

THE CLASSIC OF
NORWEGIAN LITERATURE

PEAKS AND BANDITS

*'An undiscovered gem,
and funny as well.'*

ED DOUGLAS

— **ALF BONNEVIE BRYN** —

TRANSLATED BY BIBBI LEE

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Alf Bonnevie Bryn

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Contents

Prelude in Switzerland	1
Preparations, financing and provisioning	9
Interlude in Italy	14
Life on board	26
A short review of Corsica's history	28
Bastia and Capo Corso	37
Valle Tartagine and Capo al Dente	42
Vacationing in Calacuccia	58
The expedition to the mountains around Valle Calasima	66
The village in Valle Nebbio	73
Cinque Frati and Paglia Orba	88
Bandits	97

Prelude in Switzerland

Quite late one Sunday evening in August 1909, I was hanging from a rope down the south side of Gross Ruchen.

I was hanging with my head down some eighteen to twenty-one feet under the top ridge. On the other side of the ridge, about the same distance down the north slope, hung Max van Heyden van der Slaat. Straddling the ridge right behind us sat George Ingle Finch, who was tied to the same rope. He had a big, heavy backpack with self-recording meteorological instruments on his back.

The immediate cause of finding myself in this annoying position was that a piece of the ridge, astride which Max had been edging forward, had broken off and sailed down – along with Max. To prevent all three of us from going the same way, I had slid down the south side and flipped around as the rope tightened. This, incidentally, is an example of the regular procedure in this kind of situation. I knew this from the literature, but it was the first time I had personally used the technique.

It seemed quite frightening. The first time at any rate. A feeling somewhat like letting oneself go off a high ski jump, or diving into cold water from a great height. It's just that, as a rule, one has more of an opportunity to get used to those things. Parachuting out of airplanes was not in vogue then, or else that would have been the closest comparison.

It has been said that in those apparently life-threatening moments, your whole life passes before you in the blink of an eye. Childhood memories and your home appear, and you regret things you have done or failed to do. This does not tally with my experiences. The only thing I can remember thinking of as I rushed down the wall of ice was whether Max was solidly tied to the rope. Not that I was particularly worried about his fate, but he did have the vitally

important task of being the counterweight and obstacle to my continuing journey. Thank God Max was sitting firmly and the rope held.

Considerably worse, or much more exciting anyway, was the case of O.G. Jones who climbed Dent Blanche in 1887 with his friend (or so he thought) Dr H. Robinson. They had left Zermatt the day before to ascend Dent Blanche by a particularly difficult route, which for some reason had acquired the name Arête des Quatre Ânes (The Four Donkeys Ridge). As you approach the summit of Dent Blanche, the landscape looks about the same as the ridge toward the top of Gross Ruchen, the only difference being that the elevation is considerably higher and the north face practically sheer for the first 900 to 1,200 feet. Then it gradually becomes a slick ice wall, which after a while slopes off and ends in a glacier about 4,500 feet below the summit. The drop on the south side is almost equally high but not quite so steep.

A mean wind was blowing with quite a bit of snowdrift, and Jones could barely see Robinson, who was walking about forty-five feet ahead of him on the rope. He saw Robinson lose his footing and begin to slide, after which he turned himself outward and disappeared. This was due to Robinson having untied himself from the rope before he slid, so that Jones took all the rope with him on the rest of his journey down. Robinson managed to stop his slide with the help of his ice axe and remained on the top of the ridge.

What Jones did not know was that his friend had just discovered that he had been having a relationship with Mrs Robinson for some time – something that in the bigoted, bourgeois English circles of the day was regarded as being against good form.

Robinson had a tough time getting back down from the top of Dent Blanche. He had to spend two nights in the open and arrived in Zermatt extremely bedraggled, but pleased to have saved the family honour in such a clever way.

