

THE ASCENT

BY MASAFUMI NAKAI

This magazine wishes, through the medium of the English language, to acquaint Western readers with Oriental thought, and vice versa. After having published in our March issue a German short story, "The Flood," we now present the English translation of a modern Japanese story.

The young author studied German literature at the Tokyo Imperial University. He knows and loves the mountains of his native Kyushu, through which in youthful buoyancy march the three young men of this story—Igarashi, the leader, handsome Kawai, and romantic-minded Asada.—K. M.

IN the twilight three young men got off the train at the Aso-Shimoda station.

The ancient locomotive, looking as if it had come from a museum, puffed white steam as it left the station, laboriously dragging three coaches behind it. All that remained of it was a cloud of smoke falling lightly upon the three men. For a while they stood on the earthen floor of the rough platform and gazed silently at great Mount Aso in the dusk.

With the light behind it, the mountain looked dark and somber. To its right, gigantic Mount Nakadake gushed out columns of black smoke from the crater halfway up its side. The smoke clouded Mount Nekodake in the distance, giving it a dim and ominous look.

The mountain air was cool and refreshing. Through the quiet atmosphere came murmurs of a river like the tinkling of a bell. Far off, the volcano rumbled spasmodically, the sound shaking the earth and dying away in the direction of the other mountains, leaving echoes like distant thunder.

"The mountain seems to be in a bad temper. We'll be able to see flames tonight," muttered the smallest of the three as if speaking to himself.

He was the only one wearing a schoolcap with three white bands. As all three looked about eighteen or nineteen, they were evidently students from Kumamoto city. One of them lighted a cigarette, and the other two lit theirs from it. They all carried full rucksacks on their backs as well as picks, their blades covered with white cloth. The tallest and obviously the



strongest also carried a coil of rope on his shoulders which did not seem to bother him in the least. As they walked along the stone path of the deserted platform entrance their climbing shoes rang out metallically. Their equipment was a little too heavy for ordinary climbers.

Marching along the dusky lane of a village they boisterously sang their schoolsongs; then they began to ascend the mountain path without hesitation, as if they were well versed in the geography of the place. As they passed through the dense, dark forest, picking their way with their alpenstocks, the cyclamen and azalea blossoms shone whitely at them from the shadowy undergrowth.

By the time the three, in high spirits, reached the valley of the Tarutama hot springs, night had set in. When the hundred-foot cliffs surrounding this hot spring on three sides pressed down upon them from the dark sky, their hearts began to warm at the thought of the long-awaited bath in the hot spring water. Standing still, they could hear the refreshing sound of a waterfall greeting them from the depths of the forest. When at last they emerged from the thinning woods, the familiar inn was waiting for them with brightly lit windows.

"Will you put us up for the night?" one of them shouted, while they hur-

riedly took off their shoes and stepped onto the polished wooden floor of the entrance.

There was no maid to be seen at the counter, and all was quiet in the inn except for the sound of water boiling in a kettle. For a while the three young men stood silently and smiled at each other.

"All right, let's go to the room we stayed in before," said the big fellow with the coil of rope, touching his wild-looking long hair.

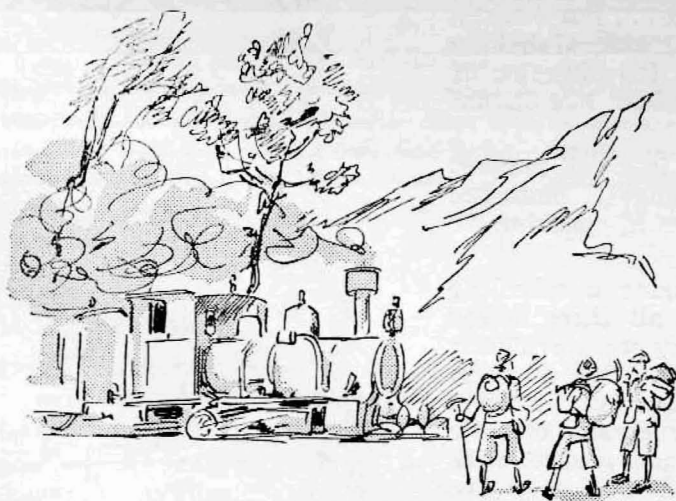
"Don't be in such a hurry, Igarashi! If you walk into someone else's room by mistake, you'll certainly be taken for a mountain robber," laughed the little fellow with the schoolcap.

