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ENCOUNTER IN A CABLE CAR

By
Andri Peer

Translated by
Myron B. Gubitz

The snowy slopes glistened under the midday sun. The larches with their fox-red trunks kept one another company on the hill above the village and the silvery masts of the cablecar line stood absolutely upright. There were only a few skiers left on the practice slope across from the village. The valley station of the cablecar, a box of raw concrete on too-thin pillars, seemed cold and provisional in the noon light. Above it, written in large letters, was the word *Filovia*. Although the native language of the area is Romansch, the Italian word was thought to be more attractive to the rich Milanese who arrived even before Christmas with their cars, their fur-clad women and their fat briefcases, to enjoy winter sports.

The village was silent as Peider strode through it with his skis on his shoulder. In the air there was a hint of the hectic activity in the hotel dining rooms — waiters carrying trays, guests chewing busily — and the dry heat in the hotel rooms crackled cosily spreading its blanket of comforting sleep. Peider had had a quick sandwich at the train station. Now he lengthened his stride, holding the skis and the prancing poles with his left hand. He felt a sudden urgent desire for speed as he passed the last houses and the snow-clad hillsides sprang at him like white beasts of prey. The metallic hum of the cablecar held promise of a swift gain in altitude, as the cabins climbed the steep hillsides like large, fat bumblebees.

He held out his reduced-rate ticket at the gate. One of the men recognised him. They had been in the army together. "A little skiing, Sar Peider?" The man looked quickly around toward his colleague at the counter and then let Peider through with a secretive gesture, neglecting to punch his ticket.

Peider laughed. "Do you still remember, *Tenente*, when we slept in tents on the Greina and shaved at that ice-cold mountain lake?"

Peider put his skis in the rack, fastened them, then stooped and entered the cabin, which rocked gently under his weight. As he sat down he saw a woman about to enter. She was very beautiful. He felt

Andri Peer was born in 1921 at Sent, in the Engadine, Canton Grisons. His early youth, during which he served as the family goatherd, mowed hay, and helped his uncle at bridgebuilding after a disastrous flood in the Val Sinestra, gave him a deep and lasting feeling for the rugged mountain countryside of his native canton. His first language was Romansch (Rhaeto-Romanic), Switzerland's fourth official language, a Latinic tongue still spoken by perhaps 50,000 people of the Grisons. Peer studied Romance languages at the University of Zürich and, in 1952, received a permanent appointment to the Cantonal Grammar School in Winterthur, where he has since taught French and Italian. His writing has, for the most part, been in Rhaeto-Romanic, and in recent years has brought him a reputation as one of the leading poets in that language as well as one of its most prominent translators. He has also written numerous stories and newspaper articles in German.

a strange sense of confusion. Not only was she well-built — these new ski outfits are so pleasantly snug — but he was also struck by her fine-featured face and the direct, almost challenging glance which she directed at him as she took her place. A silk blouse with a Provençal pattern shimmered beneath her open ski-jacket, its colours carefully matched to the rest of her outfit. He was afraid that he'd be staring at her throughout the trip and it occurred to him that it might be better simply to strike up a conversation.

One of the men closed the cabin, swung it gently around with both hands and let it slide down to catch the running cable. The field glided by beneath them, crisscrossed by ski tracks like a giant waffle iron, and the view opened out down the valley into the Engadine and on the other side to Val Roseg and the Bernina.

"*Vous êtes d'ici?*" the woman asked as she noticed him calmly watching the landscape. "Yes", he said, "born and raised in this valley. But now I live in Basle. I only spend a few days a year in the Engadine, about two weeks, just to make sure I don't forget how to ski".

"I'm Swiss too", she said quite naturally, measuring him with a friendly but penetrating glance, "but now we live in Paris, that is, if I can say 'we' any more, because you see . . ." And as she spoke her tone did not change one bit, ". . . you see, my husband died last night and now I'll have to go back alone".