In a cafe in Zermatt he found his friend Jones and Mrs Robinson fortifying themselves with a cup of tea after having spent a successful night in a hotel. It turned out that Jones had made it, without

a scratch, from the top ridge of Dent Blanche down to the glacier 4,500 feet below, with the help of a big avalanche. He had been a little confused but had regained consciousness on the glacier, and then spent the night in a cabin not far away before walking down to Zermatt. After organising the rescue operation for his friend left behind, he could in good conscience turn his attention to what he took to be the widow.

This story is recorded (minus some of the details and explanations I have provided) in the *Alpine Journal* of 1888. Though there is nothing to indicate how family relations developed from then on.

Complications of the Robinson–Jones kind did not exist between Max and me – we were both unmarried. Besides, it wasn't Max who had planned the trip; on the contrary, it was with some reluctance that he had come along on the ascent, his first (and probably also his last).

Max van Heyden van der Slaet was not Dutch, as his name would suggest. In his youth his father had moved to Russia, where he had made a huge fortune and was the owner of one of the country's biggest rubber factories and a number of forest properties, among other things. But Max was no plutocrat's son. He frequented shady characters and became a member of revolutionary student circles. As this corresponded badly with his father's business interests, he sent Max to Zurich to study. He sent him away with an elderly servant and a million francs, meant to last the entire duration of study.

Of all the cities in Europe at that time Zurich was the worst choice for someone meant to be kept away from dawning Bolshevism. It was there that the organisation which would eight years later become the revolution was formed. And it was there that Ulyanov¹ sat in his lodgings or his favourite pub lecturing about Marx, Engels and himself to an ever-larger circle of male and female admirers.

¹ Vladimir Ulyanov, better known under his *nom de guerre* Lenin.

On the periphery of this circle hovered Max, who very quickly put his studies aside in order to dedicate himself to a niece of the Russian painter Vereshchagin – a relationship that nonetheless gave him more sorrow than joy. So it was her fault that Max was hanging where he was.

The previous history was this: one evening I was at a small and simple variety theatre watching a performance by professional boxers. As far as I can remember, the match was between the Battling Kid, champion of Missouri, and Pete, the Terror of Milwaukee, who were giving a very average demonstration of the noble art. After the act, the director came on stage and announced an award of 100 francs to anyone in the audience who could hold his own for three minutes against one of the professionals.

For a long time this had been a popular additional act, something akin to what circuses do when they invite the public to come and stand on the broad back of a horse which is trained to wiggle a little so that the victim is thrown off, to everyone's amusement. But lately the number of volunteer amateur boxers had dwindled, and you had to be satisfied with hired victims who would let themselves be knocked out in a gentle fashion once per evening.

This time, however, we were luckier. A tall, skinny, light-haired youngster calmly rose from his seat in the first row, stepped across the orchestra pit and presented himself. That was the first time I made George's acquaintance. It was also the first time for the Terror of Milwaukee, and for him it was a sad experience.

The fight didn't last a full minute. When Terror hit the floor for the third time, he refused to get up. Poor Terror didn't stand a chance. George's arms were six inches longer than his and he never reached farther than George's left or right glove. He couldn't even sneak in a clinch, every professional boxer's friend and helper when in need. George humbly received the roaring ovation and asked if the Battling Kid didn't also want to go one round. The Battling Kid didn't want to. But then came the great anticlimax: George wasn't paid. No, the deal was for three minutes, this had lasted only one, so no 100 francs. The public probably missed a lot

when the discussion between George and the variety show administrators took place behind closed doors.

The members of the administration must have been strong and numerous, because they won the day. When the whole thing was over, I found George out on the corner with Max, who in a much-dishevelled state was in the process of forcing 100 francs on him as a tribute from an admiring public. George was broad-minded in money matters and let himself be convinced.

It so happened that I joined them at a nearby pub, where we were read *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*).

