

THREE SPITSBERGEN PEAKS

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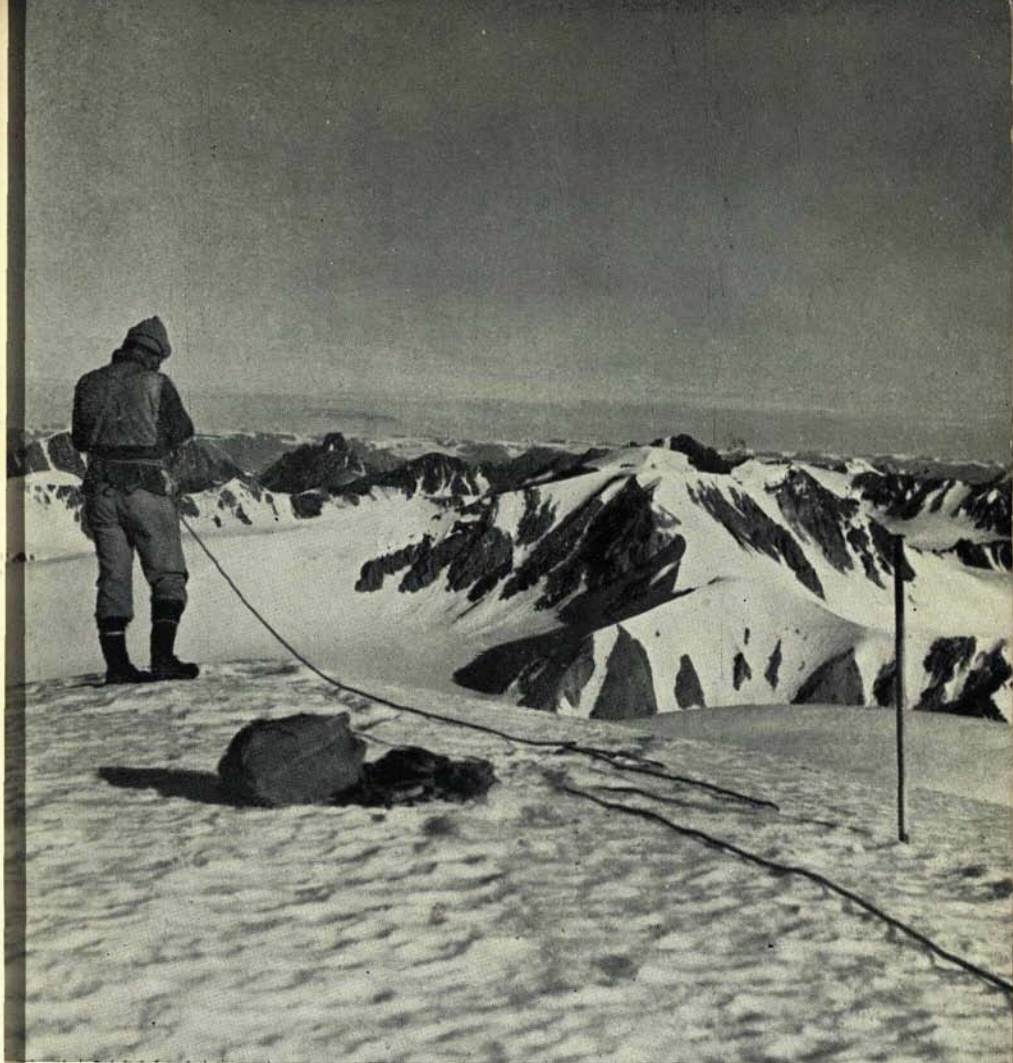
The mountains of Spitsbergen may be roughly classified in three groups; easy, sporting, and "not-to-be-thought-of." Some rise steeply out of the Arctic sea, rugged and forbidding, mantled by mist and cloud; some, of glittering white symmetry, seem to stand poised exquisitely between the ice-cold azure sweep of sky and the endless rolling miles of ice; some lie gross, flat-topped, distintegrating purple masses against a midnight sky all flame and bronze. This is the North; this is Spitsbergen and its mountains, lonely, savage, serene, beautiful.