It was said in the most offhand manner. But the astounding bit of news, the unexpected confidence of this enchanting woman, who was going skiing while her husband's corpse grew cold on its deathbed, and who would be returning to Paris, a city he knew and which he longed for like a lover — all these things went coursing through him like a flame. He felt himself brushed by the wings of adventure, fearful yet full of hope, and groped for a foothold as the sudden flood swept him along. The woman continued, her glance hypnotically linked with his:

"And that's why I'm wondering if you mightn't be able to help me. You're a young man, you've been around, as I can see, and I'm sure you understand how a woman must feel when she's lost her husband, even though he was old and sick, a woman who's far from home, without friends or relatives who might stand by her". She looked at him expectantly. What could he say? But the woman gave him no chance to say anything. To lend her own words more weight she placed her hand on his arm. He felt the pressure of her fingers through his sweater.

"I'm called Aglaja", she breathed, "the family name doesn't matter. My husband died painlessly, just . . . just like that". She looked sideways at him. "Quite suddenly, this morning. He had heart trouble. Yes, and I just covered him with a plaid blanket, because you know, he was good to me, even though he left me alone a good deal. Not that he tyrannised me, no, I wouldn't have stood for that, but his fear of being alone, of dying alone, was always with us, like a ghost, on all our travels. I hope you don't think I'm heartless, leaving him alone like that stretched out on his bed . . ."

"Yes, well, didn't you call a doctor while there was still time?" he interrupted her excitedly.

"There's always a doctor with him," again the sidelong glance, "and anyway I didn't want to cause any excitement on this beautiful winter morning. John wouldn't have wanted it . . ."

"Wouldn't have wanted you to give up some skiing for his sake?"

"Yes, he was like that. And by now the chambermaid must have found him and the doctor must have listened to his heart and seen whatever there is to see. And the hotel manager has probably come, and John is lying there as white as wax and no one" — at this point an audacious spark glittered in her eye — "no one noticed me when I slipped out through a side exit". Her laughter rippled upward, like that of a schoolgirl who has pulled off a neat trick. "Imagine how they must all be

looking for me now, the bellboy, the chambermaid, and the telephone ringing constantly in the room". Now her face darkened and she added almost fearfully: "I bet you they are already up in Marguns waiting for me!"

"That's hardly possible", he said. "How could they get up there ahead of us?"

At that point the cablecar dipped over the wooded ridge and through the plastic window they saw the village disappear far below them.

"We only have a few minutes left". She took his hand. "Help me. Help me to bury my husband, accompany me to France. I'm terrified when I think of all the questions I'll have to answer, all the bickering with insurance companies and business partners. My husband didn't die poor. I would feel safer if I had a young man near me, someone with energy, who knows his way around and can be hard when it's necessary. It would give me some protection from all the photographers and reporters that will be sent to plague me by the newspapers—we own several ourselves. You see, we control the wholesale rag market in France. Oh God, I can't stand the thought of the horrible confusion alone, but . . . by the way, what's your name?"

"Peider. Peider Gaudenz".

"Peider, that sounds nice . . . I

need a man, Peider, someone to stand by me, to protect me, to defend me if necessary".

He wanted to say something, to ask her to speak more slowly. But she continued implacably: "I won't tell you now just how I'll reward you if you agree, but you can give your imagination free rein. Would you like to travel? All you have to do is put your finger somewhere on the globe. Would you like to go skiing, riding, hunting? We own a forest near Chantilly. And a stud farm in Normandy. And so many servants that you would have difficulty finding things for all of them to do".

She finally fell silent, her eyes ablaze and her lips moist with excitement, and moved close to him, very close, until her face was touching his. He didn't move, merely watched as she inclined her head gently toward him, admiring her fine skin with its delicate structure, her fragrant hair brushing his forehead, and he felt an almost intolerable desire welling up inside him. Her hand was hot. But there was something in this luxuriant garden of promises which disturbed him, like a rigid flower made of glass.

"And then, my dear, when we've buried poor John beneath a great marble slab, and pacified the shareholders, perhaps our paths will lead us together to some far horizon, which I see shimmering blue and full

of promise off in the distance". And she softly kissed his temple. The sun momentarily went behind a tree like a great scarlet bird. He felt her hand delicately caressing his neck and the sense of being caught in a mirage was confounded by her caresses and her perfume into a feeling of dizzying drunkenness.

The cabin lurched, there was the creaking of metal. They had arrived. A man in a blue uniform opened the door. Peider was the first to rise and poke his head out into the fresh air. He felt as if he had been bound with a thousand threads and knew that only an energetic move on his part could free him.

There would be time enough for an answer when they were outside. Had he really met Aglaja? It all seemed like a scene from an old musical comedy. Except for the inscrutable beauty of this woman—who was perhaps involving him in her own peculiar game.

