine mountain. I've led a climb!

Completing the triumph, a meek voice from below: "Could you give me a belay please?" Number Two. Begging literally on his knees. Some athlete. And Number Three! He's spreadeagled on the Boiler Plate, gripping Earth with shoulders, thighs, belly. And where is the second rope? Those ~~these~~ athletes have retreated to the snow!

A daring thought. Scary. Impossible. Yet examine the evidence. Very likely most of the February multitude of beginners could humiliate me in track meet or gymnasium. But where are they now? Of the 250 barely a third remain. And many are reluctant Bettys and many (five for sure) of those who seemed athletes are not even Harveys.

There's more to this sport than acrobatics. It's not enough to be able to climb rock, one must be a sufficient connoisseur of the subtleties of mountain architecture to know which rock to climb. And then have the nerve to do it. ~~Some~~ Strength and coordination are valuable. But also needed are brains and guts -- and perhaps an above-average ration of these can compensate for a below-average ration of the others. I always knew I had ~~plenty of~~ brains. Until now I didn't suspect I had -- comparatively speaking, at least -- guts.

A quiet hour we three sat on the summit eating lunch in still warm air, ~~and~~ savoring sun-rays flashing through gaps in boiling black clouds, chiseled-ice peaks floating on the gray sea of fog-filled valleys.

I belonged here. This country at and around headwaters of the South and Middle Forks Snoqualmie River could well become my second mountain home. A stone-throw <sup>as</sup> ~~westward~~ east was Red, scrambled up with Monie and Betty year before last. Off west was the legendary Tooth. Having earned citizenship by climbing three Snoqualmie Pass mountains, I was entitled to most if not all the other of the 20 "Snoqualmie Pin Peaks": Guye and Snoqualmie and <sup>which</sup> Kendall, with Lundin and Red enclosing Commonwealth Basin. On the same ridge <sup>as</sup> ~~with~~ The Tooth, Denny and Bryant and Chair, ~~and farther~~ and farther west, Granite and Kaleetan and Roosevelt. To the east, the

formidable towers of Thompson and Huckleberry, the milder-mannered Chikamin, Alta, and Rampart and rugged Hibox. South ~~of~~ beyond Snoqualmie Pass, Silver and Tinkham. I'd not be in the club to be awarded the pin but I'd have splendid superhiker (semi-climber!) sport here in years to come. I'd not aspire to the awesome spires of the Dutch Miller Gap area -- Bears Overcoat, and Breast, Summit Chief, ~~and~~ Chimney Rock -- yet I'd admire them from such close viewpoints as La Bohn Peak, today as fog-buried as ~~the day~~ <sup>when</sup> last September I climbed it alone.

Smugly I contemplated the non-whimper, the big bang, of my Mountaineer end, starting ~~the day~~ at the rear of the pack and against heavy odds forging through the mob to win the race to the top. Almost I regretted my first alpine ascent with the club was my last -- until I spotted the west-ridge party nearing the summit, led by Limber Jim kicking steps in a tiny snowpatch precariously stuck on the spookily-thin crest.

Beware of hubris, lad.

I didn't care at all for the looks of that./Just as well I was leaving. Rest ~~content~~ on laurels, count blessings. I owned my own ice ax, a classy bit of Swiss craftsmanship bought at the Co-op this week, had learned the self-arrest. I owned the tool and the technique that would've made the Graywolf Ramble a fearless romp. And I was escaping Course and club with ~~the~~ whole skin, whole pride.

A solitary leader, one of the great and respected Old Faithfuls, appeared on the Boiler Plate. I prepared a student's modest <sup>thanks for</sup> ~~response to~~ professor's praise. Head poked over the top of the final wall. Jaw ~~dropped~~, eyes goggled.

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF GOD ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

~~My smile froze.~~ I tried to explain. He wouldn't listen. I was a smart-alec show-off, a suicidal fool, a potential assassin of ~~my~~ ropemates. They, damn sheep, previously adoring me as their savior, now joined in the crucifixion.

Crap on 'em. Crap on ~~the~~ 'em all. They tell you to be at camp at 7:30 and you get there at 7:30 and ~~they~~ they've pulled a sneak. Bust your ass catching up and a sadist erects a roadblock. Obey your assigned instructor and get ~~the~~ chewed out for following orders. I didn't deign to suggest to the hero where he could shove his high and mighty Climbing Course. ~~Hangtivity~~ I retreated to a corner of the summit, returned utterly and forever to my pre-Mountaineer absolute uncontaminated anarchism. Silently I pronounced a terrible curse upon the Course and all its progenitors and all their generations. To my gratification, the curse took instant (nay, retroactive) effect.

