I

the mountain

A WEARINESS born of three days and nights of jam-packed train travel, and four hard days of plotting escape plans in Paris before that, slowed the feet of John Henry Weidner as he made his way along the rough path leading into the Saleve Mountain from the roadway between Annecy and St. Julien. Presently he left the trail and cut his way more steeply upward to the left. To the right ahead, he remembered, stood the control station on the road that ran across the top of the mountain, and he didn't want the gray-shirted guards at the control station to see him, not with the list of Jewish refugees he had in his pocket. It was imperative that the list be delivered safely to his friend at the Swiss immigration office in Geneva.

John paused to catch his breath and swung around to view the surrounding land that swept away in rolling verdant hills and valleys. Turning back toward the upthrust face of the Saleve, he felt a keen inner joy. This was "his" mountain —he knew its every secret; he had etched the features of its rugged bluffs and peaceful vales deep into his memory.

Pushing steadily upward, he soon worked his way behind a slope which concealed him from the control station on the mountain road. It was four miles from this point to La Croisette, the isolated little village atop the mountain where he would begin to look for the familiar route leading down toward the French-Swiss border. As he picked up his pace on the gradual slope, he topped the rising ground to his left and broke out onto the flat ridge he always followed toward the village. Here again he paused, this time to study the view on the other side of the mountain—the panorama that was Switzerland.

Spread out directly below him lay the green carpet of forest covering the border area. Farther away, set against a background of green like a diamond in velvet, lay the beautiful city of Geneva. Its spires and high-peaked buildings caught the afternoon sun. The dazzling League of Nations buildings stood out in the surrounding green like great blocks of white marble. To the right, angling away in deep blue splendor, was Lake Geneva. Behind the lake, rising toward the rugged Jura Mountains that framed the entire scene, was the Plain of Geneva. And far to the right the snowy head of Mont Blanc, Europe's highest peak, raised itself among the Alps.

The sound of his light mountain boots on the dirt was all that broke the silence of the afternoon as he turned once again toward La Croisette. He had little time at that moment for taking up his years-old love affair with the Saleve, however. There were other things that needed attention. The group of Jewish refugees waiting for him near the campus

of the Adventist college at the foot of the mountain in Collonges was one. They had been there for several days already, and they had to be taken over the border that night, no matter how tired John felt. Both the Gestapo and the French police had stepped up their surveillance all along the border, and his friends were afraid the refugees might be discovered at the farmhouse where they were hiding. And the list in his pocket—that had to be in Geneva by tomorrow at the latest.

Jacques Rens was already on his way from Paris with another group of refugees, and if the names on Weidner's list were not entered in the registry at the Geneva immigration office before the group with Rens arrived, they would be turned back to France by the Swiss border guards. And back to France meant into the hands of the Gestapo!

Earlier that morning when he arrived by train in Annecy, he heard that reinforced control at every border checkpoint had been ordered. The Commandante General of the entire area was making an inspection, and special precautions were being taken all along the border. That is why he had decided to cross over the Saleve instead of taking the bus to Collonges via St. Julien, as he often did. There were control posts below Cruseilles and St. Julien, and another on the road from St. Julien to Collonges. If the searching of bus passengers at the control posts was being intensified, then John had no desire to go that way. The precious list of refugees, with its complete identification of each name, would make interesting reading for the Gestapo, and it would provide a ready-made trip to jail for Weidner. So he

had gotten off the bus before it reached the checkpoint south of Cruseilles and struck off on foot toward the Saleve.

Now as he moved along the ridge of the mountain, he was startled by a voice challenging him from a nearby hill. He whirled around toward the sound. "Halt," yelled a black-coated Nazi SS officer through a megaphone. Behind the officer John could see the green German troop truck which had pulled to a stop on the road about a third of a mile away.

"Halt," came the distant command again. His attention now riveted on the truck, John could see SS troops pouring from it. As they leaped from the rear of the vehicle, he could see that they had dogs with them. Rifle barrels caught the lengthening afternoon sun as they swung toward him.

The situation telescoped through Weidner's mind. There were about fifteen Germans that he could see. The dogs began barking, and the first bullet slammed into a nearby tree.

"If I surrender, they can't do much to me," he calculated. "I have my papers in order. But what of the list, and the refugees waiting at Collonges? The SS won't release me today, that is certain. And I've got to go into Switzerland with the refugees tonight."