At that moment they sensed someone coming down the front stairs with quiet, careful steps. They turned round and saw a woman of about thirty in a dark kimono hesitating on the stairs two or three steps up from the floor, looking at them uneasily. Perhaps it was the light, but she looked exceedingly white, tall, and slender. She gave them an indifferent nod as she passed by with elegant steps and turned to the passage leading to an adjoining building.

"Did you see her? She is lovely, and so graceful too," said the man in the schoolcap with emotion, while all three looked after her dumfounded.

"Do you think so? Every woman looks beautiful to Asada, especially if she is city-bred," remarked the clever-looking round-faced man sarcastically.

"Of course, she may not be as beautiful as Kawai's sweetheart, but she certainly was something, wasn't she, Igarashi?" retorted the first speaker. His friend gave an awkward nod and suddenly almost shouted, "I am so hungry I can't stand it any longer," and then laughed in embarrassment.



A young maid hurried toward them from the direction in which the woman had disappeared.

When they had settled down in their room they waited for their meal. Kawai and Asada lay down on their backs on the new tatami and began to chat while smoking their cigarettes. Igarashi, meanwhile, opened a well-worn, detailed map and was absorbed in looking at it.

"Hey, mountain man, has our Nekodake moved a little since last year?"

Igarashi gave a non-committal grunt in reply and ignored their joke.

When they had finished their meal and rested for a while, an overflowing hot-spring bath was waiting for them.

"You have just finished eating, haven't you? I am not a barbarian like you fellows. Go ahead if you like. I'll go in a little later after a rest," Kawai said sarcastically.

"He just wants to be a nuisance. Let him do as he likes."

When they had changed their clothes and hurried into the hall, they heard a voice calling after them, "Hey, remember not to swim in the bathtub as you did last year, or you'll be thrown out."

Igarashi had already begun to snore when Kawai finally went by himself to bath. He did not return for a long time. In the meantime Asada had also fallen asleep.

The three students were enthusiastic members of the Mountaineers' Club, and they were on their way to fulfill their long-cherished desire to conquer the Nishione peak of Mount Nekodake. They had already made one attempt the year before which they had to abandon because of lack of time. The ascent is probably the most difficult in western Japan, and there was no record in the reports of the Mountaineers' Club of it having ever been made. There was only a rumor of a failure some five or six years back.

AFTER having slept well, the three left the inn at nine o'clock on the following morning. The schedule for that day was in a sense a preparation for the next day. They intended to cross aslant the central part of Mt. Aso and to camp that night at the northern foot of Nekodake. It was quite a long walk, about ten miles, but to these three, who were facing a much bigger task, it was nothing. Nevertheless, the actual climbing had started the moment they got off the train at Aso-Shimoda. They did not underestimate this simple preparation. In their casual walking one could see in every step they took the care which only experience can give. Balancing themselves almost unconsciously, they tried to walk in a set rhythm. They did not even forget such minute details as loosening their shoestrings when ascending and tightening them when descending.

The sound sleep had refreshed them, and their young limbs were overflowing with energy. Each in his own way had to suppress the joy that burned in his heart.

Slowly they ascended the heath that was covered with flowering shrubs of all kinds.

"You know, when I went to bath last night I had the funniest experience," Kawai, who was walking in the middle, suddenly said with a laugh to Asada.

Asada looked at him blankly.

"Something happened." Kawai went on, pausing to arouse his companion's curiosity. "When I was about to get out of the bath, somebody came in. Who do you think it was? Well, the woman of last night. You remember—the woman whom you thought so beautiful. But she had a boy of about ten with her. Now, don't be so disappointed."

"Are you telling the truth? It was not a dream, was it?"

