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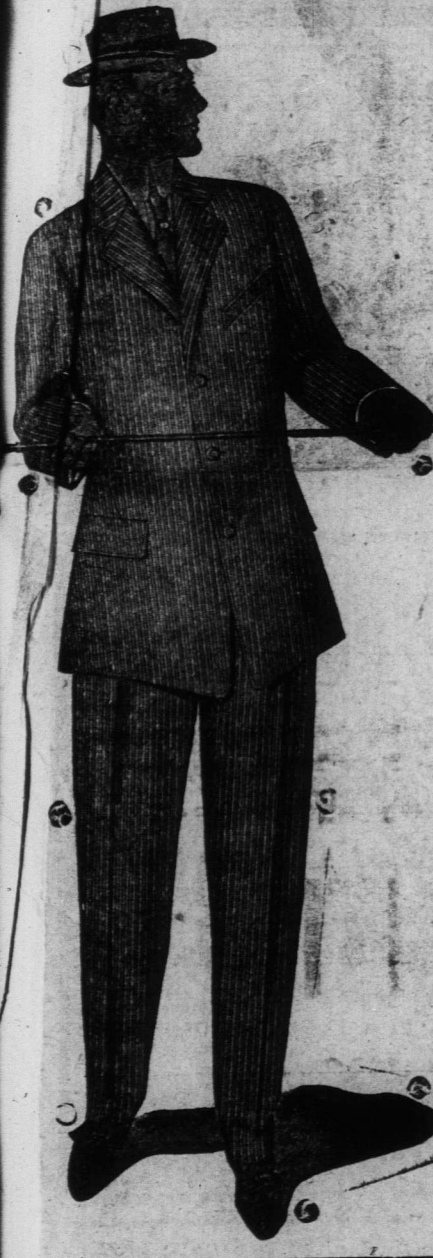
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The Monks of St. Bernard.

Although most people have heard of the Great St. Bernard Hospice and its rescue dogs, few know anything of its varied history or realize what a hard and perilous existence the brave monks, whose home it is, are called on to endure.

Standing almost on the summit of the mountain pass between Martigny and Oast—one of the principal highways connecting Switzerland with Italy—the monastery is more than eight thousand feet above the sea-level and near the region of eternal snow. For in this desolate part of the Alps the winter lasts from the end of September till the middle of June, and even in July snow storms sometimes occur, much to the discomfort of the tourists who visit the institution in large numbers during the summer.

The hospice was founded in A.D. 962 by a nobleman named Bernard de Menton, for the benefit of pilgrims travelling to Rome. For many years afterwards the monks were constantly harassed by the brigands who infested the surrounding mountains, and sometimes even had to barricade their doors and windows and live in a state of siege until the weather drove the enemy away. The building was once destroyed by fire, and when Napoleon made his famous journey across the Alps in the spring of 1800 he used the place as a barracks and converted the large room where travellers are now sheltered into a hospital ward for the weary frostbitten soldiers.

The last village on the Swiss side of the pass is Bourg St. Pierre, and at the inn there visitors are shown the small table and the cloth-covered armchair used by Napoleon at breakfast before starting for Italy at the head of his army of thirty thousand men.

The monastery is a plain, unpretentious looking block of gray buildings, built with very thick walls in order to withstand the force of the terrific gales and snowstorms. The snow is frequently eight or ten feet deep round the hospice and sometimes forms enormous drifts which reach to the roof of the building.

On the way to the monastery stands an iron cross erected in memory of a monk, named Francois Cart, who was killed by an avalanche while making a path through the snow for some travellers, and facing the building is a large statue of St. Bernard de Menton. Shelter can be provided for between three and four hundred travellers at a time, and sleeping accommodation for about a hundred. Any one crossing the pass is welcome to the hospitality of the monks.

There is, however, a collecting-box in the beautiful chapel where Mass is celebrated every morning, and contributions are naturally very welcome, for the expenses of keeping up the monastery are extremely heavy; all necessities of life having to be brought up from Aosta and the adjacent villages, including the winter forage for the cows which supply the hospice with milk, butter and cheese. Fresh meat can be obtained in the warm weather, so a sufficient quantity has to be salted down to last the whole of the winter, while during the brief summer an enormous stock of fire-wood has to be laid in. This, as can readily be imagined, is no light undertaking, for there are no forests near the monastery, and it all has to be carried on the backs of mules from a distance of several miles.

Two meals of plain but abundant fare are provided every day at the hospice, at twelve and six o'clock, and almost every nation under the sun

will be represented in the company gathered round the long tables in the paneled dining-room, where the monks mix freely with their guests and do their best to make them feel at home.

The rules of the institution are by no means strict. Snow-bound wayfarers can pass a pleasant time listening to the stirring tales of adventure recounted around the large open fireplace, inspecting the museum, or reading in the library, before retiring to the bedrooms and the comfortable curtained beds. Musical people too are also catered for, as the hospice can boast of two pianos, presented at different times by King Edward, and a harmonium which was subscribed for by some English people, including Mr. Gladstone and Cardinal Manning.

