

## CHAPTER 8

# THE WAGER

The ancient, magical, beautiful Book of Kells was to become an obsession for Mario Kleff, adding his name to an illustrious list of scholars who had come under its spell. The 1,200-year-old book is a masterpiece of medieval illuminated script. Its 680 pages each measure 33 centimeters by 25 and are widely believed to have been originated by Columban monks on the Scottish island of Iona in about the year 800 AD. Its Latin text contains the four Gospels of the New Testament. Marauding Vikings sacked the monastery, forcing the monks to relocate to Ireland where the book remained for centuries in the abbey at Kells, County Meath.

Adding to the book's allure is the mystery of its origins. How it survived over the centuries is also a matter of conjecture. The abbey at Kells was plundered and pillaged by Vikings many times and at one point the book was stolen, only to be found later buried in the dirt minus its jewel-encrusted cover.

The book that rested on the Fischers' coffee table was a book about the book. Similarly titled, *The Book of Kells* was by French author Françoise Henry. Its reproductions of the original, held in Trinity College, Dublin, fascinated Mario. His knowledge of Latin helped him decipher much of the Latin text, but it was the lavish illustrations which really caught his eye.

"I had never even heard of the Book of Kells up to that point," said Mario. "I had never seen anything quite like it before. Its excellence and precision were astonishing. The fine detail was so exquisite that printing techniques when this French book was published were not sufficiently advanced to do it justice. Blow-ups which zoomed in 400-500 percent revealed details you just couldn't see in the life-size images in Henry's book."

Mario Kleff was mystified how the monks of the 9th century had managed to create a work with details so fine they were difficult to spot with the naked eye. Furthermore, the book had been created at a time when neither glass nor paper had been invented, so the monks of Iona had worked in a monastery with glassless windows with only candles to provide artificial light, drawing on animal skin which was not smooth like modern paper.

## Mario Kleff – Without Fear

Mario's brain went into overdrive, imagining which modern-day projects could incorporate the intricate patterns of the Book of Kells. Linen, carpets, furniture? The subject was the focal point of much discussion in the Fischer household. The answer arrived quite by accident during a visit by Holger Rathsdorf, a student from Wiesbaden who specialized in Roman culture and history.

Holger and Gaby had a shared interest in making clothes. Gaby made them with linen produced from flax grown in her own garden which she spun into yarn and wove into material in her own home. Holger made reproductions of roman costumes, using his skills at metalwork to create the clasps, brooches and body adornments needed to complete the outfits. Both attended the frequent Middle Ages markets and exhibitions held in many of the castles throughout the region where their skills could be demonstrated, and their products sold in authentic recreations of bygone eras.

Holger was an occasional visitor to Gernot's and Gaby's home, arriving one day amid a conversation about the Book of Kells. It was a subject he knew a little about having read an article which claimed that the Book of Kells was impossible to copy. He was adamant that that was the case, and Gernot and Gaby agreed with him. Mario begged to differ and in the ensuing debate a wager was agreed. If Mario could copy a page from the Book of Kells, he would win a case of port wine from Holger. If he failed, then he would have to give a case of wine to Holger.

It was a challenge Mario couldn't resist. He had read in Henry's book that the Book of Kells had been created on the skin of an animal, but it didn't make it clear which animal. Gaby obtained some parchment made from goatskin and Mario started drawing on it in black ink, attempting to recreate the characters from the handwritten text of the story of Joseph. Using a popular brand of black ink and a fine-nibbed pen from a stationery store, he quickly learned that it wasn't going to work. The black lines he drew were too thick, even using a pen with the finest nib commercially available which was one-tenth of a millimeter thick.

"I decided to file the nib down even more to make it as thin as I possibly could, but it still didn't work," said Mario. "The ink was too thick. So, I began to think Holger Rathsdorf was right when he said the Book of Kells couldn't be copied. But I decided to carry on anyway."

Using his homemade pen and commercially available black ink, Mario managed to copy one page of the handwritten text. Eventually the entire folio was finished with the color sections completed in oil paints. It was, Mario thought, a good first attempt, but it was unprofessional. Oil paints were absolutely the wrong medium to use, but it looked good; good enough to win him the case of port wine. But, more importantly, it had whetted his appetite to delve deeper into the secrets of the Book of Kells and prove, once and for all, that it really could be copied.