Max was not having much fun with his Vereshchagin. She really had nothing against him personally, it was just that she was decidedly communistic, even in the erotic sphere. In 1908 she was already in possession of the Bolshevik ideals that would not receive the official stamp until the early 1920s. (History has shown us that even before that time there were several such rascals in Russia, not least on the female side.) As already mentioned, she would make use of Max, but put the common good before his personal interests. Besides, she said, he was no real proletarian. To put it plainly, he was the worst kind of plutocrat, not even worthy of sitting in the same pub as Ulyanov.

‘As if I’m not just as good a proletarian as him,’ said Max, ‘just because my father is rich. Ulyanov’s father is an aristocrat – that’s not so good either. And how can I help it if I don’t have a brother who’s been hanged? I don’t even have a brother. That’s not my fault.

‘It doesn’t matter what I do,’ Max continued as he started on a fresh drink. ‘I thought she would find it a nice trait that I paid for a complete meteorological station to be installed at Altstadt, right by her regular cafe.

“But no, what do I care about the weather in Zurich?” she said. “Just give me a sports outfit.” Of course I did that too, and no sooner did she receive it she went away to a cabin with one of those damned Finns – what did he have to brag about? He had shot a policeman in Helsingfors – probably an accidental shot

– and there she lies now. Cheers. Women! Damn – now I’m going home – you’re my friends – good night.’

Truly a sad fate, being robbed of one’s illusions in one’s early twenties.

‘Listen,’ said George after Max had left, ‘I think we have to do something for him.’

I agreed. Max considered us his friend. You never let down a friend.

It took a while to find his meteorological station, which was installed in a glass case in an alley where it obviously did not belong. It was full of expensive instruments with clockworks and rotating cylinders. The ingenious part of George’s plan was not that we would steal the station. He was a broad-minded organiser, far ahead of his times.

‘We’ll pack it up,’ he said, ‘and then we’ll bring Max and the station to the top of Gross Ruchen. It’s obviously more interesting to determine the weather in places where no one visits than in the middle of town where you feel the weather yourself.’²

I have good reason not to reveal how we managed to steal the station. But around three o’clock, with all the instruments securely packed in an old raincoat, we arrived at Zurich’s best hotel, Baur au Lac, where Max lived with his servant. It was obvious that Max had made more of an impression on the night porter than on his faithless Bolshevik girlfriend, otherwise we would never have been allowed entry so late at night.

We dragged him out of bed and explained our plan. Max found it only moderately interesting. It was only after George had convinced him that this activity would not only improve his self-esteem, but also bring his faithless girlfriend to understand that she was consorting with a desperate and lawless man, that Max gave in and agreed to participate in the expedition to Gross Ruchen that day.

2 It is interesting to note that George, who later became a professor in London, was a real pioneer in this field. Not until many years later did meteorologists, principally at Professor Bjerknes’ initiative, begin systematic work to establish stations on high mountain tops. Now there are many of them, in both Switzerland and Norway, but in all fairness George, Max and I should be recognised as pioneers in this field.

And so we were hanging there. The weather was foul and it was getting dark. It is by no means easy to resolve such a situation: it takes its time. Just managing to squirm around to get your head on top is a work of patience, and then you have to hold the rope with one hand and use the ice axe with the other to get a reasonable foothold. George was straddling the ridge above us, directing the operation. He gave the impression of being pleased.

Finally both Max and I regained the top of the ridge and there we sat, all three of us, straddling it. It was about nine o'clock and it had grown quite dark. The snow whirled up with the wind from the north and made a cloud out across the precipice toward the south. Sometimes we could just barely see the contours of stone slabs up toward the main peak in front of us. Before daylight we could go neither forward nor backward.

What does one do in such a situation? Nothing – there is no danger. You can only wait.

We ate cured meat, smoked a pipe and beat our heels against the ice to keep warm. Every once in a while George sang a song for us. He was no great artist. He knew only one song and sang it loudly and off key.