The Nazis were running toward him at top speed now, but they were holding onto the dogs' leashes instead of letting the animals run free.

He spun around and fled through the trees. "There may be more of them," John thought as he ran, "but I know the mountain better. If I can hold out long enough, I can go down the cliffs." Quickly he put more distance between him-

self and the onrushing Nazis. Bullets whined past as he hurdled fallen trees and rocks.

As he ran, he began to think of the course he would take. He decided to circle toward La Croisette, then cut around the village and try to go down the cliffs that drop behind the houses. It would be difficult for his pursuers to follow him there with the dogs.

La Croisette was still more than two miles away, and Weidner knew he would have to conserve what strength he had left. He began to count as he ran, trying to measure his running evenly to keep a constant distance away from the SS.

Then he saw the soldiers divide into three units. "They'll try to cut around me now," he thought. "I'll have to travel faster." Bullets sang their deadly song around him as he ran. He could hear the barking dogs, and from the sound he knew one of the groups was gaining on him. As exhaustion began to build up in his body, John started to calculate the distance to the houses of La Croisette: "Four hundred yards . . . three hundred . . . two hundred."

Suddenly he broke out of a small patch of trees, and ahead he could see the six or eight houses that made up the little French village. A hundred yards beyond the houses, chalky humps of limestone reared from the green undergrowth, marking the approach to the cliffs. One group of SS troopers was less than three hundred yards behind him now. He plunged past the houses and came upon the cliffs almost before he realized it. His time now would be measured in seconds. With the Nazis pounding out of the trees

behind, the old familiar crevasse in the face of limestone and granite had to be located immediately.

John stopped abruptly, glanced quickly across the face of rock, and spied his route down. It was a deep split in the rock face that, to the experienced climber, gave promise of hand and foot holds inside by which descent could be made.

Down into the split he crawled. Loose shale fell into his face when his hand slipped or groped for a firm rock. Far below, almost straight down, he could see the patch of green that was the peaceful campus of the college at Collonges, where he had spent so many happy days as a student. "Will there ever be peace again such as I had in those days?" he wondered as he clawed his way down the rock.

At last he reached his hiding place, a growth-covered outcropping more than one hundred feet down the almost vertical face. Below yawned nothingness for five hundred feet! "How I wish I had the proper tools for practicing *varappe* right now," thought the exhausted Weidner. "I can't hope to go back up, because the soldiers are sure to be waiting there, probably all night. I should have some real climbing shoes, pitons, and rope for going down. But I'll just have to chance it."

He knew he had to be as quiet as death itself. Any movement would let the Germans know he was still alive. He could hear the dogs snarling above. And the bullets seemed to increase as the SS men shouted in anger at the hidden man. But John was protected by the overhang above him so that the bullets struck harmlessly in the soft limestone or went whining off in ricochet when they hit a patch

of granite. He edged closer against the face of the cliff as he tried to stretch his exhausted body.

As he lay back in the small patch of bushes which made up his shelter, he noticed that the firing had diminished. Although the dogs still barked, they now sounded farther away, as though they were being taken to another area to look for the fugitive. Darkness was beginning to settle on the Saleve. Above, he could hear two soldiers talking. John, who understood German, heard one soldier tell his companion, "He has probably fallen down the cliff and is dead. The way he went over so quickly makes it all but certain. But our orders are to stay here until we're relieved."

Weidner turned his head downward from the little outcropping. The way looked dangerous, more dangerous than he liked to think about. As he studied the rocky escarpment for a route, his mind returned to other days on the Saleve when he had come to practice *varappe,* the mountain-climbing art of those who try for the highest peaks. Although the Saleve was far from the highest of mountains, its limestone-granite cliffs made it an excellent though dangerous practice area.

Before the war hundreds of climbers came from Geneva and the surrounding French countryside each week to practice on the Saleve for more difficult climbs. And each year a number who had not learned their lessons were carried lifeless from the bottom of the massive rocks.

As the welcome darkness continued to gather about him, thoughts of earlier days at Collonges flooded John's mind. One of the first discoveries he had made after his father

had been appointed Greek and Latin teacher at the college was that the mountain held an exhaustless store of adventure. He was forbidden to climb the dangerous crags and outcroppings of the Saleve, but John was too much boy to follow the restrictions with any consistency. Many times he would slip away from the campus to try a new trail he had found or to scale a difficult face of rock with friends.

