

A POOR VIRGIN

SHOWELL STYLES

Only the poets, and but few of those, have dared to defy English Usage and apply Prosopopœia to mountains. E. H. Young can write, of Y Garn,

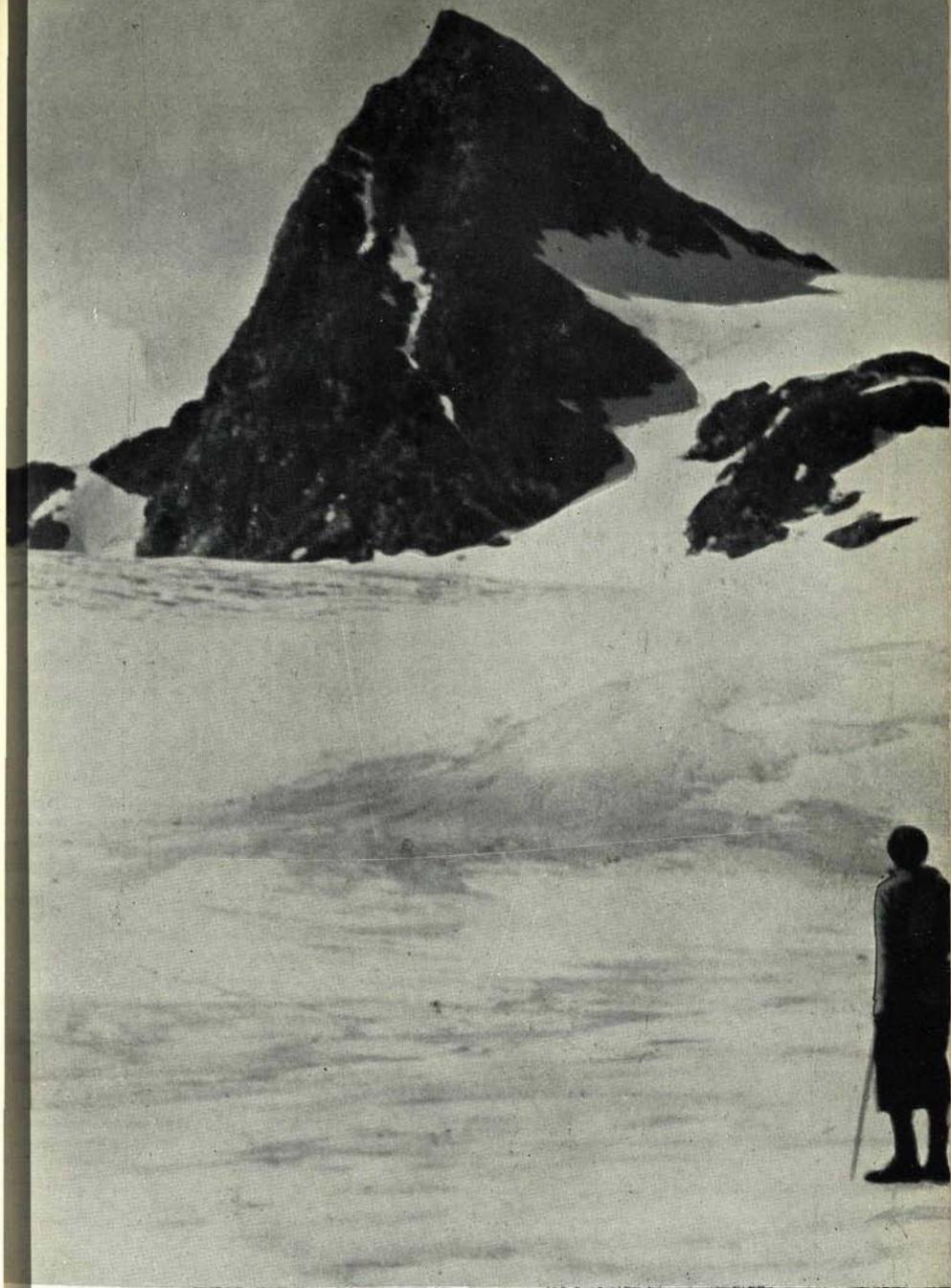
"She sits in splendour, great against the sky,"
and Wordsworth ordains masculinity for Skiddaw with

*"In his natural sovereignty
Our British hill is nobler far."*

But we mere prosaists are denied personification of our graceful peaks, though any seaman may without reproach cherish a graceless collier as "she." Whymper writing of the Matterhorn, Mallory writing of Everest, were both obliged to love their loves with an "it." Generic attributes have long been applied to mountains in our mountain literature, as when a presumably feminine mountain veils its head or a presumably masculine one scowls blackly at its would-be conquerors. "Its," you see—always that stultifying Impersonal to thwart the natural instinct for personification. It is high time for a determined stand. The mountaineer should be able to gaze at his peak, as the sailor gazes at his ship, and say, without any sense of oddness, "She's a beauty."

