

Walking Stick on the Spiral Road

*a short story
written by Jerry Auld*



It's just a stick.

Just a foot long shaft of wood. Bare too, the hand that holds it, gnarled and weathered.

The stick doesn't belong here. The bare hand either. The man only by effort of will, standing on Mount Robson, the highest in the Canadian Rockies. The guide's words hang in the granular air:

– *Gentlemen, I can take you no higher; God must do the rest.*

One end is splintered to a point which was jammed into the rime. The hand that pulled it free is numb, fingertips wooden, outstretched above the enormous drop of the south face. The man is immobile, captured on camera in the instant the shutter flashes open and sears the film with ambiguous light. It's grainy, his neck indistinct in the fog of his exhale. The colours are of an old photograph: is it the sepia and grainy film, or is it the reality of 1913: grimy canvas jodhpurs, dull axe metal, woolly toque and beard, fierce wind burn. There are no synthetics, there are no colours that haven't been rubbed with the charcoal, grease, and sweat. One wants the camera to pull back, to reveal his companions, the steepness of the face, the breadcrumb trail of divots in the snow leading them here, the fantastic drop to the still lake below. One wants to expand the frame to follow the twisted hemp rope, to start it all in motion.

But the stick is out of place, too big to be carried by a bird, and never this high. It's heavy, like an axe-haft. His head is turned toward it, watching as the cold bites, slipping past the euphoria of arrival and realizing the struggle to return requires a goal the way a summit once drew him. Pull the camera back, follow the rope out: it's tight on his waist, stretching with the slight droop of waterlogged weight, splitting back to the stocky guide and forward to the other client. It's their last moment on the summit. Maybe that's the pause: even one step is one step down, never to be trod again. They know their accomplishment: all had searched the snows for anything unnatural.

– *I see no marker, no other sign,* said a client.

– *It's ours! The first to set foot here since God placed the last stone,* gasped the other.

Now the other client looks down at the long ladder of chopped foot holds and the steepness and space around them. The clients are not young, already distinguished by careers. One is an ex-pat Brit, newly elected to the B.C. legislature, the other an American naval commander that saw action in the Spanish-American war. They are ambitious men who have earned their reputations.

Beyond the stick are the surrounding peaks, no focal length deep enough to bring them into memory. They stand atop the highest, the hardest the Guide says he's ever climbed. They stand atop a series of rockbands, sloping layers that appear to curl up and around to this singular point. The Shuswap tribes call this the *Mountain of the Spiral Road*. At the top the three men are caught looking in different directions, bound by the rope. They all know the story of the previous attempts to stand there, especially that of their own Outfitter, retelling the stories in the glacier camp below. The wind snapped the canvas and they peered up at the broad shoulders of the mountain.

- *Four years ago, the Pastor and our Outfitter climbed up that side.*
- *That looks bloody hard. Direct, but hard.*
- *I'd heard our Outfitter had never before stepped on a mountain, even by accident.*
- *And that he didn't even have an alpenstock. Used a pole he pulled from the forest.*
- *I understand it was the Pastor's 13th attempt. On August 13th. A Friday.*

They all laughed when one of them says it's bad luck to be superstitious. But they're all looking up silently. The summit's the only place the two routes meet, a singular point on a knife blade. There at the top, the rope holds them, the knots dripping water as they tighten. The camera can pull back and it won't change the calculus: The Guide is the first to be hired by the fledgling Mountain Club in a venture as precarious as his clients. They're all amazed at the ridge the Pastor and Outfitter climbed and from which they claimed to have reached the summit.

- *That's where they came up, the Guide said.*
- *They would have missed all the glaciers, and with no train. Two weeks just to get here.*
- *Even if they didn't make the highest point, they deserve credit, the Guide said.*

But it's just flotsam, something cast aside. In the cold it's impossible to feel if the stick's flattened surface is from a knife or where ice has scored it. The man with the stick is inscrutable, looking from behind smoked-glass goggles that make everything look historic. The rope between them sags, it doesn't conduct, they can't tell what each is thinking. But they've all climbed many times before. Clients like that come with experience, but also expectations. They are not easily satisfied with an attempt, a high spectacle. They want the summit. And the Mountain Club wants word immediately upon their descent. Under the stick is the drop of the south face, to the tiny meadows and the station houses. They must see the platforms, the twin tracks flashing brighter than their size at this distance. Four years after the Pastor and Outfitter bushwhacked up over Yellowhead pass there is not one, but two railways, right to the doorstep, pulling away to warmth and water and comfort. The telegraph lines will flash their news out like a watershed from the mountains, spreading, faster than the train. Once that starts it cannot be stopped. It might seem ridiculous from that height; the stationhouses seem too small to shelter such power. The naval commander knows about signals. They've all told stories around the fires in the forest, and in the huddled cold camps higher up, jesting with each other, teasing the Politician on his recent election.