After many days, marked in an era of perpetual light by the ache of muscle, by pemmican stews, by camps pitched, broken, and forgotten, our little force of eight men and four sledges crossed the inland ice and the watershed and established Ice-Cap Depot by a melt stream at the base of a great cliff. We had suffered as much as one might expect of a party only two of whom had previously known that skis are inventions of the devil, and only one of whom knew that sledge-hauling is not so romantic as it sounds.

We were buried by a storm, had sledges broken by melt streams, were palsied by fright at crevasses, and hobbled on the remnants of our ski-skins into Ice-Cap Depot, full of the stern conviction that if we could not claim the prize for being the world's silliest asses at least we were having a jolly good try.

At Ice-Cap Depot we were to split into three parties. Bayly and Bailey were to conduct geological investigations in Oslobreen; Parks and Macdonald were to set up a base-line in Kvitbreen and survey the surrounding district; Wilson, Stileman, Marriott and myself were to have an off-day, then return to Base Hut for further supplies of food and fuel. We were all to rendezvous at Ice-Cap Depot in sixteen days.

Meanwhile, a few miles across the great flat Kvit glacier, seductive, enticing, intoxicating, sprawled Mt. Newton. Newton is actually a great snow bump, having all the intense interest of a hog's back. But consider our state of mind. Arthur and I had watched in frustrated silence as different ships carried us past Romsdal, Lofoten, and Lyngen; we had resisted the pointed peaks just across the ice fjord from Longyear City; we had envied the



THE SUMMIT OF MOUNT NEWTON
(Spitsbergen)

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French when they vanished into the Stubendorff ranges, and we were now almost as desperate as an alcoholic in a temperance hotel. As I say, just across the glacier sprawled Mt. Newton, beautiful, exciting, real; and the morning of our off-day dawned with rare promise, sunny and crystal-clear. I do not think any consideration could have kept Arthur and I from climbing Newton that day. It is the highest peak in Spitsbergen, and we were grateful for its nearness.

We carefully collected the various items of food, goggles, cameras, and all the miscellany of mysterious gadgets considered necessary for so perilous a mission. With a sturdy resolution born of the past fortnight's reverses and vagaries I clasped the sweet coolness of the ice-axe shaft and delighted in its balance. Then the sun touched our spirits and with the gaiety of truant school-boys we waved to our friends and set off by ski across the Kvitbreen. We left the skis at the foot of the mountain, and continued on foot.

Newton is an easy peak, though it boasts several ridges and some steep cliffs. We favoured the easy route, and followed a snow ridge to the summit. I was fearful lest we should be robbed of our reward by the inevitable mist and clouds, but the gods were kind, and after a long slog we came at last in sight of the bent cane and tattered red shred that was sole remnant of a flag erected by a previous survey party.

The ascent had been uninspiring and our gaiety had left us, and there was no indication that this would rank amongst our finer mountain memories. Yet as we stood by the old survey flag and looked around I knew that for me this day had a singularity that I should never find in Norway, or Switzerland, or anywhere in Europe. I stood looking down at an unknown world, utterly lonely and stern. I could see Oslobreen, where our geologists would soon be working, and beyond it the silver streak of Hinlopen Strait, and beyond that the vague, elusive icy shores of North East Land, floating, it seemed, in a sea of mist. By turning a little I could scan the mighty Stubendorff mountains, and the Christmas-cake effect of their steep cliffs topped by thick crusts of permanent snow and ice; and marvel at the awesome aspect, even in the sunlight, of their deep gloomy valleys.

To the South-West opened a wide vista. The mouth of Icefjord, over fifty miles away, could be picked out; and filling all the scene stood a hundred peaks, and a hundred beyond, many without names, most of them unclimbed. And where the mountains were not lay broad flat glaciers and ice-fields.

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It was several weeks before Arthur and I were able to plunge into the Stubendorff area, and then it was a few days too late; for the fresh winter snow started to fall, and never really stopped from that time on. After our rendezvous at the Ice-Cap Depot, Arthur and I took eight days' food and a single sledge and set off along the upper part of the Kvitbreen. As we crossed the Trebreenpasset between Mount Waynflete and Mount Newton it started to snow, but not before we had time to see a long jagged ridge rising up to the crest of a massive and formidable-looking peak. Arthur, with whom the choice lay, immediately declared that the prominent ridge was a "must"; and so, a few hours later, we pitched our little Mummy at the foot of the ridge amidst deep crevasses.