Once, when he was fifteen, he found himself at that dread moment of the mountaineer: he couldn't go farther up the rock wall he was scaling, and to go down meant certain death. The only answer was to jump to a jutting outthrust of rock on one side. If he missed the leap, he would fall to the rock-strewn valley hundreds of feet below. As was his custom at all times, whether in need or in thanksgiving, young Weidner closed his eyes and spoke to God. "My Father," he prayed, "my next moments are the most important of my life. I need Your help to guide my hands." With confidence born of the habit of prayer the youngster leaped for the rock and grasped its safety!

When John would return home after his early climbing experiences, clothes torn and boots scarred from the mountain's harshness, his father would ask the inevitable question, "Have you been on the Saleve again, son?" Schooled in honesty above all else, the boy would acknowledge that he had, indeed, been climbing. Then the thrashing would come. "I received more whippings than I can remember for climbing on the Saleve," he recalled years later. "My father had good reason to spank me; the mountain was very dangerous in places, and I was just a youngster, sometimes

climbing alone. I can understand now that if I had been my father, I too would have been concerned."

The tense hours passed slowly, the silence being broken occasionally by German conversation above his place of refuge. "You stay here, and I'll take the dogs away," he heard one of the SS troopers say. "If that fellow is still alive down there, he will think we have gone when he no longer hears the dogs, and he will climb back up. When he does, you grab him."

Finally, with darkness fully come, John decided to go down the dangerous face of the mountain. By now only the night sounds—the birds, insects, and the wind playing through the trees higher up—could be heard on the Saleve. Cautiously he stretched out on the little shelf to flex his muscles. The movement sent shale and small rocks clattering down the face of the cliff. John froze, but when no reaction came from above, he cautiously shifted his body again.

As he moved, he looked out toward Geneva. The sparkle of thousands of bright lights startled him because they seemed so near. He saw a few small glows which marked the college campus, and the contrast between the almost blacked-out college and surrounding town with Geneva in the distance was striking. Geneva was purposely telling enemy air crews by its blaze of light that it was a neutral city, that there was peace in Switzerland; while the little French border city of Collonges tried to hide in the inky blackness of the night.

"Is it possible that so many people are suffering so much just a few miles from that city ablaze with lights?" John

asked himself as he prepared to leave his tiny shelter. "There, just a couple of miles away, is Geneva. There is no Gestapo, no curfew, no death, no misery of evasion." As he slowly rose to his feet on the little outcropping, he whispered, "I'll be in Geneva soon. Wait for me, bright lights and peaceful streets; wait for me. I'll be there soon."

With torturing slowness he eased off the small ledge of rock back to the crevasse. That split in the rock, he realized, was his only route down, dangerous though it was. Fingers scraping raw on the rock, he began to inch downward. As he moved, he recalled a night some years before when he and a group of students had stood on the college campus watching the small light of a lantern in the hand of a climber moving slowly down the face of the Saleve. "He should stay on the mountain through the night," one of the students had ventured as the others watched in silence. "The only safe thing to do is to stay on the mountain through the night." Moments after the student's voice had trailed off in the quiet night air the little light had suddenly arched down, and with an awestricken gasp they knew the climber had lost his footing. The next morning they found him, skull crushed and fingers still clutching pieces of the loose limestone he had broken from the mountain's face.

Determined not to repeat such a performance, John now fought his way down with agonizing slowness. Below, he could see the lights, so close it seemed he could reach out and touch them. But that was another danger of the mountain he had learned. The bell-clear atmosphere surrounding the Saleve made lights which were quite distant look con-

fusingly near. Exhaustion hovered close by him again; but each time it came, he would cling to the rocky face, not moving at all, and wait until the fatigue passed.

Finally, abruptly, John hit the bottom of the mountain. He crumpled in a heap when he realized where he was. He had been much nearer collapse than he realized before. Now, at least for the moment, he was safe. If he could keep going just a little longer, he could pick up the refugees and see them safely into Switzerland. The border would be no problem, not on such a black night as this one.

John's thoughts turned to the larger implications of his wartime involvements. His work, he decided as he rested at the base of the Saleve, had lately taken on real complications since he had organized his friends into groups to handle difficult assignments. It was so different now from the early days of the war when he was handling everything himself. Then he had been taking all the risks and had only himself to worry about. Now there were others: Jacquet in Lyons; Moen in Toulouse; Laatsman in Paris; and faithful, ever-helpful Marie-Louise Meunier in Annecy. He had to think of them and of how they could help rescue those whose death decree was written by the Nazis, and at the same time of how these friends could be protected from the Gestapo.

