

AN INNOCENT ON THE ZUGSPITZE

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Garmisch in the late summer of 1956 was exceedingly hot. Dozing in the sunshine and reflecting on the perspicacity of the German Physical Society in organising a conference in such a delectable spot, I was roused by a voice booming the Scottish equivalent of "Good show! Let's climb the Zugspitze." Hugh, who should, by rights, have been several thousand miles west, had arrived accompanied by his newly acquired and very charming fiancée Cathy, and having spent several weeks in or around Grindelwald was now seeking new worlds to conquer. I shrunk deeper into my chair, muttering something about old age. Examples twenty years my senior were quoted. I had no kit; under pressure I admitted some old pants and an anorak had somehow strayed into a corner of my baggage. No rope! Unnecessary; fine fixed ropes were provided for nervous novices at the slightest hazard. I played my trump card: no boots! Twenty minutes later, I emerged from a local emporium the possessor of a stout pair of vibram soled kletterschuhe. I was committed.

The route we chose followed the Reintal, through the Partnach gorge to the Bockhutte, the Angerhutte, the Knorrhutte and then on to the summit via the Schneefernerhaus hotel which is the terminus of the cogwheel railway. The Zugspitze is the highest mountain in Germany and although it does not quite top 10,000 feet, the ascent from Garmisch involves over 7,000 feet of climbing. We decided to spend the night at the Angerhutte (4,500 feet) mainly because we were informed that in this modern hut ham and eggs would be provided by a beneficent warden at any reasonable hour of the day or night.

The way from Garmisch passes close to the fine Olympic ski stadium and here we were accosted by a weather-beaten Bavarian with horse and trap, offering to convey us the first mile or two to Partnach Klamm. Craftily, I pointed out to Hugh, a keen photographer, the possibilities of a marriage between his colour film and the brightly painted trap. A prolonged camera session ended in us jogging lazily up the steep road towards the Klamm. From here, the route follows narrow tunnels hewn in the 300 foot rock walls of the gorge, finally emerging on to the wooded and fern clad slopes fringing the Partnach river and providing pleasant walking as far as the Bockhutte. This we reached just as pale stars began to glimmer above the massive wall of the Wetterstein which separated us from Austria. The path now steepened and ran mainly through thick

woods so that we were thankful for our torches, in spite of the presence of a battery of the largest and brightest glow worms I have ever encountered. In front and high above us, we occasionally glimpsed a yellow point of light, which we assumed to be the Knorrhutte, but of the Angerhutte there was no sign.

It was 10.00 p.m. and close to the head waters of the Partnach that the woods suddenly cleared and we came upon an elegant wooden building with surrounding verandah; certainly the Angerhutte, and equally certainly closed. Several minutes of unhopeful hammering produced no reward and we were about to bed down in the ferns when an eerie flickering glow was accompanied at the door by an elderly Bavarian lady in a dressing gown, looking in the candlelight rather like Lady Macbeth. She was, however, unperturbed by this disturbance of her slumbers, and welcomed us in with a flood of voluble German which was finally summarised for me as meaning "the mule has hurt its foot," as a result of which there was not a single consumable item for us on the premises. Our visions of unlimited supplies of ham and eggs faded into cheese and dry biscuits produced from the bottom of someone's rucksack.

A perfect morning and early start brought us to the Knorrhutte for breakfast. The ascent so far, although by a well worn track, had been fairly steep but soon came a mile or two of gentle walking over snow and rock towards the final peak of the Zugspitze. Spectacular walls rose on both sides of us and behind were fine views into the depths of the Partnach gorge. Ahead civilisation ran riot. The snow-filled bowl of the Schneeferner was littered with skiers below the coloured cabs of the ski-lift. The Schneeferner hotel occupied a prominent ledge carved from the face of the mountain and a further cable ran from there to the summit.

Munching chocolate on the terrace of the hotel, I realised I was exciting some interest among a number of well-dressed tourists, who had just arrived by train. I was taking a quick look to see if my already tattered garments had acquired a further rent in an embarrassing position when Cathy informed me that I had been mistaken for a "bergfuhrer." I adopted my grimmest expression.

