

A DUFFER ON SKIS

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THE DUFFER ON SKIS is a more ridiculous figure than the duffer armed with a bat or a racket. No sport more truly demands expertness. Yet may it not be possible that the duffer sometimes loves a sport more than the master, that his distant imaginations of what it would be like to excel in all the fine points of the craft are more ardent and worshipful than the actual performances of the expert? Certain it is that every sport lives by its duffers. It is they who dote upon and applaud the master stroke, it is in their mouths that the fame of the great performer is trumpeted and kept alive. Without them no game could survive for a decade. Perhaps the breach between the duffer and the expert is wider in ski-ing than in other sports. None the less, anyone who is man enough to strap eight feet of good ash to his boots and trust himself to the laws of motion on an inclined plane may experience some of the pleasures of ski-ing, however crude may be his methods.

His first ventures are likely to be painful—both painfully awkward and profuse in bruises. The first steps in ski-ing are a complete surrender of the will to malign supernatural powers. Personal independence is resigned, and all charge over one's body is committed to those vast universal forces that have stars and atoms alike in their keeping. They twitch the strings with crude humor, here drawing out a leg, there displacing a foot, now bringing a rump to the ground with a tremendous jar, now spreading a whole frame headlong in the deepest and coldest drift. The duffer on skis learns how fine the mills of gravitation grind. They deceive the innocent victim with an illusion of balance and buoy him up with false confidence only to bring him down in the end with disaster so complete that he wonders grimly how he has survived. And at the moment of profoundest chagrin, when he is stretched helpless in fine swathes of snow, all his members heaped in confusion like a pile of jackstraws, always at this moment some careless stripling, lithe with Italian grace and ease, comes floating airily by, makes a difficult turn as naturally as a seagull rides the air, and gives him a sidelong glance of scorn.

The duffer's troubles at his first setting out are all but universal. When his skis begin to move over the snow, he finds to his surprise that his body does not always go along with them, and he is brought

violently to earth by pure inertia. Sometimes when he is merely standing still a change of balance will cause one ski to rise perilously in the air so that he hovers awkwardly and dangerously on one foot like a pelican. Once under way, he is plunged into acute suffering by two opposite tendencies of his feet: one to spread apart until it seems as though his frame would split asunder, one to swerve together and cross each other with fatal entanglement. The leverage of a rotating ski is tremendous, and it is a new experience to learn how the human frame can be twisted without actually tearing apart. I can recall lying on the ground for minutes and simply studying my situation to discover how I could begin untying the strange knot of arms, legs, and skis into which I had been tied.

Yet it is not difficult, after a season of discouragement, to learn to slide down a straight slope upright. A man feels a distinct gradation of achievement when he finds it possible to turn a corner, and in learning to make an intentional full stop without burying his face in the snow he arrives at true glory. But great is the moment of excitement when, hurtling over a steep bank or a modest jump heaped up in the drifts, he first feels his skis win clear of the ground, and descends on them without a fall. It must be a comparable moment in the life of the prospective aviator when, after long training on the ground, he first springs into the air and pulls his wheels up after him.

Until he has reached this point, the duffer is hardly prepared to enjoy even those external aspects of ski-ing which would be obvious to a detached observer: the startling blue of the winter sky, irradiated from beneath by the bright but powerless sun; dark clumps of cedars on the dazzling hill, and brown oak woods in the distance; forms of men and women climbing and descending in bright-colored fabrics, scarfs, berets, tam-o'-shanters. Like all athletic motions, the grace and skill of a fine performer on skis are an exhilarating sight, and ski-ing admirably displays the natural attitudes of the body in balance and in rapid motion. The costumes which women wear for ski-ing are particularly attractive. They bring to winter such colors as the sumach and the beech tree bring to autumn. The texture of woollens and corduroys, moreover, is becoming to a woman out of doors. A

hillside white with fresh snow where young people are ski-ing is a buoyant sight. Pleasant even is the young girl whose buxomness fills her swathes of scarfs, sweaters, and leggings with abundant curves, and who, when she makes an ingenuous tumble, strikes the earth with a rich corporeal thump.