It is estimated that more than twenty thousand persons cross the pass every year, and more than two-thirds of the number have to undertake the journey during the winter. The majority are poor laborers, on their way to work, who cannot wait for more favorable weather, so it speaks volumes for the vigilance of the monks that a life is very rarely lost now. The monastery is connected by telephone with stations on both sides of the pass, and whenever travellers in the pass start to make the ascent, the number is immediately telephoned to the monks so that they can look out for them and send rescue parties to their aid if they fall to put in an appearance.

Every one has heard the wonderful stories related of the sagacity of the St. Bernard dogs. At the top of the pass is a monument in memory of a dog who saved forty lives during the ten years of its existence. On one occasion is discovered in the snow a child whose mother had been killed by an avalanche. After rousing it by licking its face, the dog induced it to get on its back and brought it safe and sound to the hospice. Unfortunately this dog was killed several years ago by some unknown person, probably by error. The inscription on the monument runs: "Barry the Heroic. Saved the lives of forty persons and was killed by the forty-first."

In the early part of the last century one of these splendid animals was decorated with a medal for having rescued twenty-two people from a snowy grave, but lost his own life while on an errand of mercy in the winter of 1816. A courier from Piedmont, after sheltering for a time at the monastery one night during a severe snowstorm, insisted on continuing his journey to the village of St. Pierre, as he expected to meet some friends there. The monks, after trying in vain to dissuade him, lent him the dog and two guides to show him the way, but when the party had proceeded some distance in safety down the mountain they were overwhelmed by an avalanche and killed.

According to the traditions of the hospice, the St. Bernard dog is a cross between a Danish bull and a mastiff, a native hill dog. After the breed was established it was kept pure until the winter of 1812, when, owing to the severity of the weather and the number of travellers on the pass, the monks were compelled, contrary to their custom, to send out the brood bitches as well as the dogs, with the result that all of the females perished from cold and fatigue and the true breed could no longer be continued. The problem was finally solved by crossing the St. Bernard dogs with Newfoundlanders. Though it was not a

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success at first, owing to the thick coat of the Newfoundlanders, which hampered the animals in the snow, the monks eventually obtained the necessary shortness of hair by breeding with their own short-coated dogs. Sometimes, however, puppies with rough hair would be born, and these were given away to the villagers in the surrounding valleys, so that St. Bernard dogs soon became general in Switzerland, though they were not introduced in England until 1860. Some of the finest specimens at the monastery stand more than thirty inches high at the shoulder and weigh over one hundred and fifty pounds. They are extremely powerful and have been known to drag an unconscious man over the snow for three-quarters of a mile. Their sense of smell is so highly developed that they can detect a human being even when he is covered by several feet of snow and though the mothers are inclined to resent interference they are very gentle and good-tempered as a rule.

The training of such intelligent animals does not present many difficulties, and is undertaken in the summer months. The young dogs are taken into the hollows or valleys, where there is always some snow to be found. One man will go on ahead and completely bury himself in the snow. Then a dog is at first taken by one of the monks to look for him, and afterwards sent by itself to discover the hidden person. By degrees it is taught to bark when it has found him and also to rouse the man if unconscious and lead him back to the hospice.

During the winter months it is practically impossible for an inexperienced person to achieve the journey across the pass without assistance, for, apart from the danger of avalanches which no one can foresee, not a trace of the path is visible, and deep snowdrifts are numerous and often hide dangerous precipices, while dense fogs and blinding snowstorms come on with appalling rapidity to confuse the exhausted traveller, who cannot resist the desire to lie down and sleep.

Before the telephone was introduced the dogs used to carry food strapped to a saddle on their backs, as well as a fagon of wine tied to their collars, but now they are sent out with the wine alone, as the weight of the food and the saddle impeded them in their work. These dogs are so trustworthy and intelligent that they are sometimes despatched by themselves to guide travellers down the mountain-side or show them the way to the monastery. If they happen to find an exhausted wayfarer when not accompanied by a monk they begin to bark loudly, and if too far off to be heard at the hospice, quickly return there for human aid.

It can easily be realized what terrible hardships and perils are endured by the heroic monks in the course of their duty, when they have to venture out in the middle of the night, with the thermometer standing below zero, to grope their way down the treacherous mountain-side, knowing that a false step to the right or left or the rush of an avalanche at any minute may hurl them to instant death. They carry their lives in their hands, yet these splendid men think nothing of remaining out in the blinding snow for many hours at a stretch searching for lost travellers.

The monastery staff comprises seventeen monks and about fifteen assistants and laborers. Though they are all picked men, and specially chosen for their physical strength and robust health, fifteen years' work at the hospice is the utmost limit of their endurance. Most of them break down in their twelfth year, not only on account of the constant exposure and hardships they are called on to face, but also because of the intense cold and the difficulty of breathing such a rarefied atmosphere, which permanently injures the health—in fact, even in the most favorable circumstances no one could exist at such an altitude for more than twenty years.

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