The summit, a plateau some 20 feet square, seemed spacious occupied by three, tiny as a hundred bodies converged upon it. One would've supposed the situation would've been foreseen by our esteemed faculty. Not on your ~~the~~ tintype.

Already, with the addition to the summit population of Limber Jim's west-ridge contingent of 15 instructors, ribs were getting jabbed with elbows, rucksacks spread out for lunch squashed by boots. Now the student horde swarmed in the snow and on the ~~staircase~~ staircase.

Not immediately was it necessary to cram 100 sardines into a can built for 20. First the sardines must be got to the can. It seemed the <sup>Cramming</sup> ~~second~~ problem might never arise. I watched one Betty after another ~~(enough)~~ ~~collapse~~ collapse into catatonia on the Boiler Plate.

And as the result of the brilliant policy of letting instructors climb the west ridge, only in ~~the~~ position to help ~~the~~ ram ~~the~~ beginners through the east-ridge bottleneck were several senior leaders. They pointed out holds by hollering from a distance, then by crawling personally onto the slab, compounding the crowding. At first they sought to make each person do his own climbing~~x~~ but quickly said the hell with <sup>good form</sup> ~~teaching~~ ~~technique~~ and began giving helping hands, pulling and pushing. Finally they rigged a fixed rope for a handline -- ~~the~~ ~~reversion~~ to an ancient discredited means of mob management. The fixed rope began tangling with climbing ropes, frequently bringing all progress to a halt, requiring ~~endless~~ unsnarling. I anticipated seeing someone, by giving just the proper yank, flip a student over the brink. The student would not go alone~~x~~ since in the ~~the~~ absence of belays he'd pull off ~~the~~ ropemates. And with the right concatenation of climbing~~x~~ ropes~~x~~ the first team might be followed by another, and another, in mass flight down to the Middle Fork valley.

Limber Jim, though his <sup>impish</sup> ~~stupid~~ smirk suggested mixed emotions, commented in a yell to ~~Boiler Plate-bound~~ Boiler Plate-bound Leader Lloyd that since the east ridge was unsuited to two-way traffic, at the present rate the party wouldn't be off the peak until along about 10 o'clock Wednesday morning. Moreover, unless a few folk were disposed of off the cliff ~~rocks~~ (a distinct possibility) there shortly would be no room left on the summit for new arrivals. Lloyd, wrestling a hysterical spastic bent on self-destruction, implored Jim to "Do something!" He did, rigging a rappel down a 20-foot chimney to a ledge bypassing the Boiler Plate. To keep climbing ropes from tangling with rappel rope, everyone <sup>untied</sup> ~~unroped~~ before starting down. Teams no longer existed. It was every man for himself and devil take the women and children. I saw an opening in the <sup>queue</sup> ~~line~~ and got my ass the hell out of there.

Safely in the snow my pleasure was undiluted. Students inched up the Boiler Plate, clinging to the fixed rope, and inched down the rappel. Females moaned and sobbed and even ~~some~~<sup>male</sup> athletes trembled, nerves wrecked not by mountain but mob. Big-shot hero-leaders cursed and wailed and yammered a welter of conflicting orders. Had Mack Sennett made a climbing movie, this is how it ~~would have~~<sup>d have</sup> appeared on the screen. ("Ambles in the Alps, starring Ben Turpin, Fatty Arbuckle, and the Keystone Kops.") Yet one couldn't help keeping in mind this low comedy was being performed on a very high stage, ~~rinned with genuine precipices~~. It was dangerous. But hilarious, especially when clouds darkened, a squall of rain and freezing slush swept the mountain, and students soaked to the skin by self-arrest practice showed symptoms of dying en masse from exposure.

"Let the jury consider their verdict," the King said.

"No, no!" said the Queen. "Sentence first -- verdict afterwards."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Alice loudly.

"Off with her head!" the Queen shouted.

"Who cares for you?" said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"

Reflecting that Alice-Harvey had recognized this pack of Mountaineer cards for what they were, was awaking from Wonderland<sub>x</sub> in the veritable nick, I crouched in the lee of a snow hump, out of the blasting wind, with a bunch of instructors.

"Jeez," chuckled and shivered one. "This is turning out better than the Perry Basin practice last year. That was wild, when the avalanche took everybody to the bottom of the practice slope, but <sup>what with the fog</sup> only a third of the party ever found the practice area in the first place so there wasn't all the good compact action there is here."

"Perry Basin!" chortled and teeth-chattered another. "This beats the Olympus climb last Fourth of July -- 80 people wandering all over the Blue Glacier in the storm looking for West Peak. Remember that farce? About a dozen guys finally found the summit tower and half ~~of them~~ got knocked silly by the rocks everybody was kicking off."

