
ALF BONNEVIE BRYN

George Finch and the Leaning Tower of Pisa



Street-fighting man. George Finch on Everest in 1922.

In 1909, two young students headed for Corsica with dreams of becoming exploratory mountaineers. One of them was a pugnacious Australian, the future Everest climber George Finch. The other was Alf Bryn, a Norwegian who would make first ascents back home, help form the Norsk Tindeklub, become an engineer and write crime fiction. More than 30 years after their trip, he also published a much-loved account of his adventure with Finch, now published

*in English for the first time as **Peaks and Bandits**. Even before they set foot in Corsica, George Finch was on dangerous ground, as he scrapped in Genoa and went climbing on the Leaning Tower of Pisa.*

The only annoying thing that happened at the pub, where we ate macaroni and drank wine, was that the waiter refused to accept our counterfeit money. It did not help to insist that we had had it exchanged at the railroad station – we had to pay with real money.

The main street was still lit up when we came out of the pub. It was a little past midnight and George now had to study the nightlife in the port area to find where he thought there was the best chance of some entertainment.

Personally I have always been against throwing myself unnecessarily into warlike involvements. Mostly my attitude toward war is the same as that of Johan Herman Wessel, who so beautifully expressed his sentiment in his poem about Saint Sebastian:

*I love Peace
And think War is always Wretched
Perhaps I would think War more lovely
Were I as brave as I am honest.*

After wandering around a little we found a cellar pub just above the main street that separated the port area from the rest of the town. There we joined the company of some quite shabby persons of dubious nationality who were playing billiards for money.

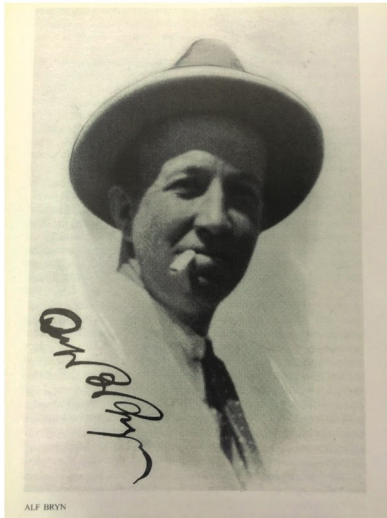
We did not succeed in finding a common language. The billiard players gave the impression of knowing four or five different ones from the eastern Mediterranean, but it was not possible to reach any closer contact than Italian. George and I were relegated to a small phrasebook, published by Baedeker, in which it was never possible to find anything resembling what we really wanted to say.

When you play billiards for money and want to know what the wager is, it won't do to ask, '*Wie viel kostet das Zimmer? Quanto costa questa camera?*' (How much is the room?') We wouldn't understand the response anyway and could hardly answer according to the book: '*E troppo cara; mostriamo una meno camera.*' (That is too expensive, show me a smaller room.)'

It was somewhat of a miracle that we nevertheless solved the situation and managed to start some sort of gamble involving billiards.

The game was played with a large number of balls and a dish of money in the middle of the billiard table. Every time a player turned the dish over, the others shared the money. Here, George thought, was an opportunity to use the fake silver coins we had brought with us. He figured that even if we lost about twice as much as we won, this would still be a winning proposition. There was not much light in the cellar and his speculation seemed therefore to be of sound foundation.

We did well for a while. True, we did lose some of the large silver coins



Alf Bonnevie Bryn, engineer, writer and martial artist.

we had brought, but on the other hand got quite a few others back and saw to it that we got smaller coins that we knew were more valuable. Apparently no one took particular notice of the kind of money they were winning from us but it was clear that in the long run, this could not continue. I finally succeeded in convincing George to end the game while the going was still good. We quietly snuck out of the place while our rivals were busy in an animated discussion about some technical detail of the play.

It was a little past two when we came into the street again and the town seemed deserted. I suggested that we go back to the station and wait for our train and George was at first inclined to agree to this reasonable suggestion, although he was very disappointed in what Genoa nightlife had to offer in terms of excitement.

He was wrong about the nightlife. When we were about 300ft away from the pub, three of our earlier friends from the billiards game came into the street, very agitated and gesticulating. There was no mistaking their wish to join us again.

Under these circumstances I found it even more natural to get back to the station by the shortest possible route. It was probably related to my guilty conscience about the distribution of counterfeit money. But George was of the opposite opinion: here he finally saw an opportunity to experience something.

From the main street where we now found ourselves, a number of small, narrow alleys went down toward the port area. Most of them started with a few steps down from the street's southern pavement. George thought this was the right terrain.

