

VARIOUS

HARPER'S YOUNG
PEOPLE, NOVEMBER 11,
1879

Various

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November 11, 1879**

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THE BRAVE SWISS BOY

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II.—A PERILOUS ADVENTURE



"AS HE STOOD THERE LEANING ON HIS ALPENSTOCK."

It was still early in the day when Walter left the cottage a second time. His heart was cheerful, and his movements light and rapid. Instead, however, of taking the road leading to the inn, he struck

off in a zigzag path through the valley toward the Engelhorn, whose jagged and lofty peaks rose far up into the blue sky. After a short time he reached the large and splendid glacier that lies between the Engelhorn and Wellborn, cast a hasty glance at the beautiful masses of ice burnished to prismatic brilliancy by the morning sun, and then turned to the left toward a steep and narrow path leading to the summit. As the road grew more difficult at every step, his progress became much slower, and he purposely reserved his strength, knowing well that it would be severely taxed before he gained the object of his journey. After a toilsome ascent of half an hour he reached the lofty crag called by the mountaineers the Warder of the Glacier, and sat down to recover his breath.

It was very necessary for him to take a little rest; for the way he had come, although long and tiring, was as child's play compared with the difficulties he had yet to overcome. He had to climb the steep and dizzy heights that towered above his head; and instead of walking along a narrow foot-path, he would have to clamber over rocks and loose stones, to pass close to the most dreadful precipices, and across foaming mountain streams, till he reached the height at which the refreshing green disappeared, with nothing visible but huge masses of brown and gray rock; where no other sight met the eye but that of mountain tops covered with perpetual snow and ice—a world dead and deserted, where the familiar voices of nature were almost unknown; where no bird carolled its love-song from the waving branch; where no sound was to be heard save the muttered thunder of the avalanche, the roaring of the cataracts which poured forth from the melting glaciers and made courses for themselves through heaps of rough stones; and now and again the harsh and discordant scream of a solitary vulture that with outspread wings circled slowly aloft, piercing into the valleys with its keen eye in search of prey. Into these wild and lonely regions Walter had to climb in order to reach the lofty crag whereon the vulture—the far-famed Lämmergeier of the Alps—had reared her eyrie.

But these difficulties had little terror for the cool-headed and brave-hearted mountain youth, who had from his earliest days been accustomed to roam on dizzy heights where the slightest false step would have been destruction. He was determined to finish what he had begun; and gratitude to the noble and generous stranger lent new courage to his soul, and strength and endurance to his frame.

After a short rest he jumped up again, and renewed the toilsome ascent, following slowly but steadily the dangerous track that led to the summit of the mountain. His feet often slipped on the bare and polished rock; sometimes he slid ten or twenty paces backward over loose pebbles, and anon sank knee-deep in the snow which here and there filled the hollows; but nothing daunted him or caused him to waver from his purpose. At last he reached a broad sheet of ice with innumerable crevices and chasms, on the further side of which a narrow ridge like the edge of a knife stretched above a wild and lonely valley, the base of which yawned two or three thousand feet below. At the extreme end of this ridge the nest he was in search of was built on a small point of rock, the sides of which descended precipitously into the depths below.

With his eye fixed on the distant crag, Walter commenced the passage of the ice-field. The utmost caution being necessary at every step, he felt carefully with his long staff to ascertain whether the snow that covered the icy mass was fit to bear his weight, or only formed a treacherous bridge over the numerous ravines which yawned beneath. Bending his way round the large chasms, he leaped easily over the smaller ones with the aid of his staff; and after avoiding all the more dangerous spots, he succeeded, by caution and presence of mind, in safely reaching the further side of the glacier, where the last but most perilous part of his journey was to begin.

As he stood there leaning on his alpenstock, out of breath with the exertion he had undergone, and surveyed the fearful path which scarcely any human foot had ever dared to tread; as he cast a glance at the dizzy precipices which yawned on each side of the ridge, which was itself in many places scarcely a foot in breadth; as he considered the inevitable destruction that would follow a single false step, he began to feel his courage fail, and lost for a moment the confidence and contempt of danger which had filled his soul an hour or two before, and sustained him during his perilous journey. "What

if I should never return, nor see my father again?" said he to himself, as he drew back from the road which seemed to threaten him with destruction. "Is it not too great a risk to run?"

But these fears only lasted a few moments. He called to mind the generosity of the stranger, and pictured to himself the delight with which he would receive him if he returned laden with such valuable booty; and his determination was renewed on the spot.

"I should be ashamed ever to look him in the face again," said he to himself; "and what would father say if he were to see that I was afraid of climbing a few rocks? No, no. I must and will have the birds; so here goes!"

Laying his alpenstock on the ground, he took off the thick jacket and heavy shoes which would but hinder his progress, and with only his shirt and trousers on, an axe in his belt, and the game bag hung over his shoulder, he started forward with all his former courage and energy, to complete the dangerous undertaking.

His progress was not difficult at first. The ridge along which he had to go was broad enough to begin with, although very rough and wild here and there. But after he had gone a little way, it got so narrow that he found it difficult to secure a foot-hold. At this point the ridge became so attenuated that the youth saw at the first glance that it was impossible to proceed in an upright position; he therefore crept along on all fours, or sat astride the ridge and urged himself on with his hands and feet.