- *Politics seems a matter of timing. If you can deliver the knockout blow before your opponent can counter in another speech, then you win the public, he said.*
- *Politics is not unlike War, said the Commander, taping his teeth with his pipe. In the battle of Santiago de Cuba, the Spaniards finally broke free to the open ocean and we engaged them. It lasted hours, the chase. Finally their Caribbean Squadron was sunk or scuttled. There was just the Vizcaya which we pursued, trading broadsides. We had her cornered when we received the signal to desist. It was the work of an instant to question if the message was real, or a final desperate deception by the enemy. By then we had hit her magazine and she exploded. The others had caught their prey and I suppose we wanted our share of the glory. In our success the issue of ignoring a transmission was forgotten. That is war, after all.*

The rope is hemp, and doesn't stretch. But it doesn't matter which holds the stick – they are bound as one organism. After a summit it's always a dwindling slide to a sleepy satisfaction. The

Guide knows he must get them down safely and that'll be easier if they're motivated by the desire to claim the summit, not from the mountain but from other humans. How many times had the Guide swung the adze to cut steps up? Fifteen hundred? Sixteen? The ascent has been hard won, the laurels deserved. His mantra is to never show exhaustion, hesitation, or fear. It's five o'clock, their descent will stretch well into dark, back down to their tiny tent where they had talked:

- *If our Outfitter was so green, and still ascended, how will the Mountain Club justify you, and themselves?* the Politician had asked the Guide across the sputtering stove.
- *The Director says they didn't make it, that it's still ours to pluck,* said the Commander.
- *But if they did, with the railway now, an amateur tide will flood these valleys.*
- *I worry my office would be delegated to search and rescue,* said the Guide.
- *Aye, if ascents are made with walking sticks. But the Director says there's no evidence.*
- *If they made it they'd have left something, until then a man's word stands,* said the Guide.

From the summit they could look down at the shores of Berg Lake and see their Outfitter's camp, possibly a thin rivulet of smoke, or a few horses running, jockeying for dominance. They all like him, it's not easy to forget his stories about the climb during three weeks of storms, the pole, him breaking the end but carrying on. They can all see the blonde curls under a drooping brim, his unassuming flash of smile. The Guide admires his enthusiasm, the way he appreciates the mountains. But that Outfitter needs the Mountain Club to keep his business running.

The stick's other end is mashed where dirt has pushed between the rings. Far beneath it the stationhouses sit quiet. It's two miles straight down, the biggest vertical in the Rockies.

- *You fall down that and nothing would remain.*

On the other side and below his clients is the huge icefall of the north face. Berg Lake pools there, flecks of ice floating, white against the translucent green water. There are no sticks there. But all around, in mile after mile, until the horizon is hazy with fire smoke, there is the forest, broken by a bony ridge or mossy glade, but all one organism, flowing up against their stone heels. They are surrounded by sticks, all scattered, unnoticeable. The Guide has snapped many

branches clearing the path for his clients in the forests below, the Outfitter many more. And surely uncountable more will be broken without regard. Up the rails, in the next year or so the Inter-provincial Boundary Survey will move through, establishing where Alberta and British Columbia should meet, probably the line will run directly through the Guide's legs as he straddles the top. Soon there will be surveyors hauling their theodolites up the peaks, swinging their scopes and peering at the summits and scratching their papers with rhumb lines. But for this moment the horizon is clear, there are no glasses flashing the late-afternoon sun, there is no one watching.

The stick is suspended, just in that moment. Can you see? Look closely at the hand, frozen in a loose claw, the film is grainy as if it sees the molecules of air, a thin layer of white between the flesh and the wood. It's a mere thing, an individual's flash decision, a flick of the wrist.

It's just a stick, after all. Falling.