"No, it was not. I even played with the child. But that dame was certainly hard to embarrass. So much

so that even I had to blush. I couldn't get out of the bath and had to stay in there till I was as red as a boiled lobster."

"Is that so?" said Asada with a shrug; but in his heart he was not so indifferent as he appeared. Kawai glanced back teasingly at Asada.

For the first time Igarashi looked around at the other two and scowled at them in mock reproach. Then he said cheerfully, "Stop your nonsense. We will soon have half an hour's rest."

Perspiring gently they climbed on till they came to a green open space. They sat down on the grass and took their first rest. The view was beautiful, and around them a herd of horses played with their foals. Some of them started to run suddenly as though frightened. Others kept on grazing as if they did not notice anything, and those that ran away soon came back to rejoin the herd. Some of the foals crawled under their mothers' bellies, others cried out, shaking their long heads, while others again splashed about in a pool, enjoying their young lives.

The three students took out sweets and fruit from their rucksacks. Igarashi was busy examining his map, looking at the mountainside and at the volcanic smoke, while Asada and Kawai silently puffed their cigarettes. Kawai divided his chocolate bar into two and pushed the bigger piece under Asada's nose without a word. Asada accepted it deftly with his mouth. The two smiled at each other affectionately.

WHEN his first cigarette was almost burnt out, Asada, who had been staring before him, stood up suddenly and cried out, "Look! Someone is coming!"

"Ah! It's a woman. Looks like a young one too. Igarashi, look with your big eyes for me, will you?"

Igarashi stood up reluctantly, holding the map in his hand. Kawai, who had been lying on his back, grinned at Asada and got up slowly. Indeed, two figures were visible far away on the

plain, but they suddenly disappeared. Before the students could worry about that, however, they came into sight again. They were moving at a fast pace. Although the plain looked smooth, it must have been rough going.

"Yes, the taller one is a girl," Igarashi, who had been intently staring at them, confirmed.

"Try calling them."

"Useless. We can't be heard so far off."

"Sure we can be heard. In the mountains a voice carries further than you think. And what's more, the wind is blowing in their direction."

"Yoo-hoo!"

Kawai was the first to yell, his hands shaped like a trumpet. The wind swept away the call. Next Igarashi shouted, stamping his feet. The shadows of the two disappeared in the sea of grass but soon reappeared more vividly than before. But then they came no nearer and seemed to turn away toward the mountain path. The three men continued to shout frantically.

The girl stopped first. Then both figures seemed to look toward them as if searching.

"Don't shout any more. If you make too much noise they'll get scared and won't come any nearer."

Asada raised his hand high and signaled.

"Look! They've begun to walk on again. They're coming. They're coming towards us."

He raised his voice and went on waving his hand.

"She must be a brave girl to climb on a day when the mountain is so active."

"The smaller one is a boy. I say, they've stopped."

It was true. The two figures had suddenly stopped walking. They were facing each other, apparently quarreling. But soon the girl began to move on again, pulling the boy along by the hand.

Then they came briskly towards the men without further hesitation. When the three waved their hands, the boy also responded. Now their faces were clearly to be seen. The girl's navy-blue skirt appeared to be divided into two, and her brown shins, bare and rounded, kicked the grass as she walked.

"Kawai, won't you start negotiations with her? Please do it nicely, with your best Tokyo accent."

Asada was visibly restless.

"Negotiations? What is there to negotiate with her anyway?"

"Well, just be the first to speak to her. We'll all back you up later."

"I don't know about that. I'll just be an onlooker," said Igarashi shyly.

About ten yards off the girl stopped walking. "Hallo!" she said with a nod and a bright smile.

"Hallo!" the three hurriedly replied in unison. The effect was rather ridiculous.

The girl was tall and looked healthy. The boy hid shyly behind her. She immediately took off the pretty flowered kerchief she was wearing round her head. A shapely, slender face appeared which did not look at all priggish in this foreign attire.



"Have you two climbed up all alone?" Kawai was the first to speak.

"Yes," the girl laughed charmingly. "My older brother is with us too, but he is such a weakling that he is following us in the bus. It's quite impossible to go as far as the crater today, isn't it?"