Mario asked Gaby to find him any literature she could lay her hands on concerning the Book of Kells, only to discover that there wasn't a lot of it available at that time. So, Mario began to study other illuminated manuscripts, including the Book of Durrow, created approximately a century before the Book of Kells, and the Lindisfarne Gospels, written around 720 AD on the island of Lindisfarne in Northumberland and now residing in the British Library.

The more he studied the more Mario Kleff came to realize that modern day materials and equipment were not suitable if he was going to create a faithful copy of the Book of Kells. To understand the pigments and the processes that the Iona monks would have used to create the original colors, Mario read a wide range of books on the subject. A key one was a book by Heinz Roosen-Runge who had analyzed the formulas of the colors used at the time. Others included the *Mappae clavicula*, a medieval Latin text containing details of manufacturing processes, and the *Theory of Colors* by the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, which described phenomena such as colored shadows, refraction, and chromatic aberration.

“These books made me realize that the Book of Kells could not be recreated in ordinary color. So, I started to figure out the minerals for creating the pigments and the earth colors using ground leaves and urine. Eventually I had a small laboratory which Gernot helped me build.”

Mario Kleff then started making his own painting materials, creating over the next two years his own recipes for the colors he required. White, for instance, was produced from lead and acid, green from copper and vinegar which left a green residue which could be scraped from the container. He refused to use substances that would not be available in the 9th century.

“I also concluded in 1990 that the parchment was completely wrong. The Book of Kells wasn't even written on goatskin. The more I read the more

## Mario Kleff – Without Fear

I realized an understanding of alchemy was required to replicate the work of the monks of Iona. I also discovered what they had written the book on was calfskin, sometimes, even, the skin of an unborn calf.”

Mario Kleff needed calfskin and Gernot managed to acquire some from a nearby farm. Gernot stretched the skin over a wooden frame, but before Mario could set to work on it, he needed to shave it thinner. Some of the folios on the original Book of Kells have been shaved so thin they are almost translucent.

Mario’s first effort was not a success, so he tried again. By the end of his first year working on the project he had made five or six attempts to recreate the one page that had won him the case of port wine.

“I worked every day for as many as 15 hours at a time. There was a lot of trial and error. I would create a color, paint with it then throw everything away because it wasn’t right. Eventually, after one to two years, I figured out that by creating colors and working on it every day, it still wasn’t good enough.”

One major problem Mario faced was the fact that he had never actually seen the original Book of Kells, so he wasn’t certain that the colors he was creating were faithful reproductions of the originals. He wanted to see the Book of Kells, but he was told that would be virtually impossible because of the conditions under which the book is displayed in Dublin. The Book of Kells has been split into four volumes and only two are on display at any one time. Furthermore, the volumes are kept under safety glass with visitors unable to touch them or turn their pages. Upwards of 350,000 people visit the display every year with visitors able to view the pages on display for no more than a few minutes.

Not having seen the Book of Kells, Mario couldn’t be sure that the colors he created were correct and he was ready to give up. But Gernot and Gaby urged him to continue, and it eventually led to a meeting with Urs Düggelein of the Swiss publisher Faksimile-Verlag Luzern which had been given permission to produce a full-color facsimile. Each page had been photographed and a single-page facsimile was prepared so the colors could be carefully compared to the original. The completed work was published in 1990.

Almost 1,500 copies of the Faksimile-Verlag book were printed. Most were sent to universities, museums and other educational establishments.

Those that weren't were sold for many thousands of euros to private collectors.

"They had used a special camera system to photograph the Book of Kells and invented a special paper to print it on, replicating the characteristics of the original parchment," said Mario. "In my opinion, it was an almost 100 percent identical copy of the original."

Mario Kleff met Urs Duggelin in 1993 at the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz, one of the oldest museums of printing in the world. The museum was staging a Book of Kells exhibition featuring all the pages of Duggelin's new facsimile version. It was the first opportunity for most people to view the Book of Kells in its entirety. As Gaby Fischer was a close acquaintance of the curator of the museum, an invitation was extended to Mario Kleff to include in the exhibition the 5 or 6 pages he had copied by that time.