Thus with extreme difficulty he pursued his perilous way toward the end of the ridge on which he knew the eyrie was built. But presently he saw the nest, and could hear the young birds piping, which gave him new strength and determination. At this juncture a loud scream overhead caused him to look up, and he was alarmed to see the female vulture wheeling round the nest with a young goat in her talons. With this new danger menacing him, the young cragsman lay flat down on the rock, and remained motionless, while he offered up an earnest prayer to Heaven that the bird might not discover him. He knew the peril which threatened him, for he had often heard of the fury with which the vulture attacks any one who attempts to rob its nest. He had heard of many cragsmen who had lost their lives in that way, and his own position was by no means the most favorable to defend himself against attack. His short and earnest prayer was not in vain. The young birds screeched louder and louder as they saw the prey in their mother's talons; and after the vulture had further tempted their appetite by one or two more majestic sweeps, she dropped the dainty morsel into the nest, where it was at once seized. After assisting her young ones to make a good beginning of their meal, the mother-bird unfolded her powerful wings, and glided into the valley beneath with the speed of an arrow.

"Heaven be thanked, I am saved!" murmured Walter, as he rose from his uncomfortable position and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "I must lose no time now, or perhaps one or both the old birds may return."

He pressed on with redoubled energy till an event occurred, unimportant in itself, but which caused him some uneasiness, and reminded him of the need of caution. The rock in places was fragile and split up by the weather, and with a slight touch of his foot he loosened an immense fragment of stone, which went rolling down the side of the mountain till it reached a projecting ledge hundreds of feet below. A pang of terror shot through the boy's heart, and his face blanched, as he watched the stone thundering over the obstacles in its way until it disappeared in a cloud of dust. It seemed as if the whole mountain trembled beneath him; a mist bleared his eyes; and as the blood rushed to his head, a deadly giddiness threatened to overpower him. He felt an impulse to throw himself over, which he could scarcely resist; and it was only by falling on his face and shutting his eyes that he recovered his presence of mind. After thus lying for several minutes, with beating heart and quaking limbs, until by degrees he became more at ease, he ventured to look around him once more, and fixed his eyes on the nest, which was now only about fifty paces farther on.

After waiting a few minutes longer, to be sure that his courage had returned, he made a fresh start, determining not to allow anything to alarm him again; and soon reached the end of the ridge, and viewed the nest with the young vultures before him. But here still another difficulty presented itself.

The rock, which up to this point had been quite level, rose at the extreme end about eight feet above the ridge, and formed a sort of projecting platform, which the parent birds, with their wonderful sagacity, had deemed the most suitable spot on which to take up their abode. As he measured the height with his eye, Walter began to fear that after all he would be obliged to return without accomplishing his object, for the rock was so smooth as scarcely to afford the least hold to either his hands or feet. Fortunately, however, he recollected his little axe, which might do him good service if the stone, as he hoped, proved soft. Raising himself cautiously, he drew the axe from his belt, and while supporting himself with the left hand, dealt the rock several vigorous blows with the right, and to his great delight succeeded in making notches, by which, if he only went carefully to work, he could accomplish his object.

With renewed courage he clambered up the almost perpendicular rock, and his curly hair and sunburned face soon appeared above the edge of the nest. The next moment he leaned over, seized the young birds in spite of their angry cries, transferred them one after the other to his bag, and throwing it across his shoulder, began to return on the dangerous road by which he had come. In common, however, with the experience of all who have ascended precipitous heights, he soon found that going down was much more difficult than had been the coming up; but ignoring the fact that he had beneath him a precipice two thousand feet deep, he devoted all his attention to the work immediately before him, and carefully descended the rocky wall step by step, till he reached the level ridge once more. He then turned slowly round, slung his bag in front of him, and leaning back against the wall, surveyed the giddy road which he must traverse to reach the glacier and the steep declivities of the Engelhorn, and thereafter his native valley.

It was a difficult and dangerous road; but the young mountaineer's heart was now full of joy and confidence, for he had surmounted the greatest difficulty, and the prize of his bold and daring venture was in his possession. He uttered an exclamation of triumph; then, thanking God for the help he had received, he implored the Divine protection on his homeward journey. The sharp ridge made it necessary for him, as before, to work his way forward astride on the rock for some time; but he soon got within sight of a part where it would be possible to go on his hands and knees, and was just about to change his straddling position for the more comfortable one of crawling, when the constant shrieking of the young vultures in his bag was answered by a piercing cry from above, followed the next moment by the loud rushing of powerful wings close to his ear. The boy uttered an exclamation of horror, and clung with all his might to the rock to prevent himself from falling.

In an instant he perceived the fearful danger that threatened him. One, or perhaps both the old birds had been attracted by the cries of the young ones, and were about to avenge themselves on the robber of their nest. Walter guessed that a hard fight would probably take place, and his first impulse was to throw the bag with the young birds into the valley beneath, and then try to make his escape as well as he might. But he soon found that this plan was more readily formed than it could be executed; for before he could make a single movement, he felt the blast of the wings just above his head, while the screaming of the enraged bird so confused his senses that he had great difficulty to avoid being hurled from his narrow resting-place into the ravine below. This sudden danger, although it alarmed him for the moment, awoke the next moment the courage and determination of the brave-hearted boy. It was a case of life or death, and it was vain to think of retiring from the contest. So, snatching his axe from his belt, he aimed a powerful blow at the old vulture as she swept down upon him for the third time. He succeeded beyond his expectation, for the blow, made almost at random, struck the wing of the bird, which, after vainly attempting to continue the struggle, fell helplessly into the abyss.

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