"Well, at least there's nothing to worry about. Like we always say, if you obey the Code the most dangerous part of a climb is the drive home on the highways. After all, nobody's ever been killed on a Mountaineer trip. How about that? Forty years of these <sup>high</sup> ~~high~~ jinks and not one death!"

"Yeah, fantastic. It's no lie, it's got to be true the good Lord loves us."

One of the merry men struck up an imaginary guitar and the bunch ~~it~~ joined him in raucous song:

"There was BLOOD on the axes,  
And BLOOD on the ropes,  
And great big blotches of BLOO-OO-OOO on the slopes,  
Oh pity these climbers,  
All covered with gore,  
They'll never go bagging ol' Lundin no more."

Altogether a masterpiece, a perfect revenge. But drawn out hours past happy laughter. Not until 5 o'clock in an afternoon darkening to premature night, clouds lowering to swallow us, was a ~~distant~~ bellow interpreted by the instructor bunch as announcing the removal of the last quivering body from the summit, ~~it~~ releasing us from standing by for rescue duty.



An instructor yelled, "Party time, boys and girls!"

Time for one of Monie's favorite cheap thrills. We'd ascended ~~an~~ an indistinct ridge, a series of rises and flats. To descend we'd fling ourselves into the Lundin Chute, a steep gully dropping 1200 vertical feet to the valley floor.

Instantly at the signal of release the jolly instructors leapt from the ~~storm~~<sup>wind</sup> refuge and with running jumps disappeared in fog, followed by a flock of babbling Boy Scouts and (omitting the running jumps) by ~~less~~ less exuberant students seeking not ~~pleasure~~<sup>thrills</sup> but ~~merely~~<sup>only</sup> the safety of the valley. I was experienced enough in the sitting glissade to be wily, to let over-eager pioneers establish a track. When dozens of butts had smoothed the bumps and ~~smoothed~~ gouged a groove I jumped.

Just-like-that I was rocketing through face-stinging fog, ear-roaring wind, yipping and whooping as loud as a Scout. No worry about too much speed. As I'd learned on Silvertip the ~~ax~~<sup>shaft-bottom</sup> and spike dragged in the slope is ever-ready for slowing. As I'd learned on Cam's Knoll the self-arrest is ever-ready for emergency stops. With slowing and stopping ~~easy~~<sup>easily done</sup> one can go fearlessly fast.

But something new. Never before had I glissaded in such loose snow. I was alarmed to find myself riding a ~~hissing~~<sup>and</sup> avalanche stirred up by legs and butt, ~~and~~ rolled out of the groove into self-arrest. The avalanche hissed on down into fog. I rolled back into the groove and resumed the run. Another avalanche, another roll-out -- not quite so soon, not quite so scared. The third time I delayed the roll-out still longer -- and didn't do it at all because the avalanche ~~it~~ grew so big and no bigger, was

perfectly harmless. Okay then, let 'er rip! <sup>Discover</sup> ~~Enjoy~~ the supreme method of mountain <sup>snow descent</sup> ~~travel~~ -- no scraping or bumping of body against slope, no jouncing or bouncing, no pain or strain. Smooth! Relax on your back and let the soft swift magic carpet carry you down!

I flew by faces white as the snow and fog -- students who'd ovinely followed Judas-goat instructors and been too much thrilled, who'd arrested and crawled from the groove and were wondering how they ever would reach the bottom of the Chute this side of eternity. Laugh! What did they know, chicken athletes who'd never slid into the Graywolf without an ax?

Down, down, down, almost to the valley floor. Slope flattened, speed slackened. I now was passing not only halted students but halted instructors. Nobody below me. Nobody but me glissading. I <sup>was</sup> ~~was~~ leading the pack and that ~~was~~ good but best not get too far ahead. Stop.

I'd plummeted out of fog into clear air. ~~Most of the mob was still hidden.~~ <sup>containing the main mob.</sup> Shouts from the cloud. Then shouts below the cloud. Then a shout from my nearest neighbor, an instructor a couple hundred feet above.

"Are you Manning?"

Suspiciously I confessed.

"Your wife wants you."

Gone, gone, gone the exhilaration of the magic-carpet flight. Naturally Betty wanted me. As on Silvertip when she slowly slid toward the cliff, as on the retreat from La Bohn Gap when she got her damn boot stuck. I'd not seen her since morning and had reverted to the freedom of Camp Parsons boyhood and now she'd spitefully <sup>jerked the leash.</sup> ~~recalled me to marriage.~~ More, she'd shamed my name, which she'd possessed a week short of a year, before 100-odd idiots who in ~~xxx~~ years to come would snicker whenever they recalled Manning.