When he has learned to maintain himself in the face of earth, sky, and onlookers, what pleasure even a duffer may derive from ski-ing! It brings him into touch with those primal realities for which our senses are so often starved: velocity, for example. Ten times as much speed mechanically bought in a motor car is not worth half his intimate acquaintance with it as he plunges down what seems an insanely steep slope. Then he feels motion in its elemental reality gathering under his feet and beating at his temples. He is alone with the goddess of speed, no artificial mechanism thrust between them. Peril comes and salutes him in her own person, threatening him with a good primitive tumble; and sweet is that danger! A dozen times in his whizzing descent he gives up all for lost as balance takes wing and flies away; and a dozen times he recovers and finds himself still miraculously on his feet. And if, finally, he manages a turn and brings himself to a well-calculated halt, he has won kingdoms and conquered provinces!

Presently the duffer must expect to be invited by an attractive hostess to bring his skis along on a week-end party; and then let him beware. She seems, perhaps, an unassuming, guileless, friendly young woman, obviously soft and fragile in figure; it is impossible to picture her roughing it on skis. She disclaims all ability, and declares that she expects to profit much by the example and teaching of her guests.

And so, on a dazzlingly bright afternoon early in the new year, the duffer finds himself trudging through a foot of new snow in company with a dozen gayly clad figures who seem alarmingly expert. And he notices that his hostess, although her figure is as soft and shrinking as ever, moves with enviable litheness and speed through the wood lot and toward the open pasture that drops like a cliff to another wood lot below. Her costume particularly detains his eye: it is as

bright and jaunty as she is herself. He wonders if there is a glint of amusement in her gaze as she looks about and sees him shuffling along in the rear of the party.

At last they all reach the top of the hill. It looks staggeringly long and steep, and it stops abruptly at a stone wall at the bottom. No room to come comfortably to a halt by the simple means of running down like a clock. Like a flock of bright birds the members of the party begin to float down the slope. He sees his hostess perform a particularly difficult turn in mid-flight with a grace which is nothing less than sinful. There is nothing to do but follow. It is no time to show the white feather. He is off. Below—far, far below—his eye discerns with horrid fixity a neat pile of cordwood directly in his path. How murderously steep is the hill! What speed! Faces, pale behind a fine blowing spray of snow, gaze at him in some astonishment as he hurtles past. The wood-pile expands with the speed of an approaching meteor. He sees with preternatural acuteness of vision the fine tracery of wormholes where the bark has peeled from the logs. Something must be done on the instant to avert the breaking of every bone in his body. Something—but what? He tries to think of just how it was that he extended one foot and threw his weight on it to make a beautifully successful turn and stop. But he is moving at much too fast a clip even to contemplate such reckless experiments now.

Then suddenly it is all over. He need not have worried. The forces that have so often brought him unexpectedly to earth intend to reserve him for further sport. They will not lightly allow his neck to be broken. His right ski strikes a spot swept bare by the wind, and slows abruptly; his left ski seems to shoot ahead with redoubled speed. For an instant earth, sky, woods, and snowy pasture whirl together in a maelstrom which annihilates every reality except pure speed. Then he is deep, fathoms deep, in a cold white sea that pierces every crevice of his clothing and springs ingeniously into his ears, eyes, and hair. But this is normal; this is expected. It may be embarrassing, but he can endure it. He has put up with it many times before; it is just being a duffer on skis.

An interesting ski race has recently been instituted in Norway as an annual event. The "Birkebeiner" Loipe, from Hamar to Trondjhem, in memory of the "Birkebeiner"

who saved King Sverre's son, Haakonson, in 1205, by carrying the Prince over that distance on skis, 58 kilometres. The winner was presented with a silver cup 200 years old.