*I loved a lass and her name was Lill
But she was seduced by Buffalo Bill
And then she was kissed by Seladon Hill
God damn her soul, I love her still.*

George was born and raised in southern Australia. The fact that he knew this typically American love poem, and that it was also the only poetry he was familiar with, is good proof of how early on the American temperament started to influence even faraway areas of the globe.

There is little to be said about the rest of our meteorological expedition. I've never heard another thing about those instruments we so carefully built into a cairn at the top the next morning.

About Max van Heyden van der Slaat, there is really nothing to

say other than what is said about most men in Norwegian history – he is no longer part of this saga. He was just an incidental part of this prelude, which started my acquaintance with George and which some time later led us to decide to discover Corsica.

Preparations, financing and provisioning

With whom the plan to explore Corsica originated will probably never be determined with any certainty. The available professional literature gives contradictory information. For example, you will find in *The Norwegian Tourist Association Yearbook* a short account of the expedition and its results from which it appears that the initiative came from the Norwegian side. That account was written by me. If, on the other hand, you seek information from the *Alpine Journal*, wherein the journey is also described, you get the distinct impression that the original idea was Australian. The account in the *Alpine Journal* was written by George. A third version, no doubt the most diplomatic, may be found in the work entitled *The Making of a Mountaineer*, wherein George magnanimously lets us each get the idea independently.

Personally I no longer have an opinion about this international question of prestige, but it would not surprise me to find that the original version in the *Alpine Journal* was the right one. I clearly do remember that, according to plans approved by the powers that be on the home front, I was supposed to spend Easter vacation 1909 in Lausanne studying French. What is certain, however, is that George and I, a few weeks before the start of the vacation, had become clear about needing to go to Corsica.

The plan was quickly made, but then there was the question of obtaining permission from the Australian and Norwegian authorities. We discussed this back and forth. It would obviously in many ways have been a considerable relief, financially among other things, if the expedition could begin in a formal, official manner. But on the other hand, should the plans not meet with approval – and we thought there was much to indicate that this

might be the case – then the consequences would be considerably more serious than if we started without ever seeking prior approval; almost without prohibition.

The solution we finally reached, all things considered, was certainly the right one. Like all ingenious solutions, it was tremendously simple. At a point so late that no order to desist could reach us, we would both write home and say that we had had to change our previously approved Easter plans because we had been invited by a well-off friend – George by me and me by George – to travel to northern Italy and Corsica.

There were still obstacles in our way, for our ingenious solution required making financial arrangements. The financing of voyages of discovery has always posed difficult problems for the organisers. The idealised values connected to something being discovered, no matter what it is, as a rule have completely escaped the sensibilities of financial matadors. When the explorer cannot bring mercantile interests into his plans, like Columbus and Marco Polo, or be like Henry Morton Stanley, who had a wealthy newspaper behind him, then he faces financial difficulties that often seem insurmountable.

When you think about it, it was worse for us than for our predecessors. They could, at any rate, present their plans officially and appeal to whatever interests might exist. We were excluded from this possibility. There have been great discoverers both before and after George and me – I am too high-minded to want to rob them of the fame they have won – but one must not forget that for them the really big difficulties were solved by others, whereas we had to solve them ourselves.

We created a financial plan. The journey to Corsica via Genoa, Livorno and Bastia, then back to Zurich via Ajaccio and Nice in third class (and fourth where it existed) at that time cost approximately 200 francs. Room and board for six weeks we figured at 250 francs, when we allowed for a total of six nights under a roof. The rest of the time we would sleep outdoors. Adding 50 francs for unforeseen expenses, the total came to 500 francs each. Half of this sum would be covered by the last month's stipend if we didn't pay the rent and other debt. The rest we had to dredge up.

As students abroad you don't have an opportunity to make extra income except by 'buying' expensive books and instruments, which you don't actually acquire but rather borrow from friends. As far as our library was concerned, both George and I at that time had such a hypothetical one that no prospects of any amount of luck worth mentioning could increase it.