It snowed all the following day. Arthur said the tent was facing the wind and we ought to get out and turn it round. I viewed the suggestion with disfavour; it was obvious that Arthur had finished his book. My sleeping bag was warm and I still had some pages left to read in "Kon-Tiki." I gave a non-committal grunt. Arthur was not to be put off. I laid down "Kon-Tiki" and we debated the problem.

Arthur pointed out, stressing his arguments by intermittent puffs at a foul briar, that our home would be more desirable if the wind did not penetrate through the flap entrance. Peering across the intervening foot at his indistinct shape I coughed out the reply that to achieve his Utopian ideal we must expose ourselves to the elements, and it would take a long time to get warm again.

The discussion, eked out by brews of tea, and stimulated at times by great gusts thrusting snow through the flap entrance as if to support Arthur's arguments, reached limits undreamt of for such a mundane subject in less inspired circumstances, and only ended when the conversation and talkers were quite exhausted. We then ventured out and turned the tent round. The wind had changed direction anyway. Next day was much the same; it snowed. Arthur read "Kon-Tiki" and I read the Odyssey for the tenth (or perhaps it was fifteenth) time. I assumed an air of stoicism; Arthur had another name for it. Arthur, indeed, exercised great self-restraint even when our stove went temperamental. He did not hurl it into the outer darkness as I might have done, but spoke to it. Perhaps it was a prayer, or a mystic incantation; the phrases, though unintelligible, possessed a fervour and colour that left one completely aware of the warm, passionate feeling of the man and his imaginative interpretation of the situation.

The third day dawned clear, and we attacked the ridge, plastered though it was with new snow. We spent about eight hours on this grand ridge, and ascended perhaps the better half of its length, during which time we encountered slabs and a fierce little chimney which again gave scope for Arthur's latent powers of expression. Clouds began to obscure the summit, and large snowflakes fell on our anoraks as we probed for a way across a huge gendarme between two gullies, so we called it a day and retreated, not too hastily, down the steep and treacherous slopes of the nearer gully. And so back to our tent, and base. If anything could lure me back to Spitsbergen it would be the desire to finish that ridge, for Eddingtonryggen is a more magnificent mountain than any other on which I've set foot, and must offer a dozen sporting routes to the persistent explorer.

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Endeavour is the child of optimism, and scanning the crumbling horizontal strata of the cliffs overlooking our base hut I could not help thinking that there must be a chink in the armour somewhere. So, one day, after persuading my friends that I was seeking such flowers as still clung to life by the fjord's edge, I took my axe and by some strange means found myself walking towards a dark gully that snaked up the mountainside between heaps of rock-debris to a small white dot in the line of crumbling cliffs. I hoped that this was a reasonable snow or ice slope giving access to the summit. But as I drew near and saw its hundred or so feet of near-vertical ice, I knew that this was no weak point in the mountain's defences. Though this mountain may be ascended easily from the other side, there are similar peaks in Spitsbergen, having this horizontal stratum of friable rock, which I think are quite unclimbable with any degree of safety, even if one wished to devote energy to such huge slag-heaps.

To climb alone is one of the deadly sins, but to mislead one's friends as to one's intentions is to be utterly steeped in wickedness. I derived great comfort from the thought. I would make this dull slag-heap yield its quota of romance even by making it a forbidden fruit, a fruit to be stolen.

I edged out of the gully to the base of the rotten cliffs. A black shadow swam across the hillside, and I ducked as an angry fulmar swooped low over my head. Along the valley a dark cloud crawled down the glacier and on towards my stance, and I knew it was snow. The unstable surface beneath my feet excused itself on every pretext and slid away, and it was with more joy than regret that I turned my steps back to base.

A curl of smoke rose from the hut's chimney, the Union Jack swung lazily in the wind. Down on the fjord the engine of our small boat sprang into life—soon we should be gone from this lonely valley and all would be quiet. The darkness and cold of winter would hold the land in an iron grip, and the ice-bear be sole master again.