"The exhibition opened in front of an audience of invited guests which included professors, teachers, artists and students, not the general public. My reproductions were in the center, surrounded by the facsimiles mounted on the walls. I was impressed by the way my pages were displayed. I didn't arrange them, they did. And I stole the show!"

Dieter Stolte, director of ZDF, a German public-service TV broadcaster based in Mainz, publicly stated that Mario had achieved something that no one else had managed to do in a thousand years, namely copy the Book of Kells. Another interested attendee at the exhibition was Pádraig Murphy, the Irish Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany at that time. He was later instrumental in helping to arrange Mario's visit to Dublin to see the original masterpiece.

Mario Kleff also received a copy of Urs Duggelin's book. It became an invaluable resource in Mario's ongoing work.

## High society

The early 1990s, according to Mario Kleff, saw an avalanche of knowledge tumble his way, principally from Gernot and Gaby, but also from their many well-educated, academic and influential friends who regularly descended on their Halsenbach home in search of a little intellectual conversation. It all got a bit much for Valerie who felt somewhat sidelined by all the attention being heaped on her new boyfriend. She wanted to move out, and so did Mario.

## Mario Kleff – Without Fear

At Gaby's suggestion, the 22-year-old Mario Kleff had set out to complete his high school education starting in the summer of 1990. It involved a 70-kilometer motorcycle journey from Halsenbach to Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler where Mario had found a gymnasium willing to take him. A few kilometers away, along the road that meanders along the Rhine from Remagen to Bonn, the then seat of the German Government, Mario discovered a delightful area of castles, chateaux and villas, a few of which were occupied by foreign powers as embassies.

One villa caught his eye. It was large and run-down with broken windows and peeling paintwork, and it was empty. Mario wanted to see inside. He climbed over a fence and broke yet another window to gain access. All the furniture had been removed exposing fine oak flooring. The villa was called the Haus Herresberg and Mario Kleff loved it. He wanted to know who owned it and a neighbor directed him to a house on top of a hill. Mario had been sent to the house of Herbert and Gila Böhler. Gila answered the door and Mario explained that he wanted to live at Haus Herresberg.

Gila, it later emerged, was one of the first legal women appointed in North Rhine-Westphalia. She was entrenched in the upper echelons of German society, and she spotted something in Mario's demeanor that made her think that maybe he belonged there too. The years of conditioning by Christel Hentrich eventually paying off for him.

Mario explained to Gila that he wished to complete his education at a nearby school and then study art. He told her he was a painter working on the Book of Kells and that he was also a musician, playing both piano and violin. Gila was impressed. She suggested he return a few days later after she had had the opportunity to discuss the matter with her husband and her sisters, who had jointly inherited the property.

When Mario Kleff returned, it appeared the decision had already been made. He was handed the keys to Haus Herresberg before they even opened the door for a second viewing. The only remaining question was how much Mario could pay to live in the enormous villa set on 30,000 square meters of land.

The Böhlers knew that the market rental for such an imposing property was way beyond the pocket of a mere high school student. It was also evident that they wanted him to be their tenant. He could live there for as

long as the property remained unsold for a token, one-off payment of 70 marks. Mario jumped at the chance.

“From that day on we became friends,” Mario said.

Mario and Valerie moved in. Each had a separate bedroom. Although they had known each other for less than a year, cracks were already beginning to appear in their relationship. Valerie wasn't interested in painting or classical music and wanted to distance herself from Gernot and Gaby. Mario wanted to get closer to them.

In the basement of Haus Herresberg, Mario found an old, finely carved wooden bed which he estimated was from the renaissance or baroque period. He asked Gila if he could have it. No, was the answer, because it had been the bed of Thomas, Baron von Hennet, when he was young, and he might one day want it back. But Mario could borrow it.

For once Mario made no attempt to alter his bedroom. He liked it just the way it was with its uncarpeted oak flooring and peeling wallpaper. He arranged his bed underneath the large, wooden-framed window that wouldn't close properly. In winter it was freezing. In fact, the whole house was cold, so Gernot installed a couple of oil heaters to help keep Valerie and Mario warm. There also came a lot of Jugendstil – Art Nouveau – furniture from the original Sauerbrunnen house which Christel and Heinz did not have room for when they moved. Other rooms contained Mario's hi-fi system with its huge horn speakers, his guitar and, of course, his books.