'But,' said George after some reflection, 'I have a spirit level!' George was a chemistry student, and as a rule there are no levels in the chemistry department. And the level was not really his; he had confiscated it from a friend in the building department. He knew someone who would pay 300 francs for it. This may sound strange, but anyone who has studied at a technical college will know that we all need a level. You receive money from home to buy it and then sell it right away. In the four years I spent at the college in Zurich, I came across only one level among the Nordic students and conservatively speaking that must have cost gullible Nordic parents an average of 15,000 francs a year.

'There is no reason,' I said, 'that you should sell it to him. Sell it to me, I'll resell it, then that'll make 600 francs.' That's how easy it was to solve these financial problems that looked so difficult before we took them on.

But financing also had other sides. For some reason we had the fixed idea that foreigners travelling through Italy were faced with a high degree of swindle. George in particular had a deep mistrust of the Italians and was determined that we must guard in every possible way against being cheated. Convinced that attack is the best defence, we therefore decided to acquire a reserve of counterfeit money.

Money matters at that time were quite particular. First of all, it so happened that Swiss, French and Italian silver coins were valid in all these countries. But there were also some older Greek coins of the same appearance as the five franc and five lire pieces. These had also been valid at some point but now they were out of circulation. Such Greek coins were freely exchanged for their worth in silver (about two francs) and were continuously in circulation, aided by people with a highly developed sense of saving.

Now we reasoned as follows: there was every reason to believe that we would have worthless coins pressed upon us, particularly since we as foreigners couldn't see the difference at all. It is therefore just as well that we insure ourselves by bringing our own supply of them. On the basis of today's more advanced ideology, this may be understood as a form of anticipated retaliation.

After the financial problems had found a happy solution, we proceeded to the second main problem that all journeys of discovery have in common: the question of equipment.

Here arose at the beginning some differences of opinion related to the fact that Australia at that time was an entirely undiscovered country, believed to be principally inhabited by cannibals. George was of the opinion that this must also be the case in Corsica and that the different chiefs on this relatively unknown island should be pacified with gifts of glass beads, bells, mirrors and the like, which had been the conventional currency of safaris among tribes.

It was very difficult to convince him that this would be unnecessary baggage, and it was really only when I showed him Baedeker's excellent guide to Corsica that he, much against his will, had to reconcile himself to the fact that we were too late to be doing business on the same basis as Henry Morton Stanley in Africa.

He insisted on one thing, which later proved to be not such a bad idea: we had to bring food from Zurich. Our provisions were raw oatmeal, sweetened condensed milk, dried apricots and chocolate. Then there were the sleeping bags, cooking pots, waxed matches and two sets of clothes, as well as regular mountain gear consisting of rope, ice axes and other items. The inclusion of ice axes may seem strange, but the mountains of Corsica are about 8,000 feet tall, and at Easter time there is about the same amount of snow and ice as there is in the high mountains of Norway in summer.

We were given all our provisions on credit by the lovely grocery shop owner in Zurich.¹ You might say she played the same part in our expedition as Ellef Ringnes had done for Fridtjof Nansen's at the time.

¹ Franchescetti, in Rämistrasse.

At the eleventh hour we acquired an addition to the expedition – George’s younger brother, Max, who was studying something or other in Bern. (Why these two boys from South Australia had been placed in Switzerland to study has always been a mystery to me. One that has never been solved.)

As we already have one person named Max in this book, it is just not suitable to have another, but one cannot simply for the sake of overview conjure up new names. That would result in the book’s losing its character of serious literature and fall into the category of the kind of writing that does not need to stick to the truth.

We made an agreement with Max that if he could finance his own trip, he would meet us on a certain day in a village we found on the map in the middle of the northern part of Corsica. We gave him the task of bringing a tent he would borrow from the Akademischer Alpenclub (Academic Alpine Club).