

The Horror Horn

A STRANGE STORY OF THE ALPS IN WINTER

By E. F. Benson

FOR the past ten days the Alpine village of Alhubel had basked in the radiant midwinter weather proper to its altitude of more than six thousand feet. From sunrise to sunset that luminary—so surprising to those who have hitherto associated the winter sun with a pale tepid plate indistinctly shining through the murky air of England—had blazed its way across the sparkling blue. Every night the serene and windless frost had made the stars sparkle like illuminated diamond dust.

Sufficient snow had fallen before Christmas to content the skiers, and the big rink, sprinkled every evening, had given the skaters, each morning, a fresh surface on which to perform their slippery antics. Bridge and dancing served to while away the greater part of the night.

To me, for the first time tasting the joys of a winter in the Engadine, it seemed that a new heaven and a new earth had been lighted, warmed, and refrigerated for the special benefit of those who, like myself, had been wise enough to save up their days of holiday for the winter.

But a break came in these ideal conditions. One afternoon the sun became veiled with vapor, and up the valley, from the northwest, came a wind frozen with miles of travel over ice-bound hillsides. Soon the air was dusted with snow, first in small flakes driven almost horizontally before its congealing breath, and then in larger tufts, as of swan's-down.

All day, for a fortnight before, the fate of nations and life and death had seemed of far less importance than to get certain tracings of the skate-blade on the ice of proper shape and size; but now it seemed that the one paramount consideration was to hurry back to the hotel for shelter. It was wiser to leave rocking turns alone than to be frozen in their quest.

I had come out here with my cousin, Professor Ingram, the celebrated physiologist and Alpine climber. During the serenity of the last fortnight he had made a couple of notable winter ascents; but this morning his weather wisdom had mistrusted the signs of the heavens, and instead of attempting the ascent of the Piz Passug, he had waited to see whether his misgivings justified themselves. So there he sat now in the hall of the admirable hotel, with his feet on the hot water pipes, and the latest delivery of the English post in his hands. This contained a pamphlet concerning the result of the Mount Everest expedition, of which he had just finished the perusal when I entered.

"A very interesting report," he said, passing it to me. "They certainly deserve to succeed next year; but who can tell what that final six thousand feet may entail? Six thousand feet more, when you have already accomplished twenty-three thousand, does not seem much; but at present no one knows whether the human frame can stand exertion at such a height. It may affect not the lungs and heart only, but possibly the brain. Delirious hallucinations may occur. In fact, if I did not know better, I should have said that one such hallucination had occurred to the climbers already."

"And what was that?" I asked.

"You will find that they thought they came across the tracks of some naked human foot at a great altitude. That looks, at first sight, like a hallucination. What more natural than that a brain excited and exhilarated by the extreme height should have interpreted certain marks in the snow as the footprints of a human being? Every bodily organ, at such heights, is exerting itself to the utmost to do its work, and the brain seizes on those marks in the snow

and says, 'Yes, I'm all right, I'm doing my job, and I perceive marks in the snow which I affirm are human footprints.' Here, at this comparatively moderate altitude, you know how restless and eager the brain is, how vividly, as you told me, you dream at night. Multiply that stimulus and that consequent eagerness and restlessness by three, and how natural that the brain should harbor illusions! What, after all, is the delirium which often accompanies high fever, but the effort of the brain to do its work under the pressure of feverish conditions? It is so eager to continue perceiving that it perceives things which have no existence."

"And yet you don't think that these naked human footprints were illusions," said I. "You told me you would have thought so, if you had not known better."

He shifted in his chair and looked out of the window for a moment. The air was thick now with the density of the big snowflakes driven along by the squealing north-west gale.

"Quite so," he said. "In all probability the human footprints were real human footprints. At any rate, I expect, they were the footprints of a being more nearly a man than anything else. My reason for saying so is that I learn such beings exist. I have even seen quite near at hand—I assure you I did not wish to be nearer, in spite of my intense curiosity—the creature, shall we say, which would make such footprints. If the snow was not so dense, I could show you the place where I saw him."