It was typical of John to think about others at a time when his own life was in great peril. Of rugged constitution, ruddy, dark-haired, and fast-reacting, he was in top condition at twenty-nine years of age as a result of his frequent mountain climbing, skiing, and hiking trips about the Swiss

and French countryside and mountains. Now as he picked himself up at the base of the cliff and struck off toward the farmhouse where the refugees waited, he was thankful that he had lived healthfully and exercised vigorously. Mountain trips like this one were only for those in top physical condition.

As he came upon the farm road which led to where the refugees waited, John's weariness began to drop away again. It was nearing midnight, and the fresh night air seemed to give him renewed strength. Another ten minutes of walking steadily brought him to the little cluster of farm buildings and the house itself. He rapped out a prearranged signal at the door.

"You're late," said the small dark farmer who let Weidner in and then quickly dropped the blackout curtain behind him. "We were afraid you had been caught by the Gestapo. Everywhere they are tightening control of the area."

"I was almost caught on the Saleve, but I got away this time," John stated.

"Good, good!" the little farmer said.

The two men walked through the house and slipped quietly out of the back door to the barn, where the refugees were bedded in the hayloft. Anxious to reach Switzerland before dawn, they roused the sleepy people and led them into the chill of the spring night. They set off along a pathway which ran behind the barn, around the field and into the trees, bordering the St. Julien-Annemasse highway paralleling the border. Deep in the trees they paused to rest awhile.

"I'll scout the road and see how the wires look," John said as he left the group. "Bring them onto the roadway, but stay well behind the trees until I give you the signal."

At the road John found no sign of either the French police or the Gestapo. The black night was at its protective best now; the other side of the road was barely visible. After his survey of the roadway, he ran across the strip of paving and down a little decline to the strands of heavily barbed wire separating France from Switzerland. "Lucky they haven't electrified this section yet," he muttered as he began to gingerly separate the lower strands. He crawled through, tearing the bottom of one trouser leg as the wires snapped back together.

Turning, he looked up the incline and back across the road, then both ways along the road to make sure it was still clear. When he saw no movement, he gave a low whistle, chopping the note off sharply at the end. One of the refugees ran out of the blackness of the trees, his body hunched low, his face a mask of fear. Behind him came an old woman, then a young girl, another girl, and an old man.

John put his foot against the lower strand of wire and pulled the others up. "Quickly, quickly; be very quick," he whispered at the formless figures pushing their way through the opening. "Keep going. I'll catch up with you. Don't stop. Hurry! Be quick! Keep moving!" Another old man, then a boy. "I'm last," the youth whispered softly as he slipped under the wires. The low whistle with its abrupt ending came from the other side of the road. The farmer was confirming that all the refugees had been sent across the road.

"Good-bye, good friend," John whispered toward the whistle, although he knew the farmer could not hear him. "I'm going to freedom now, to the precious freedom of Switzerland for a while. But I'll be back."

He turned from the eighteen ugly strands of double barbed wire and fled after the refugees. Racing through the broad, cleared no-man's-land used by the Swiss to expose border jumpers, John felt a sudden surge of joy well up inside. As he caught up with the refugee band, he pulled the leading member down beside him on the ground. The others fell exhausted.

"There is no need to hurry anymore," John told them. "We are inside Switzerland. It will be best to wait here until the Swiss border guards come and find us. If we are moving, they might shoot at us so that we will stop. There is no need to take a chance on their poor aim. Settle down and rest; we are in a free land."

The old woman slumped near the center of the group began to cry.

"That's all right," John thought silently. "Go ahead and have yourself a good cry, grandmother. Cry for whatever you will: for your freedom, or for your family still in France, or for your brother in the concentration camp, or whatever. Go ahead and cry; it will do you good, old one."

For two years he had been in the war, John reflected. Two years of brutality and sorrow—sorrow like that of the old woman weeping there on the hard ground of the Swiss border. Two years of flight by these poor people and thousands of others just like them. How he wished the senseless

game of fleeing-from-death could be over! Why were men so brutal anyway? Didn't they know or care that the God of all creation was watching their black and evil deeds?

"How I wish it could have been different, these two years!" John mused. "I would like to go back to that sun-swept afternoon in Paris in 1940 and have it all happen differently, beginning right there."

It was in Paris on a spring day that it all started; there in Boulevard de l'Hopital.