

The Moasernspitze Expedition

I must make it clear from the very start that it was definitely never my intention, at any time during my travels in Switzerland, to get my neck broken. When I dared to undertake the ascent of the Moasernspitze, I was acting under the influence of a higher power, namely three bottles of wine, and the daughter of the man who kept that lousy inn in Berne where I drank the said wine.

And now, to business. What exactly is the Moasernspitze? Well, since I went climbing on the Moasernspitze, there are no prizes for guessing that it is a mountain: a mountain, moreover, with a 'Spitze', a sharp point, as can easily be deduced from its name. And I hardly need to point out that it is situated in the Alps for no-one, I hope, would imagine that if you are looking for the Himalayas, Switzerland is the place to go.

The Moasernspitze puffs itself proudly up some six hours' journey away from Berne, in the Canton of Berne, and it was of interest for the fact that up to the time of my arrival, no-one had been killed there, for the simple reason that no-one had ever gone clambering about on it.

There are, after all, so many mountains in the vicinity of Berne that this particular dangerous peak had been lost in the multitude and had it not been for the enterprising Bernese innkeeper Herr Grafergeren, no-one to this day would have an inkling of the fact that this is a mountain ideally suited to the various pleasures of mountaineering, as for example neck-breaking, or leg-, spine- and arm-smashing.

The enterprising Herr Grafergeren of Berne saw the advantages of this mountain very well, such as the dangerous valley in which it lay, its sheer peaks, crumbling rock and so on, and conceived the idea of setting up a climber's hut at the foot to which he could lure Englishmen and any others who did not care whether it was Mont Blanc they fell off, or merely the Moasernspitze.

So he established one hut down below and a further four hours' climbing, or rather, crawling on all fours up the mountainside, a second one. By means of donkeys, he stocked both of these huts with drink, wine and spirits, and food and settled down to wait for a first

victim, from whom he could get some publicity.

And Fate decreed that I should be the first to fall into his hands. Towards the end of June, then, I was staying at his inn in Berne and was hooked, to use the vulgar parlance, partly by the wine, partly by his daughter Margareta. And Margareta and the wine lured me into the Moasernspitze expedition. I'm not surprised at the wine, but I do wonder at such lack of conscience in a woman.

To Hell with her, that Margareta of Berne! Such are my thoughts today but at the time, inflamed as I was by the wine, I should have volunteered to go to India and climb Mount Everest, let alone the Moasernspitze, which is only three and a half thousand metres high.

It happened this way. Towards evening, on the day of my arrival at Herr Grafergeren's inn, I was sitting with a bottle of wine in front of me and got into a conversation with Margareta.

I didn't know what I was saying. I boasted about the climbs I had made.

'Climbing Mont Blanc,' I said, 'is a piece of cake, Fräulein Margareta. And as for the Grossglockner - a mere pimple! Child's play. A fellow doesn't even feel dizzy.'

At that point, Herr Grafergeren approached.

'Milord,' he said (giving me the title he usually employed, since he assumed from my daredevil tone that I must be an Englishman), 'Milord, I know just the thing for you. A dangerous climb.'

'I never' (I lied to Margareta) 'take on a climb where there's less than a seventy-per-cent chance of a fatal accident. Do you by any chance know, Sir,' (naming a café under the Hradčany in Prague) 'where Mount Nebozízek is?'

'No, Milord, I don't. Is it a dangerous mountain?'

'Out of a hundred people,' I replied coolly, 'hardly five come back from Mount Nebozízek in full working order.'

That impressed even the hard-boiled Grafergeren. 'Milord,' he said, 'I can guarantee you the chance of a fatal accident on the Moasernspitze as well. There are precipices and abysses there two thousand feet deep.'

'That's nothing, Herr Grafergeren. Bring me another bottle of wine, and on the way you can reflect on what I am going to ask you now. Can you guarantee that in the event of an accident I would be smashed completely to smithereens?'

When that worthy man returned with the wine, he answered: 'I can give you my word of honour that you would be reduced to a pulp. As you fell,' he added enticingly, 'you would be dashed at least two

hundred times against the sharp projections in the cliffs. And then there's another advantage you should consider carefully: there are terrible raging storms and torrential downpours on the Moasernspitze and I can guarantee that you will be at risk of being washed away by the water and blown into an abyss by the wind.'

'Beginners' stuff, Herr Grafergeren. To a climber of my calibre, that's nothing.'

'Quite, Milord, but just take into account that you would be climbing amongst icefields and that those icefields on the Moasernspitze are anything but innocent little creatures. I can say with confidence that at the very least, eighty per cent of climbers would fall into a crevasse. In short, Milord, a trip up the Moasernspitze would be just what you're looking for. Be so kind as to take into account the fact that this is the only mountain in the area where you can be suddenly overtaken by mist, so that your chances of falling over the edge of a precipice are extremely good, and on top of that, the stone up there is powdery at precisely those places where you are skirting a sheer drop. It really is just made for you.'

'The kind of expedition that would suit you to a tee,' added Margareta.

'Fräulein Grafergeren,' I said, 'would it give you pleasure if I were to climb the Moasernspitze?'

'Yes, Milord,' said Margareta. Go to the Devil, my little Swiss Rose! That's the way I feel today. But on that day, I gave her my hand and said: 'Fräulein Margareta, I will climb the Moasernspitze.'

So I climbed . . .

My guide was called Georg. He was a Catholic as it happened, and he drew my attention with great earnestness to the fact that I could go to confession before we set out. When I declined this kind offer, he asked me to buy him his drink while we were still in Berne. With this request I complied.

He pressed a piece of arsenic upon me, which climbers crunch as if it were sugar.

'The pleasure was all mine,' I said, thanking him heartily.