He pointed straight out of the window, where across the valley lies the huge tower of the Ungeheuerhorn, with the carved pinnacle of rock at the top like the horn of some gigantic rhinoceros. On one side only, as I knew, was the mountain practicable, and that for none but the finest climbers. On the other three a succession of ledges and precipices rendered it unscalable. Two thousand feet of sheer rock form the tower; below are five hundred feet of fallen boulders, up to the edge of which grow dense woods of larch and pine.

"Upon the Ungeheuerhorn?" I asked.

"Yes. Until twenty years ago it had never been ascended, and I, like several others, spent a lot of time in trying to find a route up it. My guide and I sometimes passed three nights together at the hut beside the Blumen glacier, prowling around it. It was by luck that we found the route,

for the mountain looks even more impracticable from the far side than it does from this. But one day we found a long transverse fissure, which led to a negotiable ledge. Then there came a slanting ice couloir, which you could not see till you got to the foot of it. However, I need not go into that."

II

THE big room where we sat was filling up with cheerful groups driven indoors by the sudden gale and snowfall, and the cackle of merry tongues grew loud. The band, too, that invariable appanage of teatime at Swiss resorts, had begun to tune up for the usual potpourri from the works of Puccini. Next moment the sugary, sentimental melodies began.

"Strange contrast!" said Ingram. "Here are we sitting warm and cozy, our ears pleasantly tickled with these baby tunes. Outside the storm is growing more violent every moment, and swirling round the austere cliffs of the Ungeheuerhorn—the Horror Horn, as indeed it was to me."

"I want to hear all about it," I said. "I want every detail. Make a short story long, if it's short. I want to know why it's *your* Horror Horn?"

"Well, Chanton and I—he was my guide—used to spend days prowling about the cliffs, making a little progress on one side, and then being stopped, or gaining perhaps five hundred feet on another side, and then being confronted by some insuperable obstacle, till the day when, by luck, we found the route. Chanton never liked the job, for some reason that I could not fathom. It was not because of the difficulty or danger of the climbing, for he was the most fearless man I have ever met when dealing with rocks and ice; but he was always insistent that we should get off the mountain and back to the Blumen hut before sunset. He was scarcely easy even when we had got back to shelter and locked and barred the door.

"I well remember one night when, as we ate our supper, we heard some animal—a wolf, probably—howling somewhere out in the night. A positive panic seized him, and I don't think he closed his eyes till morning. It struck me then that there might be some grisly legend about the mountain, connected possibly with its name; so next day I asked him why the peak was called the Horror Horn. He put

the question off at first, and said that, like the Schreckhorn, its name was due to its precipices and falling stones. When I pressed him further, he acknowledged that there was a legend about it, which his father had told him.

"There were creatures, so it was supposed, who lived in its caves—things human in shape, and covered, except for the face and hands, with long black hair. They were dwarfs in size, four feet high or thereabouts, but of prodigious strength and agility, the remnants of some wild, primeval race. It seemed that they were still in an upward stage of evolution, or so I guessed, for the story ran that sometimes girls had been carried off by them, not as prey, and not for any such fate as for those captured by cannibals, but to be bred from. Young men, too, had been raped by them, to be mated with the females of their tribe. All this looked as if the creatures, as I said, were tending toward humanity.