Another hotel was located within a few feet of the summit while the topmost point was crowned with a large ball surmounted by a cross. In spite of this paraphernalia, a pleasant hour was spent resting in brilliant sunshine and enjoying perfect views into four countries. Below us, the cliffs fell steeply to the Hollental glacier and the dark intriguing cleft of the Hollental gorge. It was now late afternoon, and some discussion ensued as to whether time allowed us

to descend by this route. Hugh, who was all for pressing on, had his way and down we went. Here we met the rusty pegs and rustier wire honoured by the name of fixed ropes. The rock was glassy and trap-like so that even in kletterschuhe I did not feel comfortable, especially as the glacier had the annoying habit of appearing permanently fixed between my feet. On our way down, we passed several ascending parties including a guide, casually leading a very nervous young lady on a short rope, rather like a dog on a lead. The glacier was safe and easy, and we glissaded to the moraine down which we gently strolled in the gathering dusk, smoking, chattering and generally taking things easily, in the belief that all difficulties were over. It was just as the fading daylight disappeared up the steep walls of the narrowing gorge, that we came to a hidden fall in the valley ; two hundred feet of vertical rock, appearing in the near darkness like two thousand. Fortunately, it was well supplied with iron pins, but nevertheless it was rather like descending Terrace Wall by torchlight, and we looked enviously at the faint light of the Hollental Hut far below. This, when we reached it, was filled with youthful climbers, building strength for the morrow with ham, eggs and lager ; an example we quickly followed.

From here it was an easy walk down to Hammersbach village. So we thought.

Among the trees above the torrent of the Hammersbach river, the vertical walls of the gorge rising some hundreds of feet to a narrow strip of starlit sky, it was as black as it should be. Hugh's torch now decided to rebel, and we were left with a very miniature version, bought by me in Garmisch, and reduced to a glimmer by its efforts of the previous night. We rationed ourselves to one flash every few minutes, and stumbled on. A party of happy climbers ascending by the light of several healthy torches informed us "Der Klamm ist licht." This proved to be the understatement of the year. The Klamm is a series of rocky tunnels in the deepest and narrowest part of the gorge connected by ledges cut from the face a few feet above the rushing river. In perhaps three of these we found a minute light set in the ceiling. For the rest, we groped claustrophobically from ledge to ledge, with the aid of occasional flashes from my torch now reduced to one glow-worm power. At last, when we were seriously considering a bivouac, we emerged into a cool night breeze, sweeping up wooded slopes from the twinkling lights of Hammersbach. A half-hour's pleasant stroll brought us to the village precisely at 11.00 p.m., some seventeen hours after leaving the Angerhutte.

Not being subjected to British licensing laws, there was still plenty of activity and we made hot foot for a well lighted hostelry

whose white walls were decorated with murals in the fashion of Bavarian villages. The interior was crowded with young people in their best evening attire but embarrassment at our own appearance disappeared at the sight of large decorative mugs of German ale. Cathy and I collapsed into two chairs by the side of the small dance floor while Hugh disappeared to find a taxi to take us to Garmisch. He had scarcely gone before a young man with an accordion jumped up, played a few bars and barked some rapid orders in German, whereupon two couples began to dance. Clearly, I thought, something is afoot. After a few minutes, the two couples split up, found new partners and danced on. It was a snowball dance. Larger and larger grew the dancing crowd, and closer and closer to the wall shrank Cathy and I trying to hide our feet under the table. It could scarcely be said that Cathy was looking her best, while I, apart from my tattered clothes, sported two days' growth of beard. Surely the worst could not happen? It did!

A handsome young German bowed politely to Cathy and held out his hand. She waved her nailed boots in the air and repeated "Zugspitze! Zugspitze!" It was of no avail. She was swept on to the floor and I also by the young man's partner. Now that everyone was dancing, more pleasantaries followed. Coats came off and my trousers were rolled up to my knees. Finally, the men had to dance around carrying their partners in their arms. Everyone seemed to be having a wonderful time, but I was in no state to appreciate my attractive burden. The atmosphere was stifling; perspiration rolled down my face. Desperately, I wondered what further antics lay in store. There was no way of escape, for it seemed like a horrible dream; torture in the midst of delight. I was about to savour the ultimate degradation, forget my upbringing as an English gentleman, cast my burden to the floor and sprint for the exit, when Hugh arrived to announce the taxi.

We were well on the way to Garmisch before we realised we had still not drunk our beer.