He lived in Haus Herresberg while he completed his education at Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler, eventually leaving in late summer 1992.<sup>1</sup> As school finished around two in the afternoon, Mario had plenty of time to work on the Book of Kells in his new surroundings. He also had plenty of time to meet the other members of the extended Böhler family. There were Gila's sisters, Uta Countess von Bassewitz, and Cornelia von Guillaume. They were the daughters of Herwart von Guillaume, a rich industrialist. Mario became friends with other noble families who lived in the nearby villas and chateaux. Among them was Wilhelmine, a young lady of similar age to Mario. There was a mutual attraction.

The Guillaumees had owned real estate in Remagen since the end of the 19th century. Franz Carl bought Gudenau Castle, and his son Max von

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<sup>1</sup> Haus Herresberg [Wikipedia \(Germany\)](#)

## Mario Kleff – Without Fear

Guillaume acquired the Calmuth estate in 1895 and had it expanded into a country house, Schloss Calmuth. In 1907 he also acquired Marienfels Castle on the Rhine. His brother, Arnold von Guillaume, acquired Schloss Ernich in 1916 or 1917 along with the adjoining villa, Haus Herresberg.

“Cornelia lived in Paris, and I fell in love with her,” said Mario. “She invited me to go and live with her in Paris and be a companion for her son. Gaby and Gernot thought it would be great for my career to live with the Bassewitz family in Paris, but I refused. I wanted to stay close to them.”

Nevertheless, there followed a period of intense and influential social contact. Among other notables Mario Kleff met was German socialite Marianne, Dowager Princess of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn, a photographer of the rich and famous, including Prince Charles, Maria Callas Salvador Dali and Sean Connery. There was also Gabriela, another member of the Wittgenstein-Sayn family, who had a large butterfly collection. The nearby ruins of the 12th century Sayn Castle were the family seat of the counts of Sayn and Sayn-Wittgenstein.

Women were destined to play an important part in Mario’s life. It had started with his mother, Adelheid, grandmother, Christel and great grandmother, Irmchen, before Gaby, his adoptive mother, came along. All had a strong influence on Mario’s artistic development. Then came another, Silvia, an older woman with an aristocratic background who was married with three children and lived in a castle.

“She had a medical background, and she taught me much about medicine and philosophy,” said Mario. “I couldn’t resist her beauty, and we embarked on a journey of spiritual and physical love. Her children, who were about my age, understood our relationship and welcomed me in their home.”

Silvia introduced Mario to more hidden treasures during their travels through Germany. But their intense relationship wasn’t to last. After a few months Silvia asked Mario to let her go, claiming the age difference would eventually lead to their breakup anyway. Mario understood, but these relationships didn’t bode well for a long-term future with Valerie.

Mario felt there were several artistic disciplines he needed to know more about. In 1991 he studied industrial photography with Ralf Häselich at Arts Unlimited, one of Germany’s largest photo-graphic studios located



in the old locomotive sheds in Mayen, and he learned the art of glass painting, glass grinding and lead crystal.

Meanwhile, the magnificent Marksburg Castle in Braubach was the location of an encounter that had a profound influence on Mario Kleff's development as an artist. Gaby was a regular visitor to Marksburg with her linen displays and demonstrations at the Middle Ages markets held there. This brought Gaby and her protégé, Mario, into contact with Tilla von der Goltz and her business partner, Busso von der Dollen. They were the castle managers for the German Castles Association which was headquartered in Marksburg. Tilla was a member of an aristocratic East Prussian family that could trace its roots back to the 12th century. She literally gave Mario the keys to the castle.

The most striking feature of Marksburg Castle is the 160-metre tall Bergfried, a free-standing tower like a keep in English and French castles. And in the Bergfried was a small room known as the King Heinrich Room. All it contained was a small table and a few wall decorations featuring mathematical instruments. Mario decided it was the room for him and Tilla gave him permission to use it free of charge during the daytime while he worked on the Book of Kells. In a sense, he became part of the castle display as hundreds of tourists filed past the room watching him while he worked.