"Naturally, I did not believe a word of it, as applied to the conditions of the present day. Centuries ago, conceivably, there may have been such beings. With the extraordinary tenacity of tradition, the story had been handed down, from one generation to another, and was still current around the hearths of the peasants. As for their numbers, Chanton told me that three had been once seen together by a man who, owing to his swiftness on skis, had escaped to tell the tale. This man, he averred, was no other than his grandfather, who had been benighted one winter evening as he passed through the dense woods below the Ungeheuerhorn. Chanton supposed that they had been driven down to these lower altitudes in search of food during severe winter weather, for otherwise the recorded sights of them had always taken place among the rocks of the peak itself. They had pursued his grandfather, then a young man, at an extraordinary swift canter, running sometimes upright, as men run, sometimes on all fours, in the manner of beasts; and their howls were just such as that we had heard that night in the Blumen hut. Such, at any rate, was the story Chanton told me. Like you, I regarded it as the very moonshine of superstition; but the next day I had reason to reconsider my judgment about it.

"It was on that day that after a week of exploration we hit on the only route at present known to the top of our peak. We

started as soon as there was light enough to climb by, for, as you may guess, on very difficult rocks it is impossible to climb by lantern or moonlight. We hit on the long fissure I have spoken of, we explored the ledge which from below seemed to end in nothingness, and with an hour's step-cutting we ascended the couloir that led upward from it. From there onward it was a rock climb, certainly of considerable difficulty, but with no heartbreaking discoveries ahead, and about nine o'clock in the morning we stood on the top. We did not wait there long, for when the sun grows hot that side of the mountain is raked by falling stones loosened from the ice that holds them, and we made haste to pass the ledge where the falls are most frequent. After that there was the long fissure to descend, a matter of no great difficulty, and we were at the end of our work by midday—both of us, as you may imagine, in a state of the highest elation.

"A long and tiresome scramble among the huge boulders at the foot of the cliff then lay before us. Here the rock formation is very porous, and great caves extend far into the mountain. We had unroped at the base of the fissure, and were picking our way as seemed good to either of us among these fallen rocks, many of them bigger than an ordinary house, when, on turning the corner of one of these, I saw a sight which made it clear that the stories Chanton had told me were no figment of traditional superstition.

"Not twenty yards in front of me lay one of the beings of which he had spoken. There it sprawled, naked, basking on its back, with its face turned up to the sun, which its narrow eyes regarded without winking. In form it was human, but the growth of hair that covered limbs and trunk alike almost completely hid the sun-tanned skin beneath. Its face, however, save for the down on its cheeks and chin, was hairless; and I looked on a countenance the sensual and maleficent bestiality of which froze me with horror. Had the creature been an animal, one would have felt scarcely a shudder at the gross animalism of it. The horror lay in the fact that it was a man. There lay by it a couple of gnawed bones, and, its meal finished, it was lazily licking its protuberant lips, from which came a purring murmur of content. With one hand it scratched the thick hair on its belly, in the other it held one of the bones, which

presently split in half beneath the pressure of its finger and thumb.

"My horror was not based on the stories of what happened to those men whom these creatures caught. It was due simply to my proximity to a thing so human and so infernal. The peak of whose ascent had a moment ago filled us with such elation became to me an Ungeheuerhorn indeed, for it was the home of beings more awful than the delirium of nightmare could ever have conceived.

"Chanton was a dozen paces behind me, and with a backward wave of my hand I caused him to halt. Then, withdrawing myself with infinite precaution, so as not to attract the gaze of that basking creature, I slipped back around the rock and whispered to him what I had seen. With blanched faces we made a long detour, peering around every corner, and crouching low, not knowing that at any step we might not come upon another of these beings, or that from the mouth of one of the caves in the mountainside there might not appear another of those hairless and dreadful faces, perhaps with the breasts and insignia of womanhood. That would have been the worst of all.

"Luck favored us, for we made our way among the bowlders and shifting stones, the rattle of which might at any moment have betrayed us, without a repetition of my experience. Once among the trees, we ran as if the Furies themselves were in pursuit. Well now did I understand, though I dare say I cannot convey, the qualms of Chanton's mind when he spoke to me of these creatures. Their very humanity was what made them so terrible—the fact that they were of the same race as ourselves, but of a type so abysmally degraded that the most brutal and inhuman of men would have seemed angelic in comparison."