"Well . . . you might, but it's pretty hard. If you climb without considering the direction of the wind, the best you can do is to get suffocated by the smoke or get dizzy and fall head over heels into the pit."

"Oh, how awful!"

The girl looked around at the boy. For the first time Asada joined in the conversation.

"Your brother?"

The boy bowed casually and smiled.

"Yes, he is. Although you are small, you are braver than your big brother, aren't you, Saburo-chan?"

The girl seemed quite at ease, not at all put out by the three men.

Igarashi, who had been looking down and devoting himself to peeling an apple in an awkward manner, said, "Hey, you, take a piece. Tastes good."

He held out to the boy a piece of apple on the point of his knife.

"Don't be afraid. He won't hurt you, in spite of his looks," Kawai remarked sarcastically.

The boy reached out his small hand frankly. Igarashi blushed and grinned, and all of them burst out laughing. Igarashi pulled a coil of rope around his knees in his embarrassment.

The girl, looking at him with big eyes, asked gently, as if to console him, "What heavy equipment you have! Where are you going?"

Igarashi turned his head to the right and tried to point in silence, but unfortunately Nekodake could not be seen since it was hidden behind other peaks.

"We are going to conquer Nekodake, but not until tomorrow," Asada replied for him.

Touching his alpenstock curiously, the girl asked, "Is that a very high mountain?"

"Yes. I think it is 4,700 feet, isn't it, mountain man?" Asada asked Igarashi who was still sitting on the grass.

"Yes, it is 4,701½ feet at the top of Tenguiwa Peak," he corrected bluntly.

"Oh, 4,701½ feet."

Asada did not miss the slight shadow of disappointment which passed over the girl's face as she repeated the figure in a murmur.

"But, you know," Kawai said gently, taking over the conversation, "the summit is a wonderful mass of rocks. There is hardly anything like it even in the Nippon Alps, to say nothing of here in Kyushu. To climb it is really a life and death adventure. Especially the route we are going to take, which has never been conquered yet."

"Oh, how wonderful!" The girl's big eyes shone. "I wish you luck. I suppose I can find out what happens through the newspaper or some other way?"

"Newspaper?" Kawai and Asada looked at each other and smiled. "Yes, perhaps in the Kumamoto newspaper. But it will be a different story if we happen to fall and get killed."

For a short while the students were silent, lost in their own thoughts. Looking at the fine profile of Kawai, who could talk so freely and delightfully, Asada had jealously to admit that he was handsome.

"Why don't you take off your rucksack? It must be awfully heavy," said Asada to carry on the conversation, shifting his eyes from her breast which, in her white blouse, was bewitchingly rounded by the strap of the brand-new rucksack pressing into her shoulders.

"No, it's very light. It only looks heavy."

"I suppose you aren't from Kyushu. Where did you come from?"

"From Beppu. Oh, you mean. . . . We're from Osaka."

"Oh, I see. But you don't have an Osaka accent at all," Kawai suddenly chipped in with a laugh.

"Why, you are mean!" laughed the girl, falling into the intonation inadvertently, her mouth hidden behind a handkerchief.

The moment Asada heard this accent with its sweet, unique sounds, he felt a pang of pleasure that almost numbed him.

"If you don't mind. . . ." he suddenly burst out and faltered, dazzled by his own courage. "Won't you tell me your name?"

"My! Did you say my name? I wonder what good it will do you to know my name!" The girl smiled brightly, and Asada's cheeks burned; but he bore it manfully.

"Oh, no special reason. But even if it is only your first name, please tell me."

"All right. Akiko," she said gallantly, still smiling. "I was born in the autumn [*aki*]; so my name is Akiko. Very simple, isn't it?"

Meanwhile, Igarashi with his strange-looking long hair had become fast friends with the boy and was telling him about the mountains, his favorite topic. Then he looked at his watch and took out his notebook.

"10 a.m. Rested. Volcano continues to spout smoke. Met an Osaka girl. Name is Akiko (?) Think she is beautiful. Her brother is a dear. Chatted. 10.55 Said farewell. Started. All in fine condition."