I was in a difficult situation. It wasn't easy to know what was the riskiest – to separate from George or to follow him. I chose the latter and we went down one of the stairs toward the port alleys.

Not far behind us came the three billiard players. Two were big, one was small.

'It is clear,' I said to George, 'that they have not come to bid us a fond farewell.'

George was also aware of this. He looked brightly to the future.

'Well,' he said, 'if we're going to have a fight with three people down here – people who are well known in the area and probably use knives –

it is just as well that we start things. The element of surprise is not to be underestimated.'

We went to the right at the nearest street corner and waited. Right by the corner stood a dirty gaslight that barely illuminated the closest few feet around it. Our battle plan, according to my suggestion, was that George would take on the two big ones and I the small one. George thought this was fine.

As far as the element of surprise was concerned, I am sure it was present. When the three of them showed up around the corner, the first one (one of the big ones) received, without a trace of prior debate, a solid uppercut from George, while I, who lately had tried to specialise in jiu-jitsu, started in on the small one.

Someone who is completely unprepared and who has no idea of jiu-jitsu does not have a chance against a sudden attack when it is executed with sufficient brutality, and my opponent (if one could call him that, for he made no opposition) was lying in the street within a few seconds, where I too found myself due to my clumsiness, as I stumbled over him when he fell. Unlike him, I had not hit the back of my head on the cobblestones, and I got back on my feet quite quickly. My opponent – or rather my victim – was lying completely still.

When I looked to see what George was up to, I saw that he had grabbed the gaslight with his left hand and the second of the billiard players by the hair with his right hand. At short intervals he was banging the back of the man's head against the gas light.

After each bang, the billiard player sank down a little and gradually went to a sitting and then to a prone position.

The first one that George had become acquainted with had by then regained his feet. For a moment he looked at the remains of his two friends and then quickly resorted to flight-like retreat. The two remaining ones stayed completely still. It was what one might characterise as an annihilating battle.

'Now,' I said to George, 'I think it would be best if we follow my original suggestion and find the station as quickly as possible. First of all, we can count on the third guy soon being back with reinforcements, and second, I think it looks bad for those who are lying here. God only knows if they'll revive!'

For once George agreed, and after stumbling around a little in the now-empty port area, we finally found our way back to the main street and reached the station half an hour before our train was to leave.

I think it was a relief even for George when we finally had put Genoa behind us and were being jostled toward Pisa, where we once again would change trains to reach the port of Livorno.

Just before we reached Pisa, George, who was sitting opposite me, woke up. 'Bryn,' he said, 'it was noble of you to let me have the two big ones. I'll never forget that.'

'My dear,' I said, 'don't mention it.'

*

Pisa, which we reached in the morning, is generally known for its leaning tower, and among people who pretend to have a classical or scientific education, the tower is also known for Galileo Galilei's dealings with it. As we know, Galilei allegedly used the leaning tower to construct one of his many heretical theories, the one about bodies of different masses falling at equal speed in a vacuum.

We had a few hours to wait for our train to Livorno and set out in full gear into town and the big Piazza del Duomo, where the Campanile and other points of interest reside. The plan was basically to go straight up into the tower in a normal way and look at the view but the tower was closed; the guard who demanded one lira from tourists to let them in did not arrive until ten o'clock.

This was, in reality, a stroke of luck. Already at this point in time, the horrible practice had been instituted of gathering up a suitable group of innocent tourists and hauling them around through such historical monuments with a so-called guide, who in a hectoring manner rattles off a memorised lecture that has something to do with the monument, but never about something one has an interest in currently. I have on various later occasions been exposed to this curse on the travelling public, this curse for which even the Inquisition's most crafty torture would be altogether too mild a punishment.

It is obvious that these tour guides are driven by a malignant form of sadism. Not even promises of an increased honorarium can make them keep quiet about the chair which seated such and such a king or queen on some long-forgotten, insignificant occasion.

Only once have I seen a guide of this kind got rid of. It was a wonderful experience. With some French friends I was visiting a French castle, known for its old tapestries. We had successfully escaped from the flock of guided sheep and were having a nice, quiet time. But then we were discovered and the guide, who probably thought we had escaped too lightly, threw himself on us with a recitation about the history of the tapestry factory.