III

THE music of the small band was over before Ingram finished his narrative, and the chattering groups round the tea-table had dispersed. He paused a moment.

"There was a horror of the spirit," he said, "which I experienced then, and from which, I verily believe, I have never entirely recovered. I saw how terrible a living thing could be, and how terrible, in consequence, was life itself. In us all, I suppose, lurks some inherited germ of that ineffable bestiality, and who knows whether,

sterile as it has apparently become in the course of centuries, it might not fructify again? When I saw that creature sun itself, I looked into the abyss out of which we have crawled. And these creatures are trying to crawl out of it now, if they exist any longer. For the last twenty years there has been no record of their being seen, until we come to this story of the footprint observed by the climbers on Everest. If that is authentic, if the party did not mistake the footprint of some bear, or what not, for a human tread, it seems as if this bestranded remnant of mankind is still in existence."

Ingram had told his story well, but, as we sat in this warm and civilized room, the horror that he evidently felt had not communicated itself to me in any very vivid manner. Intellectually I agreed with him. I could appreciate his horror, but certainly my spirit felt no shudder of interior comprehension.

"But it is odd," I said, "that your keen interest in physiology did not disperse your qualms. You were looking, I take it, at some form of man more remote, probably, than the earliest human remains. Did not something inside you say, 'This is of absorbing significance'?"

He shook his head.

"No—I only wanted to get away," he said. "It was not, as I have told you, the terror of what, according to Chanton's story, might await us if we were captured; it was sheer horror at the creature itself. I quaked at it."

The snowstorm and the gale increased in violence that night, and I slept uneasily, plucked again and again from slumber by the fierce battling of the wind that shook my windows as if with an imperious demand for admittance. It came in billowy gusts, with strange noises intermingled with it as for a moment it abated, with flutings and moanings that rose to shrieks as the fury of it returned. These noises, no doubt, were mingling themselves with my drowsed and sleepy consciousness. Once I tore myself out of nightmare, imagining that the creatures of the Horror Horn had gained footing on my balcony, and were rattling at the window bolts.

Before morning the gale had died away, and I awoke to see the snow falling dense and fast in a windless air. For three days it continued without intermission. Then, with its cessation, there came a frost such

as I have never felt before. Fifty degrees were registered one night, and more the next, and what the cold must have been on the cliffs of the Ungeheuerhorn I cannot imagine. It was sufficient, I thought, to have made an end altogether of the mysterious inhabitants of the mountain. My cousin, on that day twenty years ago, had missed an opportunity for study which would probably never fall again either to him or another.

IV

ONE morning I received a letter from a friend, saying that he had arrived at the neighboring winter resort of San Luigi, and proposing that I should come over for a morning's skating and lunch afterward. The place was not more than a couple of miles off, if one took the path over the low, pine-clad foothills above which lay the steep woods below the first rocky slopes of the Ungeheuerhorn.

Accordingly, with a knapsack containing skates on my back, I went on skis over the wooded slopes and down by an easy descent to San Luigi. The day was overcast, and clouds entirely obscured the higher peaks, though the sun was visible, pale and un luminous through the mist.

As the morning went on, the sun gained the upper hand, and I slid down into San Luigi beneath a sparkling firmament. We skated and lunched, and then, since it looked as if thick weather was coming up again, I set out early—about three o'clock—for my return journey.

Hardly had I got into the woods when the clouds gathered above, and streamers and skeins of them began to descend among the pines through which my path threaded its way. In ten minutes more their opacity had so increased that I could hardly see a couple of yards in front of me.

Very soon I became aware that I must have got off the path, for snow-cowled shrubs lay directly in my way, and, casting back to find it again, I became altogether confused as to direction. However, though progress was difficult, I knew I had only to keep on the ascent, and presently I should come to the brow of these low foothills and descend into the open valley where Alhubel stood. So on I went, stumbling and sliding over obstacles, and unable to take off my skis, owing to the thickness of the snow, for I should have sunk over the knees at each step.

