

The Mountain:

In 1850 Gerald J Stonewall Jr. stood atop the mountain and screamed victory. He faced first east, to the late afternoon gloaming and the vast expanse of the Appalachian mountains. He then turned south where an emerald carpet of fresh spring trees burgeoned with life. The far off lakes reflected the setting sun, their pricks of golden light looked like diamonds scattered haphazardly through a field. Then he looked west, where a brilliant gold sun fell by degrees below the horizon of low mountain tops, the last rays turning the lazy clouds first gold, then pink then purple against the waning light.

Last he faced north. The cold spring wind biting into his cheeks was a defiant contrast to the warmth coming from the west. The snowcapped peaks of the newly named presidential range were holding onto their mantles of white, making the wind colder as it blew over their tops and smacked the trio of climbers with a bitter feel and the promise that the trek back down would be colder still. Gerald's companions clapped his back, unphased by prospect. "Well done sir, very well done."

They congratulated one another for reaching the peak of the mountain they'd named The Spinster Bitch. She'd earned the name honestly enough, after all the group had tried and failed to reach her peak three years running. The first attempt had left Gerald with a sprained ankle, three broken fingers and deep gash on his left side after he'd mis stepped and slid down the steep slope that would become known as Walkers Ledge.

The second attempt was cut short when a late spring snow squall sped over the northern ridge and left them dismally lost and disorientated. Several hours later with frostbite setting into their toes, they managed to find their pack animals and headed back to their room at The Crawford House Inn.

That night while sipping brandy around the massive hearth in the main room, they agreed it seemed as if the mountain itself was conspiring against them. "She's a bitch alright." Said one of the men.

Gerald snickered, "A spinster bitch." he qualified. "She's cold and prickly and nearly impossible to mount!"

"We'll mount the bitch or die trying!" They clinked their glasses to seal the pact. The men laughed, drank their brandy and planned to make the trek north again the following spring.

They all nearly died. They'd waited till early summer that year, thinking that the weather would cooperate, and they'd reach the peak in just over five hours. The Spinster Bitch had other ideas. The spring of 1849 was rainy and unseasonably warm. The winter had dumped more snow on the mountains than was average. Fredrick Strickland had died just a few months before on Mt. Washington, which was less than fifteen miles away as the crow flies.

The spring thaw left water levels high, roads washed out, bridges collapsed but the trio of men were not deterred. Things had started to dry out by the end of May. The dogwoods were blooming and the lower canopy was up. The three were in good spirits by the time they left the Crawford House. The proprietor, Cyrus Eastman himself, stood on the grand front porch to wish them luck.

Eight hours later as Cyrus was checking in a Mr. and Mrs. Charles Carelton Coffin, the trio limped into the lobby, bloody, and wet with a story of a bear, a beehive and tangle of thorns set to destroy them. "We didn't account for the amount of water in the seasonal streams." Said one.

"Didn't think about the amount of undergrowth that would be up this time of year. It was so much thicker in there than the spring." Said the other.

"Didn't think about the damn bears being out and hungry and how the hell was I to know that damn beehive was there?"

The trio looked so dejected Cyrus motioned for his staff to bring brandy to each of their rooms and have their baths drawn up. "So, you'll be giving up then?" Cyrus asked.

"Never!" They spat in unison.

Gerald continued, "we said we'd mount the bitch, and we will."

Mrs. Coffin, who'd been trying not to stare at Gerald's bloody shoulder which was exposed from wrist to neck due to his shirt being ripped to shreds, gasped and fanned her face diverting his attention, "Beg your pardon madame," he said with a bow, which led to the cut above his eye dripping blood onto the newly varnished floor. "But we said we'd get to the top of her or die trying, and we're not dead yet." Cyrus shook his head at the foolhardy crew but they swore they'd return again next year and they'd get to the top if it took all week.

True to his word, Gerald, a writer for the Boston Evening Transcript begged his editor for two weeks off in the spring of 1850. He needed it, he said, because he was out to tame a mountain. After hearing the tale of the Spinster Bitch, his editor, always looking to pitch a great story, told Gerald he'd allow it, but only if he'd write about his adventure for the paper. Tourism in New Hampshire's north country was booming, the Northern Railroad was complete to Canaan and hiking as a past time was gaining popularity with Bostonians. The story, he said, would be a David versus Goliath, in a half jesting manner his editor told him he'd better make it this time. His job depended on it.

And so, a legend was born.

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NEWSPAPER MAN V THE MOUNTAIN

A story of guts, glory and a one man's quest for dominance