To me the Spisthorn was feminine from the beginning, and very beautiful. Others will find the uncompromising precipices of her Eastern aspect too angular for beauty; others, liking their mountains divinely tall, will sneer at her lowly 4,120 feet as did Lysander at Hermia's stature—"You minimus . . . you bead, you acorn." I shall not argue with these cavillers. Beauty is not an affair of profile only, nor does charm (that attribute without which beauty is as smoke without fire) reside in height alone. Even conceding a measure of the Spisthorn's beauty to lie in the eye of her first beholders, she had a very rare degree of charm. Her appeal was twofold, of that subtle duality which is wholly and delightfully feminine: she was a virgin, aloof and snowy-robed; and she invited conquest.

Undoubtedly she was smiling, if not actually beckoning, when Welbourn and I crossed her threshold of ice on July 14th. The day before, when we had first set eyes on her, she had promptly veiled herself in the traditional manner; and with reason, for we were the first men to reach that glacier of North Lyngen from which alone she can be viewed at full-length. Today the veil was flung aside, and if sun-warmth and skies of forget-me-not blue



THE SPISTHORN
(Arctic Norway)

Showell Styles

were anything to go by, we were welcome. The slush of the "dry" glacier had not cooled our ardour when we reached and touched the hem of her skirt—ice-blue with silver embroidery of snow, colours befitting a maiden whose bower is 220 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

The indefinable gradation that hallows the ice-axe and condemns the piton seems to me to place crampons halfway between the two. In deciding to leave them behind I felt a certain consciousness of merit; brutality should have no part in this wooing. The dainty pecks of the ice-axe, where the snow-embroidery ceased, were no more than love-taps. A mannerless direct assault was forbidden to us by the Spisthorn herself. She pointed gently but firmly to the circuitous approach, dear to cats and females, by which we might circle leftward from the ice-slope and gain the saddle below the West Ridge. [The right-hand ridge in the accompanying photograph.] Whether this was mere flirtation, whether she was leading us on only to laugh at us from behind some impassable step on the ridge, we could not tell. But when I paused, breathless from long step-kicking, to look up at the ridge close above me, its outline against the overhead blue appeared so level and devoid of incident that I was secretly disappointed. No man loves a too-easy victory. Was my virginal Spisthorn after all a wanton?

I need not have worried. Foreshortening had played its usual trick. When at last we gained the saddle, stepping from the broad pavement of snow to a narrow kerb of rock overhanging three thousand feet of verticality, it was plain to be seen that the Spisthorn would not yield without a struggle. The West Ridge swept magnificently to the final peak in scallops of yellow granite braided with dark-red gabbro, and in two places its attenuated towers appeared to overhang towards us. There at least was threat of rebuff; the girl did not lack spirit.

We rested and ate. The blue air of the Nordland swam about us, the Arctic Ocean spread blue-green floors beyond purple islands into the Northward haze. South and East and West rose the graceful peaks of Lyngen, some few still virgin, some few higher than our mistress. But on her alone our hearts were set. She was unknown, unmapped, un-named (for "Spisthorn," the Sharp Mountain, was our own name for her) and virgin. A pair of bearded Pygmalions, we had come to link her lifeless shape with humanity; for though she had been carved by other and greater sculptors our Galatea was still unawakened.

We left the rucksacks and axes. The shortened rope used on snow and ice was lengthened to its full 120 feet. With the sun warm on our backs and the rough rock warm beneath our hands we began the ridge, leading in turn. Jealously I watched Welbourn's progress, joyously I passed him and made my own assaults. Exhilaration grew with each success. A saucy parade of delightful tricks—airy knife-edge, coy traverse, archness of bridged boulders—served only to bring us nearer to our desire. To Welbourn fell the first, anticipated, rebuff—a grey tower, like a reproving finger, inflexible and unassailable. He thrust boldly past it by an exposed traverse, and the threat was proved a dissembling. In dismay, as it seemed, the Spisthorn suffered our advances without demur until our objective was almost gained. Two hundred feet separated us from the summit when, pressing eagerly, I was brought up short by the second rebuff.

This was a great slab of red gabbro, like the palm of an out-thrust hand. On both sides its base was undercut, overhanging the glacier on the left and the vertical perspective of rotten wall on the right. Diffidence or shyness, tentative pawings, would not serve here. An ardent frontal attack was the only mode for success. Though the lower part of the wall offered hope of a sort, out-of-balance climbing on poor holds, the upper part looked holdless. But it was gabbro. I went at it hard and got up somehow. Welbourn, following scarcely more gracefully, remarked that we should need to abseil when we came down it. It was the Spisthorn's last defence. She yielded now, gracefully enough, as we trampled the final easy ridge beneath our feet. In front the narrow crest vanished, leaving blue space under our noses. She was ours.

There is no real possession, whether of thing or person, in this life. To believe that we can possess anything other than our own souls is vanity of vanities. We crowned the Spisthorn with a cairn, we luxuriated in our triumph, we flaunted aneroids and prismatic compasses and thermometers and numbered her very feet of height. But here was no conquest, no capture. The Spisthorn had not been beaten to her knees; rather, like all mountains and some women, she had raised her lovers higher.

I looked up at her from the glacier four hours later. Our cairn was shrunk to invisibility on her proud head; she was aloof and virginal as ever. O fool, that wished to call her yours! And yet—might there not be some particle of possession in having been the first? Then I would have my consolation in that particle, and say, with Touchstone, "A poor virgin, sir, an ill-favoured thing, sir—but mine own."