These long 3 months I'd dodged humiliation -- successfully. Today the Mountaineers had taken their last shot at me -- and missed. And then my foul-up wife snatched victory from my grasp.

Driven by ~~and~~ <sup>violent</sup> ~~strong~~ but unselected emotion (soon I'd be either furious or grief-stricken) I climbed back into the cloud, nearly to the base of Lundin's summit cliffs. Here was the mob, gathered in a tight circle, faces turned inward. Fury? Grief? I elbowed roughly through the drooling gawkers, the sort <sup>of necrophiliacs</sup> who cluster around burning houses and crashed automobiles, to the center of attention. Fury? Grief?

Fury. The greater for the potential grief.

Flat on her back in pink snow lay the damn clown, giggling and simpering, the life of the party. Limber Jim was bandaging her side. As was normal for her <sup>on any hike</sup> ~~in the mountains~~, she looked terrible.

"Where's your ax?" I demanded.

She apologized with a frightened grin, a little girl who was going to be spanked and knew she had it coming. Faces in the mob expressed an opinion of me. What the crap ~~is~~ did they know?

I climbed to the avalanche jumble from which she'd been excavated and fruitlessly kicked blocks of snow. No ax. Only a couple days ago I laid out a day-and-a-half's wages for that ax. Blood is cheap but axes cost \$12.

Bystanders told the story. Together with other incompetents <sup>appalled</sup> ~~terrified~~ by the Chute she'd chosen to go down the gentler route of <sup>the mess</sup> ~~our~~ ascent. She <sup>was</sup> ~~glissading~~ <sup>slowly and cautiously, peering into fog below. In fog above her a</sup> ~~by pits and starts, enjoying her little slides.~~ <sup>dozen</sup> incompetents <sup>snuggled up for group</sup> ~~above her simultaneously~~ gathered courage and glissaded in a gang. Each set in motion a small avalanche, these ~~had~~ coalesced in a

large avalanche which achieved critical mass and tore loose the whole slope, and Betty was engulfed by a thundering hundred tons of snow containing a dozen tumbling dummies and a dozen loose axes, one of which stabbed her in the ribs. Nobody else was hurt. Only Betty. Just my luck.

The ax was hopelessly lost so I went down to see about salvaging the ~~slimy~~ wife.

Exclaimed a first-aid expert, "She's in shock!" (I refrained from informing them she'd been in shock since the day she was born.)

Declared a rescue expert, "She can't walk in this condition." (I didn't tell them she could barely walk in any condition.)

Never consulting me, the Betty expert, they tied her to a "human toboggan," a student volunteer whose body would absorb the bumps and protect the casualty, who was blooming like she'd been elected Queen of the May. (I didn't complain that they were spoiling her, that ~~was~~ <sup>henceforth</sup> she'd expect a free ride down every mountain.)

Ropes were tied to toboggan and at a fast trot he and casualty were dragged ~~down~~ to the valley floor <sup>and</sup> through the ~~was~~ woods to camp, where she was transferred to a stretcher fetched from the club's Snoqualmie Lodge by a team of super-swift instructors. At the highway she was loaded in Limber Jim's notoriously-hot Nash sedan with a back seat that notoriously folded to make a bed. Chairman Cam, who seemed delighted with the day's denouement, admired the ingenious bed arrangement, saying "Bet that comes in handy lots of times." Said Jim with ribald grin, "Yeah, a guy never knows when he might want a quick nap." The three of them hurtled off toward the nearest hospital, in Seattle.

Betty later told me they stopped twice. Once for ice cream cones in North Bend. Once when flagged down by a highway cop -- who snapped to attention at sight of my wounded wife and led the rest of the way, siren wailing, to the delirium of Jim and Cam, who rejoiced at their first opportunity ~~ever~~ ever to drive ~~at~~ (legally) ~~at~~ 70 miles an hour through Sunday traffic.

The smoking V-8 carried me more sedately to Harborview Hospital. At the desk I was directed to the emergency room, where Betty was being sewed up. In the waiting room I found Jim and Cam. They didn't notice my existence, were totally absorbed in reviewing the ~~day~~ day-long series of leadership blunders.

I was <sup>astounded</sup> ~~surprised~~ that Cam, an increasingly angry man these past weeks of the disintegrating Course, was so happy -- practically hysterical. Perhaps he was in shock. And Jim too. Why else would they, after each mention of a bungle, ~~burst into~~ <sup>explode</sup> ~~burst into~~ <sup>maniac</sup> laughter?

Cam said, "Another thing we forgot to do was count the party before we started down. How do we know we didn't leave somebody in the avalanche?"

"We don't," said Jim, "But if we did we'll probably hear about it. Sooner or later."

Tbey almost fell off their chairs.

God!