Mario Kleff's appearance was striking. With his long, golden hair, the image he portrayed was pure mid to late Middle Ages, reminiscent of a Celtic aristocrat. He wore loose-fitting, blue-grey linen clothes, handmade by Gaby. Just one of his shirts took 250 hours for her to make and was occasionally covered by a purple cape. On his chest he wore a 15-centimetre-wide Celtic brooch made especially from solid gold and silver which had been commissioned by Gaby from Mario's friend, gold and silversmith Joachim Dott. Around his neck Mario wore a matching torc, a Celtic neck ring, while his braided hair was secured by two, 10-centimetre-wide Celtic hair rings. All these adornments were decorated with motifs from the Book of Kells. Beside his desk lay a Viking sword, forged from Damascus steel commissioned from a master blacksmith by Gaby and Gernot.

One day while drawing, Mario noticed a man standing at the door of the King Heinrich Room. He stood there for 30 minutes or more without exchanging any words. Mario found it irritating being watched for so long, but eventually the man left. However, he was back the next day, but this

## Mario Kleff – Without Fear

time he did talk. He instantly recognized the Book of Kells and wanted to know all about Mario and his project to copy it.

The man was retired Professor Horst von Hasselbach. He was impressed with Mario's work and high level of concentration and invited him to visit his home. Mario accepted. There he met Horst's Japanese wife, Rejko, an expert in ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging. Such was her expertise that her ikebana skills had been called upon by the Japanese Royal Family.

The Hasselbach's small house was decorated in a Japanese style, and while the professor sat at the kitchen table with Mario Kleff, his daughter, Julia, walked in. Yet again, Mario was smitten, but Julia was a violin student, and her father insisted she go into another room to continue her studies while he taught Mario. And what he taught him was Japanese philosophy.

“At first I was interested in Horst, and then I was interested in his daughter Julia,” said Mario. “But her studies meant I had very little opportunity to see her. We would have maybe an hour together to go out for a walk, but Horst simply wouldn't let us go out together in the evening.”

Mario's regular visits to the Hasselbach household spanned two years during which Horst taught his new pupil all aspects of Japanese life and design – the thinking behind Zen, how an artist would draw a Japanese character, how mathematics and science played a role and how a Japanese house was designed.

“He taught me that design and architecture were one and the same thing and that mathematical formulas were a very important part of being a designer. Whereas the golden mean, or golden middle way, is an essential element of western design, he taught me the Asian equivalent, which is very different. The things he taught me had a greater influence than anything else did on my later career as an architect.”

Mario Kleff visited Japan twice during the time he spent with the Hasselbach family. He wanted to study Japanese architecture and visited Tokyo, Chiba and Yokohama. His visits reinforced what he had read in books and learned from Horst von Hasselbach, providing a more complete picture of how mathematics and geometry can be applied to the philosophy of Zen.

Mario Kleff's relationship with the Hasselbachs gradually faded after the Gutenberg Museum exhibition which had featured his Book of Kells reproductions. It also heralded an end to two years of unprecedented change which had seen Mario move into Gaby and Gernot's Halsenbach home, then into Haus Herresberg where he was introduced to Gila Böhler's high society friends, take up temporary residence in Marksburg Castle where he met his mentor, Professor Hasselbach, and mount his first exhibition at the Gutenberg Museum.<sup>2</sup>

It was all underpinned by continuing work on the Book of Kells. But on the basis that all work and no play does make Jack a dull boy, there were a couple of recreational highlights. The first was a visit to the 1991 Wagner Festival in Bayreuth where tickets are like gold dust. But then influential friends can often help in that regard. The second highlight, or maybe lowlight as it turned out, was his eventful, first visit to Norway and Sweden.

## Ups and downs

Holger Rathsdorf, the student of Roman culture who had set Mario Kleff off on the Book of Kells journey with his port wine wager, also happened to be a mountain climber; not just a normal, run-of-the-mill mountain climber but a free climber. Exponents of the art tackled the steepest precipices and used ropes and other climbing paraphernalia to protect against injury during falls and not to assist their progress.

Holger would take off alone for a month or more every year and head for an isolated mountain where he could indulge his passion for his extreme sport in splendid solitude. His plan for 1991 was to head to the Land of the Midnight Sun and tackle the ice-bound peaks of northern Scandinavia. Mario thought it was a great idea and wanted to go with him. Holger said no.

With her love of Celtic and Viking culture, Gaby had been to Sweden and Norway many times with Gernot and thought the experience would benefit Mario extensively. So, she helped put pressure on Holger who eventually relented.

