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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

Most people know that there are a lot of mountains in Switzerland. In point of fact, there is at least one peak for each inhabitant of the country, with as many shapes and sizes as can be imagined. This means that everyone can have his private mountain, just as people in other countries have private islands.

Mountains are, of course, larger than people, so that they are able to accommodate more than one person at a time. Consequently, one can choose almost any mountain—anywhere in the country—and proceed to sit on it, look at it, climb it or get inspired by it. Since it is difficult to move mountains in the literal sense, they also offer a high degree of security to the harried city-dweller caught up in the complexities of modern living.

Because each mountain has its own distinct appearance—one might say, its alpine personality—it has been given its own special name, too, a name frequently inspired by the shape of the peak or by the emotions produced. My favorite mountain, the one I was determined to climb, is called the Geiger, which, when translated, means the Violinist. The North Face of the Geiger was, in fact, never scaled before my first attempt, which was to take place in the dead of winter.

There is an old legend concerning the Geiger which fascinated me from the beginning, probably because of my musical background. It tells of eerie, spectral sounds emanating from the menacing North Face. Cowherds in the valley below were entranced by this ethereal music, which they believed was produced by an old fiddler who made his home in the rocky crevices of the heights. When the Geiger music sounded, villagers were drawn by a strange magnetic force to the base of the mountain, where, when they looked up, they imagined they saw the violinist himself. Many accounts were written of this phenomenon in the early nineteenth century, including a well-known poem, *Fiddler on the Mountain*:

*What form of music hear I here,
What does all this connote?
Who is this being up above,
Why does he play his note?*

*O Paganini of the hills,
Both king and queenie of the trills,
Play on and on and never stop
Until we reach you at the top!*

The attraction of the old fiddler encouraged many alpinists before me to attempt the North Face. But it remained impenetrable, as mysterious and enigmatic as the music itself.

The story, as I've said, always fascinated me, which is why I was determined to have a go at the North Face. Since even the most experienced climbers were obviously incapable of reaching the top,

I logically felt that my lack of knowledge might well produce a successful result.

And so, one day when the winter sun shone brilliantly, I put on my mountain sneakers and rucksack, and called the local TV station to inform them of my plans. I asked them please not to send a helicopter to follow my ascent, because I didn't want the noise to frighten away the old violinist, whom I wanted to interview on behalf of the newspaper *Tell*. I recalled the motto of this journal, "*Tell* tells all," and I wanted to give them exclusive rights to my unusual story.

When I arrived at the Little Fried Egg, at the foot of the Geiger, a crowd had already gathered. Mountain people seem to have extra-sensory perception, for how otherwise could they have known that I was planning my fearless ascent for this very day. I looked around me and saw a man who was renting out telescopes to the tourists, so that they could observe my climb. Other people were munching sausages and bread, which were being sold everywhere. A yodel group from the neighboring village of Lautersingen had come in a chartered postal bus to send me off with song. To the left of my starting point, a group of mountaineers—I recognized two or three of them—were betting among themselves that I would not be successful.

I'll show them all, I swore to myself. "Wait and see," I muttered under my breath, "an American will finally conquer your Geiger North Face with its overhangs and chimneys, its ledges and edelweiss. This ascent will go down in history, just as the story of Everest will never rest." Glaring disdainfully as I made my way through the sausage stands, I entered the wall, exuding confidence all the way.

I must admit that it was more difficult than I had thought. But, where a more experienced climber would have faltered, I threw caution to the alpine winds. I hammered hooks and spikes into the Geiger granite as if it were plywood, pulled myself onward and upward with brute force and sheer courage. Soon I reached the final overhang, an awesome roof of wind-blown limestone—the only remaining hindrance separating me from the peak and victory! I clenched my teeth, took out my ice pick and rope, and climbed on—first straight up, then upside down, then around... and over. Just one more step, one more breath, one more minute...

A helicopter had appeared, and a photographer, hanging perilously from a cable beneath it, was filming the final stages of my courageous ascent. I looked down. Far below I saw Swiss and American flags being waved by the eager spectators, who were following my every step with their rented telescopes.

Then I looked up. There... there, almost within my grasp, was the elusive peak. Suddenly I heard the strange music of the old violinist and I knew that the legend was true. Soon I would be witnessing a sight no man had ever seen before.

(To be continued)