Having entered this in an unexpectedly neat handwriting, Igarashi stood up and said with decision, "It is time to start."

Kawai and Asada looked up reproachfully, but Igarashi began to shoulder his rucksack in silence. Then, with a grin, the other two meekly began preparations to start.

The five walked almost in a line, taking the shortest course to the new mountain path where they were to part and go their own ways.

"Well, I wish you all luck."

With a friendly smile Akiko, in the modern way, held out her hand to Kawai. Asada was the next to shake hands. Igarashi blushed and failed to extend his clumsy hand.

"You'll shake hands with me, won't you?" Saying this, the little boy gripped Igarashi's big arm with his hands.

"Try and climb Dai-Kwanpo tomorrow," Kawai said, regretting to have to part with the girl, "you will have a fine view from there. You can get there very easily by car. Don't forget to look at our Nekodake."

"Good-by, take good care of yourselves."

"Good-by."

Both parties stopped many times to wave their hands at each other. Soon the girl was waving her handkerchief, and the men responded by raising up their alpenstocks. The two figures became smaller and smaller, and their voices seemed no longer to reach them.

Suddenly Asada ran off and jumped on to a rock of black lava. He stood up on his toes, forming a trumpet with both hands, and cried out as if bewitched:

"Hi! Miss Akiko! Akiko! I like you! I love you!"

The smoke blowing down seemed to muffle his voice, and only the sound of the echo could be heard. The other two stood dumfounded. They could not even laugh, for they felt as if tied by the power of some god.

Asada jumped down lightly.

"Let's go. Ah, I feel a lot better now," he said, looking as if a great load had been taken from his shoulders.

IN silence the three climbed down into the valley, which was a mass of blossoms. The air was fragrant, and they felt sorry they had to trample upon the flowers filling up their path.

At last they found a narrow grassy strip of level ground amid the sea of blossoms and sat down for lunch. With great relish they ate up every morsel of their meal and then rested ecstatically in the warm fragrance. But soon they were off again.

There was a splendid camping-place on the northern slope of Nekodake. The autumn before, the three students had made a mental note of the spot as the base for their next attempt. Without taking a rest they made preparations to camp. After having carefully selected the right place, they speedily pitched a military tent, using a dense cedar forest for protection against the wind. Asada and Kawai took their canteens down to a spring covered by low bamboo bushes. Meanwhile Igarashi dug a hole in the red earth and deftly built a fireplace with well-selected stones. Then he ran off to the forest to gather an armful of firewood.

Avoiding the smoke, the three men sat around the campfire at a distance



and soon began to puff their cigarettes. Although they had a late lunch, they all felt famished. A pleasant light still remained, and there was some time left till sunset. Having nothing else to do, they began to examine the contents of their rucksacks. The result was a selection of various canned goods, and dinner became an unexpected feast.

"It's queer, but I feel a bit anxious," Kawai began rather gloomily, smoking away at his after-dinner cigarette. "Perhaps someone will lose his footing tomorrow. I can't seem to get away from the idea."

Asada stared at his friend, somewhat taken aback that he could say such ominous words so casually the very night before the challenge.

"It isn't the first time that Kawai has shown the white feather," laughed Igarashi loudly. "Don't you go worrying unnecessarily. After all, we have the rope, haven't we, Asada? Let's make Kawai go last tomorrow and drag him along to our hearts' content."

Asada was greatly relieved at the way in which Igarashi had saved the situation. Kawai laughed too.

"I'm awfully sorry. You will forgive me, won't you?" he apologized. "The truth is that I want to say something. I want to confess a secret."

"Sure, we'll listen. It's your love affair again—right? Isn't it?"

Kawai grinned and fixed his gaze on the fire. Asada swiftly exchanged glances with Igarashi and smiled.

"We're going to get married at last," Kawai burst out. "The wedding is to take place as soon as I enter the university next spring."

"What? Hey, mountain man! He says he's going to get married right away. As soon as we come down from the mountain we must drink to it."

Igarashi grinned in silence.

"Isn't that great news? Of course we're glad too. It is Miss Mitsue, isn't it? Let me see her photograph again. Don't say you don't have it."

