

The Winter Alps

By Algernon Blackwood

With an audacity of outline denied to them in the softer seasons, the Alps rear themselves aloft in Winter more grandly self-revealed than at any other time—still with their brave and ancient pretence of being unconquerable. The black and white becomes them best; and they know it: the savage, iron black that seems pitiless, and that shining, silvery white that dazzles. so piercingly. They are really not summer things at all, but creatures of the winter—the short, brilliant day of icy keenness, and the long night of tempest, wind, and drifting snows. Then, at least, clothed so simply in their robes of jet and ermine, they stand in something of their old true majesty, solemn, forbidding, terrible. Summer, as it were, over-dresses them, with its skirts of emerald-bright meadows and fringe of purple forests, and all its flying scarves of painted air and mist. The colours are so brilliant, the skies so soft, the flowers climb so high. Then winter comes, undressing them slowly, from the head and shoulders downwards, till they emerge, austere in black and white, naked and unashamed beneath the skies.

The associations of summer, of course, help very largely to emphasise the contrast. Those stubborn peaks that lie in January beneath forty feet of packed and driven snow, on many a morning in July and August carried twenty tourists prattling to one another of the sunrise, sucking thermos flasks, giggling of the hotel dances to come, not a few having been bodily dragged up, probably, by guides and porters overburdened with the latest appliances for comfort and ease. And the mere thought of them all somehow makes the Alps—dwindle a little. But in winter they become free again, and hold uninterrupted converse with the winds and stars. Their greatest characteristic becomes manifest—their *silence*. For the silence of the Winter Alps is genuinely overwhelming. One feels that the whole world of strife, clamour and bustle, and with it all the clash of vulgar ambitions among men, has fallen away into some void whence resurrection is impossible. Stand upon one of the upper slopes in mid-winter and listen: all sound whatsoever has fled away into the remotest corners of the universe. It seems as though such a thing had never existed even, the silence is so enormous, yet at the same time more stimulating than any possible music, more suggestive than the sweetest instrument ever heard. It encompasses the sky and the earth like an immense vacuum.

In summer, there would be bells, bells of goats and cows; voices, voices of climbers, tourists, shepherds; people singing, pipes playing, an occasional horn, and even the puffing and whistling of at least several funiculaires in the valley. But now all these are hushed and gone away—dead. Only silence reigns. Even above, among the precipices and ridges, there is no crack and thunder of falling stones, for the sun has hardly time to melt their fastenings and send them down no hiss of sliding snow, no roar of avalanches. The very wind, too, whirring over this upper world too softly cushioned with thick snow to permit “noise”—even the wind is muted and afraid to cry aloud. I know nothing more impressive than the silence that overwhelms the world of these high slopes. The faint “sishing” of the ski as one flies over the powdery snow becomes almost loud in the ears by comparison. And with this silence that holds true awe comes that other characteristic of the Winter Alps—their *immobility*; that is, I mean, of course, the immobility of the various items that crowd their surface in summer with movement. All the engines that produce movement have withdrawn deep within their frozen selves, and lie smothered and asleep. The waving grasses are still, beneath three metres of snow; the shelves that in July so

busily discharge their weights of snow into the depths stand rigid and fastened to the cliffs by nails of giant ice. Nothing moves, slides, stirs, or bends; all is inflexible and fixed. The very trees, loaded with piled-up masses of snow, stand like things of steel pinned motionless against the background of running slope or blue-black sky. Above all, the tumbling waters that fill the hollows of all these upper valleys with their dance of foam and spray, and with their echoing sweet thunder, are silent and invisible. One cannot even guess the place where they have been. Here sit Silence and Immobility, terrifically enthroned and close to heaven.

The Alps, tainted in summer with vulgarity, in winter are set free; for the hordes of human beings that scuttle about the fields at their base are ignored by the upper regions. Those few who dare the big peaks are perforce worthy, and the bold ski-runners who challenge the hazards of the long, high courses are themselves, like the birds, almost a part of the mountain life. The Alps, as a whole, retire into their ancient splendour.

