

Victory

By ROBERT ARTHUR

Author of "Footsteps Invisible," "Blaze of Glory," etc.

An Argosy Oddity

IN THE ten years since he had lost his soul to that perilous siren, mountain climbing, the one thing Matthews had wanted, with a yearning that was like an unholy passion inside him, was to be first to the top of the Big One.

And now, with only three hundred feet left to go, it looked as if he was going to make it.

He was twenty-nine thousand feet above the world, and mountain fatigue made every foot a sickening effort. Somewhere between him and Camp Six, twenty-five hundred feet below, lay the crushed bodies of Turner and Van Alystine.

They had been climbing unroped, and the treacherous footing—loose debris on overlapping slabs—had done for them. A single misstep had sent Turner plunging into Van Alystine, and they were gone almost before Matthews could turn his head at their cry.

The day had begun with misfortune. They had waked from their restless cold-numbered sleep in the lonely desolation of Camp Six to find that the monsoon had broken unexpectedly, to feel its first breath stirring about them. Then their oxygen apparatus proved to be frozen. After hours of vain effort to make it work, they had decided to continue without it.

Behind schedule, without oxygen, and with the warning wind against



their cheeks, they should have had the common sense to go downward to Camp Five, where Banning and Haroldson waited. But the temptation had been too great. They had gone up.

And now Matthews, alone, was covering the last three hundred feet at a slow and painful upward crawl, while the howling wind tried to pluck his ice ax from his hand and snow crystals drove into him like bullets.

It was weariness and excitement that made him drop the ice ax as he pulled himself over the last rocky ledge and almost collapsed to the triangular half-acre of barren granite that upthrust itself into the lonely sky.

The ax slid away down the slope and was lost. He hardly noticed. Triumph swelled within him. All the weariness inside him could not quell his exultation.

"First to the top!" he cried aloud. "You old devil, I've licked you. First man to do it. That's something to make the name of Hank Matthews go down in history, isn't it?"

The monsoon howled about his ears like an angry cry. Somewhere below, the great white plume of snow that stretched away from the south flank

of the peak must be lengthening and thickening with—a deep and ominous roar as the wind rose in velocity. Because of the oncoming dusk and the storm, he could not see it, but he imagined it.

Imagined the companion peaks marching away in giants' ranks to north and south. Imagined all his eye would have encompassed if he had not reached the top hours later than they had planned, in the first dark of evening, with a storm building up.

He could see the rough, humpbacked shape of the peak as he lay in a rock hollow, protected from the wind. And he felt loneliness pressing in on him here, where no other man had ever been, twenty-nine thousand feet in the sullen sky.

He would have liked to lie still and hug his triumph to him, turn it over in his mind, savor it to the utmost. But the instinct of the mountaineer would not let him. Even in the first instant of his triumph his mind had been busy estimating his chances of getting down to Camp Five, at twenty-four thousand, where Banning and Haroldson waited. Or even to Six, at twenty-seven thousand, where he and Turner and Van Alostine had spent the previous night.

Matthews turned about, crawled to the edge, peered down. Only two thousand feet or so. But the overlapping slabs that had gotten his companions were waiting, and he would have to feel his way inch by inch.

He shrugged. It could be done.

MATTHEWS was a squat man, not handsome, but his deep chest and powerful physique had enabled him to endure in the cold and oxygen-lacking air this long. He had imagination, but he was not a coward.

"May not make it, Mat," he told himself aloud, though the wind tore his words away so that he could not hear himself saying them. "Though I think you will. But you've done it, and that'll stand to your credit until Judgment Day. If you get down, you'll be famous. And if you don't, you'll leave your record, and the next man up will know that you—"

Something brought him up short, stiffened his body, dropped his jaw.

You'll leave your record!

But how? Some tiny voice in his mind cried the question. How would he leave upon this eternally frozen granite some sign of his presence? He had nothing to leave! Not even a trinket. Not even his ice ax. They had discarded every surplus ounce at Six, before the climb. Even the oxygen apparatus had been jettisoned. He could have left that. But—

And then Matthews knew. Knew that if he left anything of his clothing, he would certainly die without ever getting down. And there was no loose rock on this wind-swept barrenness with which to build a cairn. No paper on him for a message. Nothing. He could not leave behind him any proof that he had been here.

Abruptly he crawled back to his protected hollow to think this thing through. The monsoon screamed above him in hoarse triumph, and Matthews lay flat beneath its violence, considering.

How would he leave his record—the mark that would endure to prove his triumph someday, even if he himself vanished on the downward climb? Or that would serve to vindicate him eventually before a world that might—that probably would—scoff at his tale until the proof was forthcoming?

For if he came down from the moun-

tain alone, with only his word to say he had reached the top—well, even Banning and Haroldson would be sceptical. For Turner hadn't made it, and Van Alostine lay dead with him, and they were rated better climbers than Hank Matthews.

And when the question was asked—how he, Matthews, succeeded alone when they had failed—what could he answer?

Nothing, and Matthews knew it. If he reached safety, the ugly shadow of doubt would forever mar his achievement. And that, somehow, would be worse than to have failed in the first place.

For minutes longer he lay there, burning pain in his throat rising anew with each indrawn breath of the thin, dry air. And then he knew he could wait no longer. He had to start now, if he ever hoped to descend alive.

He rose and crawled through the rushing wind and the hurrying sting of the snow to the edge. The rest had strengthened him. Somehow, as he pushed himself over the lip of rock and with his feet found holds on the downward slope, he felt he was going to make it. To Six at least. And tomorrow he'd reach Five, where Banning and Haroldson would be waiting for him.

Half by feel, half by sight, he began the descent, moving with the almost

automatic sureness of the experienced mountaineer, his mind busy on the story he would tell.

"Turner and Van Alostine slipped and fell. I went on alone, I made it to within three hundred feet, and then I had to turn back."

That was it. That was what he would say. They'd believe him then. The whole world would believe failure, and acclaim it, where no one would believe success. *I made it to within three hundred feet*—Yes, that had the ring of truth to it. That's what he had to say. And his victory then would be his own, to cherish in secret, untarnished, clean and sweet.

He was down now at the bottom of the first three-hundred-foot stretch, and he looked back. The crown of the mountain was almost hidden from sight by the slashing snowflakes, and the guttural roar of the wind as it tore at the rock above was like an angry growl. Like the mountain's angry growl.

Matthews grinned and slapped a cold granite slab familiarly.

"Beat me, didn't you?" he asked. "Know I can't tell, don't you? But I've beaten you, too, and that's something else you know. And won't forget. I climbed you. I got to the top. We'll always know that, you and me. We'll know, and that's what counts."

Then he began again the difficult and dangerous downward climb.

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