With Asada staring at his chest, Kawai gave in and took out her picture from the inner pocket of his coat.

Kawai's sweetheart already enjoyed a certain fame in the club house of the Mountaineers. A framed photograph of her always smiled saucily from Kawai's desk. To students of a provincial high school, the picture

alone of this incredibly beautiful Tokyo girl was enough to make its owner an object of envy. A gaily colored little envelope arrived for him at least once a week. If it was in the least delayed, it was his fellow students who would become fidgety.

"You are a lucky fellow, Kawai. I'll be invited to your wedding, and you'll introduce me to her, won't you?"

Igarashi, who had gone towards the cedar forest to gather more firewood, presently shouted, "Hi! Come and see this. It's a grand view."

Asada, gently placing the photograph on his back with his arms under his head, ran in the direction of the voice.

Far above the cedar forest the outlines of more than a hundred rocky crags, dyed deep red by the evening sun, looked down at them as if in proud challenge. Patting the shoulder of Asada, who stood there lost in thought, Igarashi whispered, "I think Kawai has become a bit too nervous. Take good care of him, will you?"

Asada looked round doubtfully.

"Never mind, never mind. Let's just do our best tomorrow. We'll be all right." Igarashi laughed cheerfully and ran off into the forest, waving his hatchet.

NEXT morning Igarashi awoke while it was still dark. After quietly smoking a cigarette, he woke up the others by pulling their noses. Then for a few minutes each did setting-up exercises in his own way, after which they washed their faces in the cold spring water. While they were still at the spring the sun rose, and the old world around them was at once vividly created anew. The sky was clear, and they felt light of heart.

The summit of Nekodake was still clothed in a thin veil of mist and seemed to hide its dignity with mystery and charm. It seemed to reach out to them from afar, warming their hearts to a friendly feeling. Having bowed

to the northeast, in the direction of the Imperial Palace, they reverently prayed to the sun.

"7.35 a.m.," Igarashi recorded in big letters, and, leaving their tent behind them as it was, the three started off in high spirits.

Led by Igarashi, they climbed up the stone path wet with morning dew, which patiently wound through the gigantic rocks that were already beginning to hinder their way.

The slopes of Nekodake were covered with flowering shrubs and trees. Glorious red and yellow azaleas were interspersed with lovely white blossoms, while the great, cup-shaped flower of the mountain lotus filled the air with sweet fragrance.

At last the path reached a damp, narrow valley. As they ascended, jumping lightly from rock to rock, they came to a confluence of stony brooks where sharp-edged rocks of all sizes were piled up unsteadily. There the gloomy valley ended. The path then passed through a bushy zone and finally led them right under Tenguiwa, which rose steeply above them in a sheer cliff about seven hundred feet high.

Looking back at his perspiring comrades, Igarashi said in a commanding voice like that of an altogether different man, "Let's rest here for a while. We'll start off again in twenty minutes," and took off the rope from his shoulders. Whenever he was very serious he spoke with hardly any accent, and his expression became tense.

The shorter the rest the better now, for the feeling of tenseness should not slacken even for a moment. Igarashi silently began to uncoil the rope.

"Good heavens, Igarashi! Are you going to examine it again? It's the same rope we have been training with for so long and trusting our lives to. Why don't you let us have a good rest?" protested Kawai, somewhat irritated. But Igarashi laughed and set to work.

"This is also for Miss Mitsue's sake. You can't be too careful. It would be terrible to find the bridegroom hanging in the air."

Igarashi's laugh showed all his big front teeth, which were slightly prominent. His bantering tone was effective. After the rope, the picks were examined. They also went over each other's attire minutely.

"All right, everything is okay. We're bound to succeed."

Igarashi lit his second cigarette.

He was a man whose true character was apt to be mistaken in the plains. Once in the mountains, however, especially when faced with danger, he seemed to emit an unconscious spark, and there was no better leader. There was no poison in his words, and it was very seldom that he became angry; even then it lasted only for the moment, and no one could hate him. Asada and Kawai, who considered themselves experts, were glad to follow his leadership.