She had been right, someone was waiting for her. No sooner had they set foot on firm ground again when two men came toward them, a serious-looking gentleman in a dark suit and an older one in ski-ing clothes who, with his calm manner and the expression of deep concern with which he looked at the woman, might almost have been that poor John whom she had left behind for dead in her hotel room. The man in

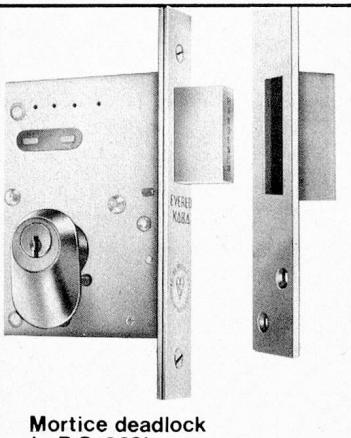
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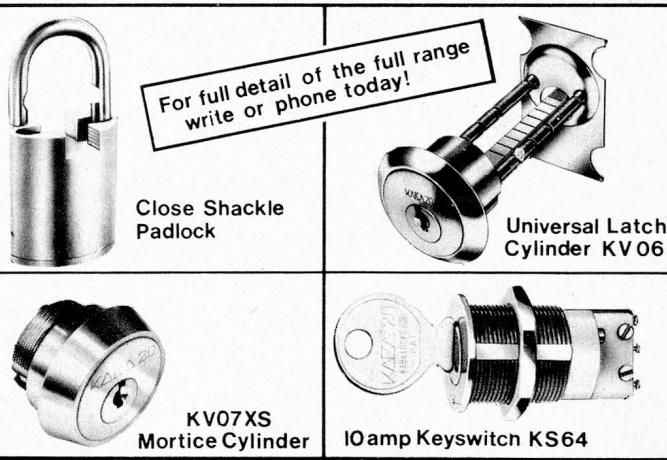
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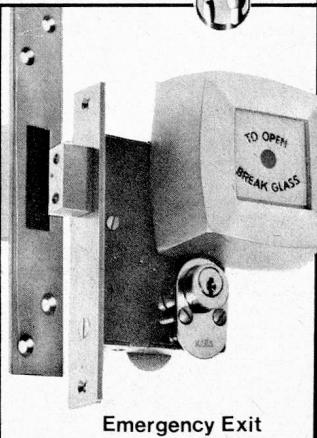
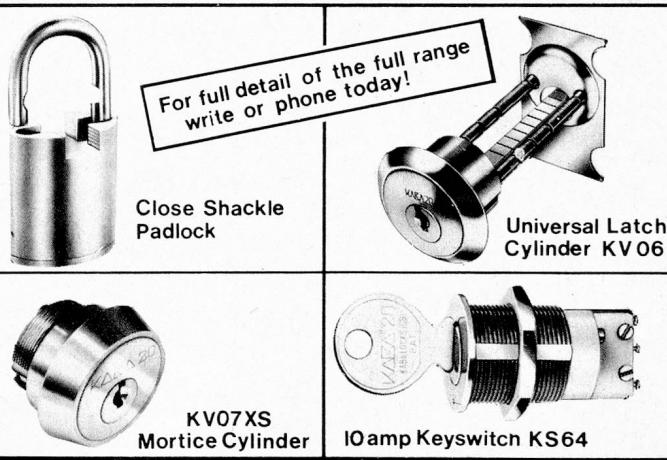
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the dark suit greeted the woman with a slight nod of the head and smilingly shook a threatening finger at her, as at a child. Then he pulled her by the arm gently to the side. She went reluctantly, from time to time casting a pleading look backward.

The man in the ski costume had noticed Peider's confusion. He stepped nearer, took off his cap and, when they were beyond earshot of the many skiers who were now pouring out of the upper station of the cablecar, said in a soft voice:

"My name is John Gordon. I'm the husband of the woman with whom you shared the cabin. It strikes me that your brief ride with my wife was not without surprises and that your companion", at which a weary and bitter smile passed over his face, "couldn't resist confusing you with her rather extravagant suggestions. Permit me to beg your pardon on her behalf".