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<sup>2</sup> Christel Eichner, *Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 29, 2000, Feuilleton, "[Most beautiful book in the world](#)" in the [Bacharach Josefskapelle](#)

## Mario Kleff – Without Fear

“Have you done any mountain climbing?” asked Holger.

“Of course,” replied Mario, rather tongue in cheek. After all, how difficult could climbing a mountain be for a man who could copy the Book of Kells?

“Fine, I will pick you up next week,” Holger replied.

Mario was excited. He was confident he could climb a mountain and looked forward to spending time with a kindred spirit with no girls, no hotels, just two extreme guys going up a mountain together. They loaded a car with their climbing gear, attached a two-person, semi-inflatable boat to the roof, and set off on a 2,000-kilometre drive through Denmark, crossing the Oresund Bridge linking it to Sweden. Eventually, they arrived at the 1,278 square kilometer Stora Sjöfallet National Park, the third largest in Sweden. The park is located 20 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle and contains a series of inland lakes surrounded by mountains close to the border with Norway.

They were in the Land of the Midnight Sun and Mario found it fascinating to experience 24-hour twilight. “I had read about it, but I had never experienced it,” he said. “We didn’t even know what time of day it was. It could have been three in the morning or three in the afternoon. It all looked the same.”

They parked their car on the edge of a large lake and, despite their tiredness, decided to practice their rowing skills in the boat.

“I learned quickly and after a short while we found our rhythm. I was in awe of the surroundings. We were in this lake, surrounded by mountains with no signs of life at all. There were no buildings, no electricity pylons, no people. It was just unspoiled nature as far as the eye could see. To me it was an incredible experience.”

The plan was to row the boat across the lake to where the mountain slopes came down to the water’s edge, climb the mountain range and work their way back to the car. It was a journey that could take up to three weeks and only essential supplies and equipment could be carried because of the need to contain weight. Whatever they needed had to be carried in their backpacks.

But there was a problem. The first day of paddling resulted in zero progress being made. Paddled as they might, Mario and Holger appeared

to be getting nowhere. In fact, when they stopped paddling the boat went backwards. And when they ventured farther into the lake, the boat spun round of its own accord and retraced its tracks.

Mario and Holger were stumped. They paddled back to shore and decided to investigate the phenomenon. As they walked back along the shoreline, they spotted a rock formation extending into the lake.

“Behind the rocks was what I can only describe as a hole in the lake,” said Mario. “It was a facility to generate hydroelectricity. It was drawing in water from the lake and, while it was not visible from where we had been rowing, it would have killed us had our boat been sucked into it.”

It was the incredible Stour Muorkkegårttje waterfall, the main reason Stora Sjöfallet became a national park. It has been harnessed for hydro-electric power and has since become a major tourist attraction.

The solution was to drive a little farther north, park the car and launch their boat from a spot where the hydro-electric generator had minimal impact on the movement of the water. The mountain range that Holger had identified as his chosen climb was accessible only by boat and required two days’ paddling up the lake to get there.

With the lake successfully negotiated, the pair secured the boat at the water’s edge, donned their backpacks and set about scaling their first, steep sided mountain.

“What I hadn’t fully appreciated was the effect of the weight we carried over that steep terrain,” said Mario. “We had kept everything we needed down to a minimum to save weight. We had one compass and one topographical map, but we didn’t even have a watch between us. A noodle cup felt like it weighed a half kilogram in the backpack, so every little bit of weight we could save was a big help. We couldn’t carry water, and we couldn’t carry tins. We carried dried food which needed to be rehydrated with ice water or spring water. We had a box of matches and a small gas cooker, but we could only use it once a day because we couldn’t carry extra gas canisters.”

At the end of the first day’s climbing Mario was exhausted. He felt his legs could go no farther, yet there were still several days’ climbing ahead. In addition to their backpacks, they carried ropes and iron crampons to be attached to their boots when climbing on ice. It all added to the weight

## Mario Kleff – Without Fear

and Mario began to realize his lack of climbing experience was starting to have an effect.

Mario became completely disorientated. He had no idea of the time, or even which day it was. And he had no idea of the direction in which they were going. They just kept walking for hours on end, sleeping occasionally in half tents which only covered their heads and shoulders.