Yet their winter moods hold moments of tenderness as well, and of colour, too, that at first the strong black and white might seem to deny. The monotony of the snow-world comes to reveal itself as a monotony of surface only, thinly hiding an exquisite variety. The shading is so delicate, however, that it eludes capture by words almost. Half unearthly seem to me sometimes the faint veils of tinted blues, greys, and silvers that lie caught upon those leagues of upper snow; half hidden in the cup-like hollows, nestling just beneath the curved lip of some big drift, or sifted like transparent coloured powder over half a hill when the sun is getting low. Under boulders, often, they lie so deep and thick that one might pick them up with the hands—rich, dark blues that seem almost to hold substance. And the purple troops of them that cloak the snow to the eastward of the pine forests surpass anything that summer can ever dream of, much less give. The long icicles that hang from branch or edge of stones, sparkling in the sun while they drip with sounds like the ticking of a clock, flash with crowded colours of a fairy world. And at the centre of the woods there are blacks that might paint all London, yet without suffering loss.

At dawn, or towards sunset, the magic is bewildering. The wizardry of dreams lies over the world. Even the village street becomes transfigured. These winter mountains then breathe forth for a moment something of the glory the world knew in her youth before the coming of men. The ancient gods come close. One feels the awful potentialities of this wonderful white and silent landscape. Into the terms of modern life, however, it is with difficulty, if at all, translatable. Before the task was half completed, someone would come along with weights and scales in his hand and mention casually the exact mass and size and composition of it all—and rob the wondrous scene of half its awe and all its wonder.

The gathering of the enormous drifts that begins in November and continues until March is another winter fact that touches the imagination. The sight of these vast curled waves of snow is undeniably impressive—accumulating with every fresh fall for delivery in the spring. The stored power along those huge steep slopes is prodigious, for when it breaks loose with the first Föhn wind of April, the trees snap before it like little wooden matches, and the advance wind that heralds its coming can blow down a solid chalet like a playing-card. One finds these mighty drifts everywhere along the ridges, smooth as a billiard-table along the surface, their projecting cornices running out into extensions that alter the entire shape of the ridge which supports them. They are delicately carved by the wind, curved and lined into beautiful sweeping contours that suggest suddenly arrested movement. Chamois tracks may be seen sometimes up to the very edge—the thin, pointed edge that hangs over the abyss. One thinks of an Atlantic suddenly changed into a solid frozen white, and as one whips by on ski it often seems as though these gigantic waves ran flying after, just about to break and overwhelm the valley. Outlined on a

cloudless day against the skies of deep wintry blue—seen thus from below—they present a spectacle of weirdest beauty. And the silence, this thick, white-coated silence that surrounds them, adds to their singular forms an element of desolate terror that is close to sublimity.

The whole point of the Winter Alps, indeed, is that they then reveal themselves with immensities of splendour and terror that the familiarity of summer days conceals. The more gaunt and sombre peaks, perhaps, change little from one season to another—like the sinister tooth of the old Matterhorn, for instance, that is too steep for snow to gather and change its aspect. But the general run of summits stand aloof in winter with an air of inaccessibility that adds vastly to their essential majesty. The five peaks of the Dent du Midi, to take a well-known group, that smile a welcome to men and women by the score in August, retreat with the advent of the short dark days into a remoter heaven, whence they frown down, genuinely terrific, with an aspect that excites worship rather than attack. In their winter seclusion, dressed in black and white, they belong to the clouds and tempests, rather than to the fields and woods out of which they grow. Watch them, for instance, on a January morning in the dawn, when the wild winds toss the frozen powdery snow hundreds of feet into the air from all their summits, and upon this exaggerated outline of the many-toothed ridge the sunrise strikes in red and gold—and you may see a sight that is not included in the very finest of the summer's repertoire.

But it is at night, beneath the moon, that the Winter Alps become really supreme. The shadows are pitch black, the snow dazzling as with a radiance of its own, the “battlements that on their front bear stars” loom awfully out of the sky. In close-shuttered chalets the peasants sleep. In the brilliant over-heated salons of hotels hundreds of little human beings dance and make music and play bridge. But out there, in this silent world of ice and stars, the enormous mountains dream solemnly upon their ancient thrones, unassailable, alone in the heavens, forgotten. The Alps, in these hours of the long winter night, come magnificently into their own.