

The mature way with mountains

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THE MATURE WAY WITH MOUNTAINS.

By CATHERINE J. LETCHER.

(The following article is reproduced from the March issue of "The Field" by courtesy of the Editor).

The time comes to all of us, sooner or later, when we have to realise that we have become more of a liability than an asset on the climbing rope, and that we can no longer keep up with good skiers. This does not put a stop to one's enjoyment of the mountains; it can enhance it, because we must now approach them in a more leisurely way.

Soon after the war I was living in Switzerland with a young son of 13 who was studying music at the Geneva Conservatoire, and despite a lack of any surplus money, and the disparity of our ages, we made many tours in the mountains, both in winter and summer, and except for skiing on glaciers we could never afford to employ a guide. We would first work out a tour on the map, try to find out if there were any particular hazards on the route chosen, and then decide what we were going to take in our rucksacks. This is probably the most controversial issue to be settled, as a surfeit of equipment means fatigue, but there is a minimum which must be carried for safety. Essentials are a first-aid kit, brandy, grape sugar — a wonderful stimulant in case of fatigue — and warm clothing in case of spending an unwilling night out. In winter a greater weight has to be carried, as climbing skins for the skis have to be taken, and at least one change of socks and gloves. We soon found that drinks weighed most of all, and we eliminated this altogether by carrying a small solid-fuel lamp and tea. One is never far from water or snow in the mountains, and we used boiled sweets as thirst-quenchers while on the move.

Typical of our excursions was one that we made one autumn when we had just arrived from England, both thoroughly out of training from three months at home. From Geneva we took the Simplon train to Aigle, at the far end of the Lake of Geneva, and there took the little mountain train that goes to Les Diablerets. This train, unlike its fellow which grinds slowly on cogs up to Leysin on the other side of the valley, winds its way on normal rails around successive curves with screaming wheels, and has a frightening quality all of its own. At Le Sepey we got out and looked for a modest hotel for the night. We were lucky finding just what we wanted.

Early in the morning we had our coffee and rolls, and telling our hostess that we were climbing the Chamossaire that day, but would hope to come back that night, we set off in the chill sunshine of the autumn morning, across the river bridge, and then over the tracks of the little railway along which we had travelled. Soon we started to climb the rocky paths through the forest, and it was not long before windjackets, and later sweaters, took their rightful places in the rucksacks, and we were climbing in short-sleeved open-necked shirts.

There is a great satisfaction in the slow rhythm of a long climb. There is time to look about and see the beauty around one, the birds and butterflies and flowers; and from time to time one emerges into the

open and the surrounding country bursts upon one's vision. The joy of this undisciplined form of touring is to stop just when one likes, to sit on a rock and stare, or even close one's eyes and doze in the sun, when by all the rules one should be doggedly climbing upwards. I have always drawn a perverse joy from doing things at the wrong time, like playing the piano in the middle of the night or lying in bed when I should be working. But best of all I like to stop in the middle of a climb, when all the best authorities say you should not stop, and lounge happily in the sun, listening to grasshoppers and all the small noises of the Alps, smell the lovely smells, and look at the view. Time does not stand still, and eventually the rest of the climb must be tackled; but nothing can rob me of those moments of perfection.

All the morning we neither saw nor heard other human beings. The cows had come down off the Alps for the winter, and we seemed to have the world to ourselves. . . when suddenly we emerged into a clearing, and saw in front of us a very beautiful lake, the Lac de Chavonnes. Nearby stood a cluster of chalets, and there was still a rowing boat tied to a little jetty. The lake had steep cliffs on one side, which threw dark shadows on the water and gave it a look of great depth.

We had our lunch by the water's edge, and then decided to climb to the summit by the ridge, which afforded us the most breath-taking views on our right, where the rock was almost sheer, while on the left it

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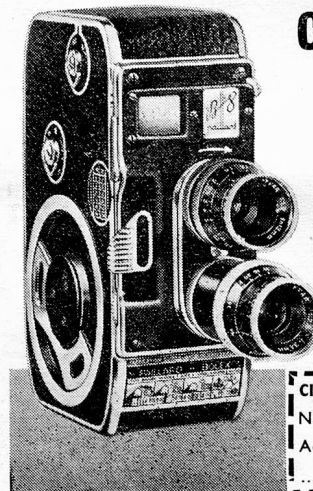
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fell away steeply in a shaly slope. A certain amount of care was necessary, but no real difficulty was met, and we were soon on the summit, which is marked by one of the characteristic iron tripods. From the summit the view was superb, and we looked across the deep valley at Leysin, lying on its distant sunny slope.

We now felt a little over-civilised, as this summit is easily gained from Villars and Bretaye, and in winter has a ski hoist nearly to the top. But after a short spell of walking downhill on springy turf we bore away to the right, and soon started to find the going once more rocky and unfrequented, as we passed under the towering cliffs of the summit. All day we had been walking by our map, with no difficulty, but soon we came to a deserted chalet, from which the cows had recently been moved into the lowland. Here we met with a confusion which we had experienced on previous tours. The map showed but one path in and out of the yard, but the cows had worn a multiplicity of tracks, and it was quite impossible to distinguish which was ours. We chose the wrong one, and after half an hour's walking we realised it was taking us towards Aigle and not Le Sepey.

Instead of retracing our steps and starting again from the chalet, we started across country to try to pick up the track nearer Le Sepey, and found many obstacles in our way, such as deep and rushing streams, fallen timber, and very rough terrain. We must have spent nearly two hours on this diversion, but in the end we struck our path again, and thankfully continued our descent in a more orderly

manner. It was after nightfall when we saw the lights of Le Sepey in front of us, and nine hours after leaving the hotel two weary walkers fell into their chairs in the dining room and ordered their dinner and a bottle of good red wine, from the Aigle vineyards.

The next morning we decided to save money by walking down to Aigle, instead of taking the train. We had noticed the ease with which a mountain postman had negotiated a steep slope of which we had made heavy weather some months previously, and we had perfected a downhill technique which was to save us a great deal of fatigue and time. It depends on good nails in heavy boots; the muscles are relaxed, and gravity takes you down at a great speed, without any expenditure of energy in controlling yourself. Thus, we made good time down the path on the same side as the railway line.

Perhaps about halfway down, we came to one of the more spectacular sights on this route — the Pont de la Tine. Here the river, the Grande Eau, gets compressed into a narrow rocky channel, only a fraction of its normal width, with a beautiful little stone bridge spanning it. The water, which is very swift, here becomes a terrifying, savage beast, and plunges with a roar into a boiling cauldron on the further side of the bridge. We risked our lives to get some good views of this, but the narrowness of the valley made the light too bad for any pictures. The rest of the walk down to Aigle was rather tame after this excitement, but sufficiently rapid to allow us half an hour for some coffee before the train for Geneva drew in.

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