The next problem occurred when Mario began to climb what Holger called a hill, not even a mountain. They were still below the tree line. The going was tough, and Mario began to have doubts about his ability to complete the climb.

“I didn’t want to lose face, so I decided to commit to the climb. Besides, I couldn’t go back. I didn’t even know which way back was and the guy I was with was so crazy he wouldn’t take me back. I had no option but to go on. I discovered during that trip that Holger’s attitude was you either survived it or you didn’t. It was up to you. He didn’t point that out to me before we left, but it quickly became apparent that was his attitude.”

They successfully completed the first climb, but they had yet to encounter the snow and ice that featured at the higher altitudes. Instead, they were faced with fast-flowing, narrow rivers formed by glacial run-off water. There was one such river about two meters wide that Holger decided they needed to cross. He threw his backpack across, took a short run and jumped across it, landing successfully on the opposite bank. Mario needed to do the same.

“I was tired and lacking in energy. If I failed to throw my backpack across it would be swept away by the powerful currents in the river, and if I couldn’t jump across then I would be swept away too. Either way it would have been the end of me because 200 meters downstream there was a steep waterfall which would have claimed either the backpack or me.”

Fortunately for Mario he made the jump and eventually he and Holger found themselves above the snowline and faced their first really testing climb; an almost sheer ice wall that each man needed to scale individually. One of them had to go first. That job fell to Mario Kleff.

“I climbed the mountain and had absolutely no idea what I was doing. Holger figured that out very quickly. I didn’t know where or how to hang a rope, so I just kept on climbing without one. No rope for me and no rope for him. It was a wall of ice. We needed ice picks and crampons on

our boots to get up there. I came to a section where I didn't know whether to go left or right, so I guessed. Then I came to an overhang and for a while I was hanging there until I got over it."

Eventually both men got to the top. Mario was exhausted and Holger was far from happy.

"Have you ever climbed a mountain before?" he asked.

"No actually, that was my first one," came Mario's reply.

"You are completely out of your mind. You risked not only your own life but mine as well," said Holger. "What would happen if you fell? Do you see any hospitals? Do you see a telephone? You forced me to climb up that mountain without a rope. Where was my support?"

There was a tension between the two that only increased after they had slept a while and discovered that their only compass had been lost. Holger tried to blame Mario, but Mario knew it was Holger who had lost it.

"Now I was getting a little bit worried," said Mario. "I knew I had been very lucky to get up the mountain the previous day, if indeed it was the previous day. We had no idea if it was day or night and now, we had no idea which way was north and which way was south. Furthermore, Holger knew I wasn't a mountain climber."

Fortunately, Holger had climbed the area before and was able to identify a few peaks on his map.

"Now you are going to find out that climbing down a mountain is more difficult than climbing up it," Holger told Mario. "We have to get over this mountain first and then there are three or four more peaks to go." And he was right, but eventually they managed to find their way back to the car.

"By that time, we had run out of food, we had run out of everything," said Mario. "So, Holger decided to shorten the trip. We had planned to spend at least two weeks there, but Holger decided to cut it short after just one week."

Without waiting to collect the boat that had been left at the side of the lake, Holger immediately drove across the Norwegian border and deposited Mario in the city of Narvik with the parting words: "Our friendship is cracked."

## Mario Kleff – Without Fear

With that Holger drove off and the two had no contact ever again. Mario took a train from Narvik down through Norway, then through Sweden, Denmark and Germany, arriving days later at the house of Gaby and Gernot in Halsenbach. Mario was exhausted, felt ill and went to bed for three days before he was strong enough to return to Haus Herresberg.

A short while later, Mario ended his relationship with Valerie. That was quickly followed by Gila Böhler's 70th birthday and she celebrated it with a garden party to which all her friends were invited. It was humiliating for Mario. In front of her invited guests, Gila asked Mario to leave her house. She announced to everyone that Mario leaving Valerie was unacceptable. Mario had to leave the party. Valerie stayed.

“It felt like I had been punched in the face, just like Forger had done to me in Gödenroth. From then on, my life took a completely new direction. It was clear I would have to leave Haus Herresberg and, in an instant, I was not only cut off from Gila, I was cut off from all her friends too. None of them wanted anything to do with me. I realised what false friends they had really been. It was time for me to move on.”