Georg finished his brandy in businesslike fashion and then asked if he could tie me to him with the safety-rope while we were still in the city. This offer I also declined. And so we set off unattached for Herr Grafergeren's hut, the proprietor himself having meanwhile gone on

ahead on his donkey.

'If it should happen that I do not see you again,' Margareta said to me as we parted, 'I'll come to your grave sometimes and say a prayer.' Hearts of gold they have, these Swiss girls.

After an uneventful six-hour walk, we reached Herr Grafergeren's hut, where we stayed overnight and were afforded every comfort by the innkeeper, who proved an excellent host.

In the morning, we set out on the next stage of our journey. As we took our leave, Herr Grafergeren stood there washing his hands and said: 'Milord, is there any message you wish me to convey to your family in the event of an accident?'

'Just tell them,' I replied, 'that I recommend you and the Moasernspitze to all my friends.'

'I'll tell them,' he said in a voice full of eager anticipation, and broke into a yodel.

The higher we went, the more precipitous the path became. Georg tied us together and I can vouch for the fact that he was a good Catholic, because he was praying as he did so.

'What would you do,' I asked him, 'if I were to slip at some point and remain dangling over a precipice, and you were having difficulty holding me in mid-air? Would you wait till help arrived?'

'I'd cut the rope,' said Georg calmly, 'and go and report the accident in Berne. It'd be in the papers that same afternoon and you'd see the stir it would create and the profit that Grafergeren would make from it. All the English would flock here, because your Englishman loves a bit of danger. Old Grafergeren's a shrewd one, eh?'

'A shrewd one indeed!'

I warmed to Georg's frank and open nature. Engaged in an agreeable conversation about fatal accidents to climbers, we ascended higher and higher until we reached the second hut, which stood looking down into an abyss of quite respectable proportions.

We entered the hut and there, while Georg was making goulash from a tin, and preparing the wine, I began to take stock of the situation.

Behind the hut, the thousand-metre-high wall of the Moasernspitze reared itself up like a giant tenement-block, with cliffs all over it, here and there a glitter of ice and the most spine-chilling crevasses.

Hell's teeth! I was supposed to climb that, was I, and get my neck

broken somewhere up there? Finally, the scales fell from my eyes. That nice Herr Grafergeren would use my death to publicise the huts he had built and the Moasernspitze which rose above them.

'Georg,' I said to my guide, 'I am not climbing up there.'

Georg took fright. 'That'll never do, Milord,' he said in dismay. 'I'd lose my money.'

'But I've already paid you in advance.'

'I know, Milord, but Herr Grafergeren wouldn't pay me.'

'And what is he supposed to pay you for?'

'For luring you up onto the Moasernspitze.'

'But Georg, suppose I get killed?'

'Then I'd get the same amount and on top of that, it would bring the climbers in, Englishmen, and I'd get more money from them, and more from Herr Grafergeren.'

'And if the Englishmen got killed . . . what then, Georg?'

'Then there'd be all kinds of people climbing the Moasernspitze and I'd be able to put by a nice little pile of francs. So come along, Milord, up we go with a will, eh? If you tumble off, perhaps you'll remain hanging from a cliff as you were afraid you might.'

'Tell you what, Georg, we'll stay here for a couple of days and feed off the provisions. I'll give you twenty francs and then we'll go back, just as if we had climbed the Moasernspitze.'

'I'll be disappointed if it doesn't give old Grafergeren a heart-attack to see me come back from the Moasernspitze safe and sound,' I said to myself, savouring the thought of my revenge.

And so we spent two days in the hut eating and drinking and on the third day we went back down.

Outside Herr Grafergeren's hut, a great surprise awaited us. There were about sixty Englishmen standing there, watching in amazement as we descended. At the head of the group of Englishmen, Herr Grafergeren stood gazing at us goggle-eyed.

'You haven't been killed, then?' he called out to me in consternation.

'As you can see,' I replied in a casual tone, 'I haven't.'

'Sir!' one of the Englishmen shouted in my ear, waving a Berne daily paper under my nose, 'Sir, if you are a gentleman, you will explain this to me . . .'

He handed me the Berne newspaper of the previous day, with this report underlined in blue pencil:

A NEW MOUNTAIN-CLIMB

Our indefatigable Herr Grafergeren has succeeded in discovering a rewarding new climb. This is the Moasernspitze, a mountain in our area which is difficult of access and on which, with typical Swiss attention to detail, he has set up two huts. We regret to have to report that the first expedition to this hitherto unclimbed peak has been accompanied by a disaster. A climber, the first to venture on this ascent, fell yesterday, having failed to pay sufficient attention to the advice of his guide, about whose fate we have as yet no information. It is a very rewarding and dangerous climb which, in view of its many points of interest, will doubtless attract many climbers. An intensive search for the two bodies is in progress. Further particulars from Herr Grafergeren, at his hut at the foot of the Moasernspitze.

'Gentlemen,' I said to the Englishmen, 'this is just a flight of Herr Grafergeren's fancy. The way up is not dangerous in the least, indeed I can state that it is really enjoyable. No more than an afternoon stroll . . .'

'Herr Grafergeren,' said one of the Englishmen, 'we are going back to Berne. This gentleman, as you can see, has not been killed. The ascent is not dangerous: it's a waste of our time. You have been lying to us. Let us go, gentlemen. Good Day!'

'Gentlemen,' cried Herr Grafergeren in piteous tones, 'at least consider the possibility that you might be swept away by an avalanche . . .'

We heard no more, for we had already left his hospitable hut behind us. A stone came flying past us from above and to this day, I do not know whether it had broken off from some cliff or whether it had been hurled down after us by Herr Grafergeren.

As for Fräulein Margareta, I saved her the trip to the cemetery, where she had intended to dedicate a prayer to me.

A heart of gold, that's me . . .