"In the event of danger I will take the weight of both of you by myself. Then you had better be calm and find a place to hold on," he had often said, smiling proudly.

His big, beautiful, well-balanced body had enough muscle to back up this big talk. He had been a javelin thrower in his middle-school days, and his arms were strong enough easily to chin his powerful body more than fifteen times. He had also trained his legs in football and exercise. The results of all this he had dedicated to his beloved mountains.

Soon confronted by the first difficult peak, the three carefully tied their bodies together with the rope. In spite of all their experience their fingers trembled slightly. Igarashi examined the knots closely and had them tied and retied again and again till he felt quite sure of them. His eyes had begun to shine, and the blood had rushed into his cheeks. All three were silent.

"I wonder what the girl of yesterday is doing now?" said Asada suddenly. The other two silently cast ineffectual glances at a corner of the distant mountains. With a smile Igarashi slapped his comrades' shoulders. This was the signal for the start.

Headed by Igarashi, Asada and Kawai following at intervals of twenty-four feet each, they started to traverse the peaks. With their hands and feet holding on like suckers, the party slowly moved sideways across the iron-colored rock wall, keeping a rhythm like that of a single living creature. Every move of their limbs was made with utter concentration. Sometimes Igarashi gave advice to the others in concise words, now and again they barked out warnings to each other.

When Kawai, the last of the three, had finished crossing, Igarashi looked at his watch and said firmly, "Excellent, we'll go right on."

The fourth finger of his right hand was injured and its nail stained with blood. Bashfully he hid the hand in his pocket.

The next wall was not so difficult, but at one place they had to let themselves down hanging by the rope, one end of which was fastened to a rock. Here Igarashi was the last to go down, first letting Asada and Kawai descend separately. It all went very smoothly. The three had now become used to the rocks and seemed to have regained their usual confidence.

Next they set out for the second peak. After having had to jump over some deep gaps, it was a refreshing job to climb its rock wall. When they had reached the rocky summit, which was as narrow as a cat's head, a cool wind began to blow. The sharp, deeply weathered Yaseone Peak extended from right under their feet.

The climbers huddled together for a short rest; but they stood up again for the next phase without even finishing their cigarettes. To step over these knife-like edges needed the ut-

most care. However expert one may be as a mountaineer, one always feels clumsy at such places. After having climbed Yaseone Peak they at last started on their old friend Ryunangan, the third peak, which had already been conquered and named by predecessors from the Mountaineers' Club. It was at this point that, the autumn before, the three students had been forced to turn back. Moreover, on their way back they had run into unexpectedly bad conditions and, when Asada had at one point lost his footing, they had even faced death for a moment.

The rocks of Ryunangan were dangerous. Especially on the weather-beaten volcanic rock wall every single hand- and foothold had first to be carefully examined before it could be trusted. While Kawai, bringing up the rear, was clinging to a rock, Igarashi suddenly shouted, "Stone-fall!"

Instantly Asada pressed himself to the rock surface as if he were part of it, and pulled in his head. But only a few pieces of broken stone flew out in a wide curve high over their heads. A moment later the sound died away far below them. The mountain had labored and brought forth a mouse. Even so, Asada was queerly out of breath after his first shock. Raising his head he saw Igarashi looking down with an embarrassed grin. Kawai, a little pale, also responded with a smile.

Owing to the continuous tension they had lost all sense of time. It was already three hours and twenty minutes since they had left Tenguwa. Luckily for them the wind had died down, and the sun came out. They ate a light lunch. For a while the volcano remained quiet, with the usual amount of smoke whirling up. The valley below them shone brightly green, and the familiar midget towns and villages dotted here and there looked very peaceful.

The course over the remaining peaks was almost nothing to these men, who were now in excellent form. The climb up the cold north wall in the shadow

of the seventh peak brought the traverse of Nishione to an end. But the high, dark rock wall of Yome-no-daira shone at them weirdly as if in challenge. They puffed their cigarettes meditatively.

