

DAVID

NANCY HEATON

Early in the Autumn of 1950 we opened our morning paper one morning, to see his photo. Perched on top of the Devil's Chimney on Leckhampton Hill, he was being rescued by firemen with their tall ladders, a rather pathetic-looking boy of seventeen or so, wearing thin city shoes. The climb had been difficult and he had tried more than once, but at last he had succeeded and now he could not get down! He waited until he saw someone walking along the ridge, and called out; and in due course these people had sent the Cheltenham Fire Brigade.

We decided to write to him. He was a Birmingham boy; his address had been given in the article accompanying the photograph. We felt that here, if anywhere, was someone who needed the help and guidance that the M.A.M. could so well give.

He came, at our invitation, to an evening meeting. I think it was a lecture on gritstone climbing, with slides, by Peter Harding. David was an undernourished-looking boy, pale and thin, with a trick of being unable to look one in the face when speaking. He had with him a copy of his newspaper photo and article, of which he was very proud, and a number of postcards of all the peaks he had climbed—Snowdon, Scafell Pike and Ben Nevis. He told us that he did all these alone and had no friends interested in outdoor pursuits. He went by bus mostly, and always wore just ordinary clothes and shoes. We glanced down at his feet; the shoes were very old and thin.

Alas, he was too superior for us. He felt that we should all have been glad to meet him, who had been such a hero.

A little nonplussed, we took our seats. The substance of the lecture was exhilarating, the standard of the climbs very high. The pictures added to one's conviction that here was a sport not likely to be undertaken in thin walking shoes. From beside me came ejaculations from time to time—"Coo! Lumme! Cor! Gosh!" After the show our new friend was much subdued. He accepted with alacrity a copy of J. E. Q. Barford's book on climbing and an invitation to come again, and left us hoping that he would agree to join a beginners' meet sometime.

He came to one more evening meeting. But by this time he had regained his arrogant attitude and took little interest in the

several introductions which we gave him. He mentioned that he was about to be called up and went so far as to 'phone me the day before he went into the R.A.F. I asked to what branch of the service he hoped to be drafted and he replied that he had stated a preference for the Mountain Rescue Section. We wished him good luck and asked him to be sure to contact us when he was on leave.

The following Spring I received a 'phone call from David. He was having a fortnight's leave in June and he wanted advice. He was going to climb Mont Blanc and he wished for a complete list of requirements—yes, at once, on the 'phone, as he had only a couple of days in which to get things together! I did my best, wishing that my husband was at home just then, and tried to impress upon him the nature of the problems involved in pursuing his ambition. Equipment, the use of it, guides, acclimatisation, cost, shortage of time available for a completely untrained climber, how much pleasure he could get out of some of the lesser expeditions, and so on; but I sensed that nothing would put him off. He was interested only in the "highest peak." No, he said in reply to my question, he had not been put into the Mountain Rescue Section of the R.A.F. I replaced the receiver, feeling a little sad.

The next news came by letter early in 1952. He had reached the top of Mont Blanc, he said, after the fourth attempt. He was going in August to climb the Matterhorn. Could we tell him at which Alpine huts he could buy food? He would be away a month. We referred him to the suitable authority and again wished him luck, but shook our heads sadly. Clearly, from the tone of his letter, he climbed alone, would accept no advice or caution on climbing, knew nothing of the changes in weather which can overtake one on an Alpine peak.

That was the last we heard from him. On our return from our Summer holiday we opened our morning paper one Saturday and read the following:—

ALPS SEARCHED FOR BIRMINGHAM MAN— WENT CLIMBING ALONE

Swiss police and mountain guides were yesterday looking for a Birmingham airman, L.A.C. David T—— S—— (19), who has been missing since he left Pélérins Youth Hostel, Chamonix, on August 14. They had no idea where to search

as he left alone and, Reuter reports, without telling anyone where he was going. He had already claimed to have climbed the Matterhorn alone.

S— left Credenhill R.A.F. Station, Hereford, at the beginning of August for a month's climbing in Europe, for which official permission was given, and was due back on August 25. On his failure to return the Air Ministry got in touch with the French police.

His father, Mr. A. W. S—, who received a letter from his son's friend, M. Jean Gullot, of Chamonix, who saw the climber put on his haversack, leave the hostel, and set out for the mountains, said: "His ambition was to climb Everest, and he had already saved £50 towards paying for an ascent of Kilimanjaro in Africa. He always climbed alone."

Birmingham Post,

Saturday, 13th September, 1952.

We wrote at once to his father but have had no reply, nor did we really expect one. They were not interested in his doings at home, we had been told.