Still the ascent continued. Looking at my watch, I saw that I had already been nearly an hour on my way from San Luigi—a period more than sufficient to complete my whole journey; but still I stuck to my idea that though I must have strayed far from my proper route, a few minutes more must surely see me over the top of the upward way, and I should find the ground declining into the next valley.

I noticed that the mists were becoming suffused with rose-color. Though the inference was that it must be close on sunset, there was consolation in the fact that they might lift at any moment and disclose to me my whereabouts. The fact that night would soon be on me made it needful to bar my mind against that despair of loneliness which eats out the heart of a man who is lost in woods or on mountain-side. I knew that one who yields to it may still have plenty of vigor in his limbs, but his nervous force is sapped; and he can do no more than lie down and abandon himself to whatever fate may await him.

And then I heard a sound that made the thought of loneliness seem bliss indeed, for there was a worse fate than loneliness. What I heard resembled the howl of a wolf, and it came from not far in front of me, where the ridge—was it a ridge?—rose higher in its vestment of pines.

From behind me came a sudden puff of wind, which shook the frozen snow from the drooping pine branches, and swept away the mists as a broom sweeps the dust from the floor. Radiant above me were the unclouded skies, already charged with the red of the sunset. In front I saw that I had come to the very edge of the wood through which I had wandered so long; but it was no valley into which I had penetrated, for there, right ahead of me, rose the steep slope of bowlders and rocks soaring upward to the foot of the Ungeheuerhorn.

What, then, was the wolflike cry which had made my heart stand still? I saw.

Not twenty yards from me was a fallen tree, and leaning against it was one of the hideous denizens of the Horror Horn. It was a woman. She was enveloped in a thick growth of hair, gray and tufted. From her head it streamed down over her shoulders and over her bosom, from which hung withered and pendulous breasts. Looking on her face, I comprehended, not with my mind alone, but with a shudder of my spirit, what Ingram had felt.

Never had nightmare fashioned so terrible a countenance. The beauty of sun and stars, and of the beasts of the field and the kindly race of men, could not atone for so hellish an incarnation of the spirit of life. A fathomless bestiality modeled the slaving mouth and the narrow eyes. I looked into the abyss itself, and knew that out of that abyss on the edge of which I leaned the generation of men had climbed. What if that ledge crumbled in front of me, and pitched me headlong into its nethermost depths?

In one hand the creature held by the horns a chamois, which kicked and struggled. A blow from its hind leg caught her withered thigh. With a grunt of anger she seized the leg in her other hand, and, as a man may pull from its sheath a stem of meadow grass, she plucked it off the body, leaving the torn skin hanging around the gaping wound.

Putting the red and bleeding member to her mouth, she sucked at it as a child sucks a stick of sweetmeat. Through flesh and gristle her short brown teeth penetrated, and she licked her lips with a sound of purring. Then, dropping the leg by her side, she looked again at the body of the prey, now quivering in its death convulsion, and with finger and thumb she gouged out one of its eyes. She snapped her teeth on it, and it cracked like a soft-shelled nut.

V

It must have been but a few seconds that I stood watching this apparition, in some indescribable catalepsy of terror, while through my brain there pealed the panic command of my mind to my stricken limbs:

"Begone, begone, while there is time!"

Recovering the power of my joints and muscles, I tried to slip behind a tree and hide myself; but the woman—shall I call her so?—must have caught my stir of movement, for she raised her eyes from her living feast and saw me.

She craned forward her neck, dropped her prey, and, half rising, began to move toward me. As she did this, she opened her mouth and gave forth a howl such as I had heard a moment before. It was answered by another wolflike cry, but faintly and distantly.

Sliding and slipping, with the toes of my skis tripping in the obstacles below the snow, I plunged forward down the hill between the pine trunks. The low sun, al-

ready sinking behind some rampart of mountain in the west, reddened the snow and the pines with its last rays. My knapsack, with the skates in it, swung to and fro on my back; one ski stick had already been twitched out of my hand by a fallen branch of pine; but not a second's pause could I allow myself to recover it.