"While we are here we might as well have a go at that too. If we don't, we might be called cowards. Besides, the sun is still high." So saying, Kawai impatiently got up. Igarashi, however, did not move. An uncanny silence followed. He felt his fighting spirit kindling. At last he said resolutely, "All right, let's go!"

Kawai jumped at him with a cry of joy.

The three descended the steep mountain path for a bit and crossed the ledge at the side of the rock wall, coming out on another ledge protruding there. Each of them realized that they were facing a very difficult place. They could not turn back now. After taking measure with his eyes, Igarashi firmly grasped the rock. Climbing up some twenty feet, he waited until Asada had climbed up to a narrow shelf, and then began carefully to cross to the next shelf, close to the top of the rock.

On arriving at the shelf after a hard climb, Asada discovered to his surprise that the other side of the rock, which had been hidden from them before by a knee-high projection, was sliced off, forming a vertical cliff some sixty feet high. But there was no other way to go on. Asada fastened the rope, and Igarashi went ahead. Although they could find holds, the rock itself appeared to be rather crumbly and brittle. Feeling for holds in the limited field of vision, Igarashi was surprised to find an old wedge stuck in a crack of the rock. There were two more further up. Although they were rusty, they were quite firm.

"I say, here are some wedges! Someone has ravaged this place before us."

"What? Can they be used? Look at them carefully."

"Sure, we can climb."

Igarashi's cheerful voice sounded reassuringly from above. With a rising feeling of revulsion it seemed to Asada as if the world had dissolved into thin air. After recoiling several times, he finally managed to look down over the projection and withstand the shock of the fearful empty space on the other side. He climbed till it was his turn to hold the rope for Kawai in the rear. The rope was already stretched to its utmost. Asada took several deep breaths in order to quiet the slight convulsion of his muscles.

He happened to see a blade of grass sticking out feebly from a narrow strip of weatherbeaten earth in a fissure of the rock at the level of his eyes. Without moving his limbs, he approached his lips to it and felt something soft touching them. His heart warmed. But the next instant he recollected himself and, closing his eyes, waited, his whole body tense with effort.

At that moment a sharp shriek like the cry of an animal pierced the air, and he immediately felt a burning shock on his shoulders. A second later a part of his brain became strangely clear, and the green blade appeared before his eyes like a vision. Clenching his teeth he desperately resisted the terrible power which was trying to wrench his whole body from the rock. Suddenly his shoulders felt incredibly light. "I must not be deceived yet. The life of Kawai depends on my shoulders. . . . Someone is calling me. . . . Why is it so far away, I wonder?"

Asada struck his dizzy head against the rock. Someone called him again. The voice sounded full of grief.

"Hey, Asada!"

This time he heard it distinctly. He came to himself and looked up. Almost directly above him he saw the hobnailed soles of Igarashi's shoes.

"Oh, Igarashi! What's the matter?"

"Shut up! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Come on! Look behind you, look well!"

As if becoming aware of the situation for the first time, Asada looked back timidly. Kawai was not there. The loosely hanging rope was all his bloodshot eyes could see. He quietly let go with his left hand, but he was afraid to grip the rope.

"Hey there, keep your nerve! Hold on with all your might. I'll be down in a minute."

Asada clung desperately to the rock. His mind was empty, and he did not even realize it when Igarashi patted his shoulder and went down past him. Soon Igarashi pulled at the rope from below and signaled three times. No sooner had one of his legs reached the ledge than Asada collapsed on the spot. He felt giddy, and cold shivers ran up and down his spine.

"Asada, won't you look down just once at Kawai?"

Hearing this whisper at his ears, Asada looked around him as if waking from a dream.

Igarashi took his hand, while Asada looked down over the ledge at the sheer cliff to find the small figure of Kawai lying right beneath him. Unconsciously he called Kawai's name aloud and waited, hoping that he would get up. Feeling a gentle touch on his shoulder, he turned his head and saw Igarashi gazing silently, with tears in his eyes, at the torn end of the rope.

Looking again at Kawai, who was lying stretched out on his back on the flat rock, it seemed to him as if their friend were peacefully asleep. Even the red dots which dyed his body and the rock appeared strangely beautiful, as if they were scattered crimson flowers.

