

Footloose in The Sawtooths

BY ANDREW GIBSON

In Washington State, due East of the Olympic Peninsula, situate, lying and being in the spectacular Cascade Mountain Range, there nestles a parcel or tract of land, more particularly described as the roughest piece of country ever gazed upon by palpitating surveyor. The particular range that concerns this story is known, aptly, as the Sawtooths, (purists may, if they wish, call them Sawteeth), and lies at the end of a long and precipitous valley up which the winds from the Pacific carry, as on a conveyor belt, an unbroken succession of fog, snow and ice, relieved only by rain and sleet.

It was into this inverted Eden that, one November morning several years ago we drove our frequently unfaithful jeep, our purpose being to locate a battery of drill-holes which had been sunk into the bowels of the mountain (or into the roots of the Sawteeth, if you dislike mixed metaphors), and which had produced sufficient evidence of precious metals to start tremors in the pocketbooks of the promoters of mining stock. At the very end of the goat-trail laughingly called a

road we were to meet a helicopter which, we had been assured, would whisk us effortlessly up to the mining camp.

We crept up the road to the end and there, sure enough, audible but invisible in the mist, idled the helicopter. It was a small bubble-domed affair, but the pilot was huge — it is a peculiar fact that helicopter pilots are often overweight. This one may have started his career with a build like a jockey, as would seem to be desirable, but he now weighed at least 300 pounds. Maybe anxiety about gravity makes for compulsive eating. I myself, contemplating the helicopter, the pilot, and our equipment, found that the hand which I wasn't using for crossing myself was straying to my pocket in search of chocolate bars.

We loaded up, took our places, and settled down to wait for a break in the weather. At last, when a patch of blue sky rolled along which looked as if it might last five minutes, we took off and headed up the canyon. But alas, although we were only ten miles from the camp, we only got half way before the fog closed in thicker than ever, and the pilot, boun-

cing terrifyingly up and down just over the boulder-strewn scree, searched for a landing place.

At last he found one, about two feet wider than the rotor, and there he literally abandoned us, claiming that the weather had now socked in for good, and he could no longer reach the camp. He pointed vaguely north towards the edge of the valley where, he said, we would find a trail. If we couldn't find it, he would, if possible, pick us up within the next couple of days. We didn't dare to ask him what he meant by 'if possible', and he took off again down the valley, leaving us to contemplate the 150 pounds of equipment, the wilderness of fog and rock, and the altimeter, now showing an elevation of 5000 feet, 2000 feet below the camp.

At such times, one realizes the true meaning of the unit 'foot pound' — we were going to try to tackle a million of them, with no other assistance than our own flabby bods. Fighting back the urge to collapse into the fetal position, we loaded ourselves up and staggered off on a compass north bearing, cursing helicopter pilots generally, and a certain behemoth in particular.

More of this melodrama in the next issue.