My French host, a distinguished, older gentleman, looked seriously at the guide and said: *'Désistez, cher monsieur, je vous en supplie, je suis sourd et en outre je ne comprends pas un mot de votre langue. (Desist, dear sir, I am deaf and furthermore I do not understand a word of your language.)'*

The guide shook his head and thereafter followed us at a polite distance. His conviction that we were dangerous and strange was not diminished by the fact that he was given an extra tip when we parted ways.

However, this was not what preoccupied me and George – George especially. George thought this was an opportune moment to climb the north face of the leaning tower, the least steep side.

I was doubtful about this enterprise, mostly because I thought it might disturb the local Pisans' patriotic sentiments and bring us into unwanted conflict with enforcers of the law. But George is not the kind who lets such petty concerns put a brake on his desire to act. He organised a camp on the

north end of Piazza del Duomo, took off his hobnail boots, put on tennis shoes and attacked the leaning tower. He brought with him only an ice axe, which the study of the tower's façade had shown to be necessary.

I stayed in camp. I told George it was in order to guard our equipment, but my thought was also toward the expedition's future, and how it would be beneficial for both its members not to be arrested at the same time.

Scaling the leaning tower is fundamentally different from scaling a normal house wall. The tower is constructed of a number of circular balconies with richly sculpted railing and thick, smooth marble columns, which, along with the railing, form the outer facade. The columns are too thick to be used as climbing poles, and the distance from the upper edge of the railing to the frieze on the underside of the next one is too great to be within the reach of the hands of even a tall man.

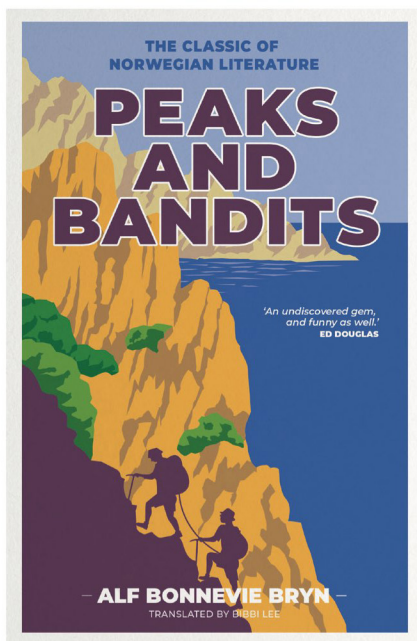
This was where the ice axe was useful.

When George stood on a railing close to a column he could get the tip of the ice axe into an opening in the railing of the balcony above. Squeezing his legs around the column and getting a hold on the ice axe with his right hand, he managed to scoot up until he had a hold with both hands and could lift himself up. It was quite a nice accomplishment.

So thought many members of Pisa's young male population who, far from being angry over the assault on the cultural monument, encouraged George with increasingly fiery shouts.

That's how it went all the way to the fourth floor. But then came what I had feared – the enforcers of the law. At first they also took it nicely and were satisfied to be part of the interested audience. But then some citizen or other must have alerted them to the fact that something was happening that ran counter to morals and the public order. They walked over to the foot of the tower and started to holler in an unmistakable fashion.

George also must have heard the false note that had mingled with the encouraging shouts, for he turned and looked down before he was about to start on the next landing. The two constables shouted many things at him, probably a reasonable choice of abusive words that constables in Italy employ toward miscreants caught red-handed, but this did not help in the case of George, whose knowledge of the Italian language was severely limited.



George did understand that he needed tools to help him out, so he pulled a phrasebook out of his pocket as he straddled the railing. After a short period of study he found something he obviously thought would suit the situation and addressed the officers of the law: *'Sono per la prima volta in Italia.* (This is my first time in Italy.)' And then: *'Viaggio per ristabilirmi.* (I am travelling for my health.)'

That clearly must have convinced the officers of the law, as well as the public, that he was crazy, something that from their point of view was not so difficult to explain, and the discussion died down. Satisfied with the results of his linguistic exercise, George started up to the fifth level, which he reached accompanied by an almost admiring public mumble.

There is every reason to believe that he would have reached the top and thereby have accomplished the ascent of the leaning tower from the north, had not the tower guard shown up in the meantime.

His view of George's endeavour was strictly mathematical. He regarded it as a cowardly attempt to avoid the entry fee, and along with the two constables he reached the fifth floor just as George was about to continue. The trip came to an end and George had to pay one lira, as if he were just an ordinary visitor.

Another 12 to 15 years would go by before the climbing of walls and tower facades became not just a very popular but also highly paid sport.

• *Peaks and Bandits* by Alf Bonnevie Bryn, translated by Bibbi Lee, is published by Vertebrate.