I gave no glance behind, and I knew not at what pace my pursuer was on my track, or indeed whether any pursued at all. My whole mind and energy, now working at full power under the stress of my panic, was devoted to getting down the hill and out of the wood as swiftly as my limbs could bear me.

For a little while I heard nothing but the hissing snow of my headlong passage, and the rustle of the covered undergrowth beneath my feet. Then, from close at hand behind me, the wolf howl sounded once more, and I heard the plunging of footsteps other than my own.

The strap of my knapsack had shifted, and, as my skates swung to and fro on my back, it chafed and pressed on my throat, hindering free passage of air—of which, God knew, my laboring lungs were in dire need. Without pausing, I slipped it free from my neck, and held it in the hand from which my ski stick had been jerked. I seemed to go a little more easily for this adjustment.

Now, not so far distant, I could see below me the path from which I had strayed. If only I could reach that, the smoother going would surely enable me to outdistance my pursuer, who on the rougher ground was slowly overhauling me. At the sight of that ribbon stretching unimpeded down the hill, a ray of hope pierced the black panic of my soul.

With that came the desire, keen and insistent, to see who or what it was that was on my tracks, and I spared a backward glance. It was she, the hag whom I had seen at her gruesome meal. Her long gray hair flew out behind her, her mouth chattered and gibbered, her fingers made grabbing movements, as if already they closed on me.

The path was now at hand, and the nearness of it, I suppose, made me incautious. A hump of snow-covered bush lay in front of me. Thinking that I could jump over it, I tripped and fell, smothering myself in snow.

I heard a maniac noise, half scream, half

laugh, from close behind. Before I could recover myself, the grabbing fingers were at my neck, as if a vise had closed there.

My right hand, in which I held my knapsack of skates, was free. With a blind backhanded movement, I whirled it behind me at the full length of its strap. I knew that my desperate blow had found its billet somewhere. Even before I could look around, I felt the grip on my neck relax, and something fell with a thud into the very bush which had entangled me.

I recovered my feet, and turned. There she lay, twitching and quivering. The heels of my skates, piercing the thin alpaca of the knapsack, had hit her full on the temple, from which the blood was pouring.

A hundred yards away I could see another hideous creature coming downward on my tracks, leaping and bounding. At that panic rose again within me, and I sped off down the white, smooth path that led to the lights of the village, already beckoning. Never once did I pause in my headlong going. There was no safety until I was back among the haunts of men.

I flung myself against the door of the hotel and screamed for admittance, though I had but to turn the handle and enter. Once more, as when Ingram told his tale, there was the sound of the band in the spacious hall, and the chatter of voices; and there, too, was he himself. He looked

up and then rose swiftly to his feet as I made my clattering entrance.

"I have seen them, too!" I cried. "Look at my knapsack! Is there not blood on it? It is the blood of one of them—a woman, a hag, who tore off the leg of a chamois as I looked, and pursued me through the accursed wood. I—"

Whether it was I who spun round, or the room that seemed to spin round me, I knew not, but I heard myself falling on the floor. The next time that I was conscious, I was in bed. Beside the bed were Ingram, who told me that I was quite safe, and another man, a stranger, who pricked my arm with the nozzle of a syringe.

A day or two later I gave a coherent account of my adventure, and three or four men, armed with guns, went over my traces. They found the bush over which I had stumbled, with a pool of blood which had soaked into the snow. Still following my ski tracks, they came on the body of a chamois. One of its hind legs had been torn off, and one eye-socket was empty.

That is all the corroboration of my story that I can give the reader. I imagine that the creature which pursued me was not killed by my blow, or that her fellows removed her body. Anyhow, it is open to the incredulous to prowl about the caves of the Ungeheuerhorn, and see if anything occurs that may convince them.