He paused briefly, just long enough to look over at the others who had sat down at a small metal table in front of the building. Peider followed Gordon's glance and saw that the woman seemed very downcast, while the man with her was apparently trying to console her, stroking her hand and pushing a glass of milk at her. At the same time Peider noticed a helicopter, like a great yellow insect, perched on the hillside, its rotors still revolving.

"You see", continued the man, as he saw with some satisfaction how Peider's facial muscles had slackened, "my wife suffers from a rather odd and regrettable, although not dangerous, disturbance. At moments of crisis—fortunately they do not occur too frequently", here again the weary smile, "she generally leaves me for dead in our house or in a hotel room and attaches herself to some young man, to whom she calmly suggests that they get married and roam about the world together. And she does this in such a natural tone and with such a seductive manner that she overrides any mistrust her companion might feel. If I'm not mistaken, you yourself were drawn a bit into her other world, weren't you? But I can see that you're a gentleman, and I'm sure that you were able to resist her rather exaggerated wish-fulfilment dreams. I daresay you had neither time nor desire to act in any way upon her wild suggestions. And so the doctor over there should not have too difficult a time in calming my poor Elizabeth".

"Her name isn't Aglaja?" asked Peider.

"No, why?"

Something like a hard ball seemed to dissolve within Peider and he felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh. But he subdued it and simply nodded. "You amaze me", he said, finally finding his tongue and search-

ing for an escape valve for his irritation. "It wasn't your wife who made improper suggestions to me, but rather it was I who let myself become a little forward with her. To speak as frankly as you did, when she stepped so radiantly and spontaneously into my cabin I couldn't resist the temptation of spicing our little journey with a short flirtation. Your wife never had a chance to say a word. I didn't even know she was married. So it is I who must beg your pardon".

Peider savoured the astonished expression on the other's face. Without another word he grabbed his skis, went a few steps to one side, fixed the bindings on his feet, and with a powerful shove glided out on the slope.

We are very much indebted to the Swiss Embassy and to the magazine Switzerland Today for permission to publish this engrossing story. Another story by Mr. Peer will appear in a subsequent issue.

A REVOLUTIONARY ANTICORROSION RESIN

A Swiss firm has produced a two-component anti-corrosion epoxy resin, of low viscosity and free of solvents, which now makes it possible to do jobs that were absolutely impossible before; it can be applied not only on dry or wet surfaces, but also underwater and even on slightly oily surfaces.

This new product, called Alocit-Aquacoat, is used as an insulating coating to protect concrete, iron, chromium steel and galvanized coatings. It offers particularly interesting possibilities of use in sectors like port installations, the petroleum industry, drinking water systems, ship building and ship repairs, the food industry and civil engineering.

Alocit-Aquacoat can be applied with a spray gun and mixed with quartz to obtain a mortar.

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L. E. SMITH APPOINTED GENERAL MANAGER OF THE MECHANICAL AND PROCESS ENGINEERING DIVISION OF SULZER BROS (UK) LTD

Mr. L. E. Smith has been appointed General Manager of the Mechanical and Process Engineering Division of Sulzer Bros (UK) Ltd. in place of Mr. R. W. Furtwaengler, C.Eng., F.I.Mech.E., who rejoined the Sulzer group in Switzerland on 1st February, 1979 after over six years in the UK.

Mr. Smith is a chartered engineer and a member of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers and at present is a member of that Institution's Fluid Machinery Group Committee.

He joined Sulzer Bros (UK) Ltd. in 1969 where he has been, until the present, Manager of the Compressor and Process Engineering Departments. Previous to joining Sulzer he was General Manager Process Engineering Division of Ingersoll Rand Co., Ltd.

SWISS MARKET SURVEY

The "Swiss Market Survey", 4th edition, the French version of which has just come out and whose German and English editions will be appearing at the beginning of 1979, gives all basic information (demography, advertising, national production, etc.) needed for a study of the Swiss market. Containing many graphs and tables of statistics, it costs 70 Swiss francs. It is available from Association pour la publication du "Guide du marché suisse", 4th edition, Case postale 720, CH-1001 Lausanne.

SWISS BANK CORPORATION

Swiss Bank Corporation announce the promotion of Mr. Harry Dehm to Assistant Manager with effect from 1st January, 1979.

During his career with the bank, Mr. Dehm has worked in Switzerland, Canada, the Far East, South Africa and Paris. He joined the London Office on the 1st September, 1975.