

PETER

The Portrait of an Alpine Guide

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I HAVE met many interesting types in my life, but none more likeable or with such a personality as Peter. A native of the Bernese Oberland, he is indeed a true son of the mountains, and has dedicated his life to the service of others. He has trodden and climbed the high peaks for more years than he cares to remember, and, although now in the twilight of his career, still leads his parties with an ability that none can question. Climbing is in his blood, and coming as he does from a family who have been guides for generations I cannot imagine him in any other calling but the one he follows. A small, wiry figure, his build is ideal for the stern, exacting life of a guide, be it dangerous or otherwise. His weather-beaten face, lined by years of exposure to the snow, wind, and sun, is frank and extremely likeable, one that creates a good first impression. Behind his smile and somewhat quiet manner radiates a personality that inspires confidence and creates a profound respect for its owner. What are the qualities demanded of a first-class guide? Climbing ability and stamina under all conditions is probably the first essential, so valuable an asset when the safety of the party is his sole responsibility. Good leadership is a quality born to few men, and this a guide must have. Personality may depend on the man himself, and can help to bridge over difficulties when they arrive with unexpected suddenness on a mountain. The ability to read the weather signs and reach important decisions quickly cannot be overrated. Tact, and an infinite patience, are also absolutely necessary, for even on high mountains human nature is not always at its best. Combine all these things with a knowledge of first-aid and cooking, and the answer is the complete Alpine guide. This, in short, is a super man, but then the standard demanded by the Swiss authorities of a first-class guide is very high indeed.

If I say Peter possesses all these qualities, I am not overestimating. In every climb I was fortunate to take part in with him he played his part to perfection. The welfare of the party, large or small, came first—nothing was too much trouble to explain or help. He speaks three languages fluently—English, French, and German—and these, along with a rich sense of humour, made every excursion a

joyous affair. The ladies in particular Peter treated with a gentleness and patience that was good to watch. Feminine traits being what they are, there were sometimes signs of panic at a difficult part of a climb, but always he was there to smooth things over and lend a helping hand. "Take plenty of time," he would say, and always a strong arm would reach out to help a slender body over an obstacle. It was Peter who lit the fire and had that glorious cup of tea ready when we arrived at the Alpine hut, after our six hours' climb. Early next morning at 3 A.M., before we went to greet the sunrise, he again had the ever-refreshing cup of tea waiting. It was only when he saw that all were provided for that he sat down to take his own. When he once asked me if I would have more tea and I replied in my best Scotch accent for a "wee drappie," he laughed heartily. I somehow suspect that he really knew the true meaning of the expression.

His quick far-seeing eye pointed out many a thing that a novice would miss; he opened our eyes in a true sense. For instance, one might have missed the two chamois high up on the snowline, or the sight of ibex, these wild mountain goats with their magnificent curved horns standing on a rock and silhouetted against the sky. "What's the weather to be like, Peter?" is a familiar question. He would lift his face to the rolling clouds, then over to some distant peak, and give his reply. I have never known him to be wrong. On a glacier or crevasse he would always test the durability of the ice and snow, and to watch him cut out steps in the ice with quick strokes of his ice-axe was a lesson in efficiency. With a rope he is an expert, and infinite care was taken to see that the party was properly roped and at their ease. I can recall one incident during a glacier crossing, when one of the party stupidly let her rucksack fall. It rolled hundreds of feet down a steep snow slope and disappeared into a crevasse. To us it looked gone for good, but not so with Peter. Learning that there was a camera in the pack, he immediately went off to see what he could do. It looked an impossible task, but on reaching the crevasse he shouted for ropes. Three male members of the party climbed down to him. Taking the strain, with the two others standing by, I lowered Peter down to the foot of the crevasse, a distance of over a hundred feet. With a shout of delight he informed me that he had retrieved the rucksack, and it was a great relief for me to see him scramble up the last part of the crevasse. It was characteristic of Peter to make no mention of his feat afterwards. Such is Peter, the man.

The day must surely come when he will have to hang up his climbing boots and take things easier. Few men can have led a more interesting or active life than he; what memories he must have of famous climbers and personalities who sought his assistance. The Alpine glow comes late to the high mountains—a strange haunting beauty that brings each day to a close. So it is with life, and one of my most cherished ambitions is to be out with Peter again before he sits down in his chair to enjoy the retirement he so richly deserves.

Fine mountains breed fine thoughts—and fine men. In Peter I found one of them; his is a personality that enriches the memories of noble scenes and even nobler deeds.