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SOME STRAY THOUGHTS ON MOUNTAIN-
CLIMBING.

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THERE is no despotism like that of the zealous and energetic editor who, by his own devotion to his project, acquires the right to hold to their word those who, in a moment of unguarded sympathy, have promised to enlist under his banner. The editor of the Cairngorm Journal bids me write, and so, though I have little to say, and no time to say it, I throw together at his bidding some scattered remarks on a pursuit which has always been a passion with me.

Those in whose breasts no such passion burns often ask—In what does the pleasure of mountain-climbing consist? “It is fatiguing”, they say; “it exposes you to cold, and wet, and hunger, and a variety of risks to health, including those which arise from bad food, from chills up to apoplexy. If pursued in steep or rocky places it involves the risk of breaking your neck, or at least your leg. The pleasure of striving with an antagonist, which makes the charm of so many games, is wanting; while as for beauty, artists agree that the views from the lower slopes of a hill are better than those from the top”.

Those who love the mountains, and have from childhood been wont to range over them, find their delight so natural and obvious that they hardly know how to discriminate the elements that go to make it up. However, I will try.

One of these elements is simple enough, for we perceive it in other forms. It is that same enjoyment of physical

exertion which comes into most games, and has received a striking illustration in the rapid growth of cycling. Moreover, in the case of mountains, the exercise takes one into fine air, and the higher one gets, the better does the air become.

Another is the pleasure of success, of surmounting difficulties, of accomplishing what one has set one's self to do. How strong this is many a climber will agree, when he remembers the dangerous bits of rock he has had to clamber up, just because he said, looking at the hill from below, that this was the line he would take. Nature, and not a rival player, is the antagonist to be overcome, but to some of us this rather increases than diminishes the satisfaction.

Then there is the pleasure in exerting and testing one's skill, of which the mountaineer has often great need. Skill is shown, not only in choosing the best route, but in the actual work of climbing, when the rocks are steep or rotten, or when the ice-wall is hard, and steps have to be cut up it. Skill is needed to judge of the weather, and to bring one's weather forecast into relation to the route, the time, the amount of food left, and other points material to success, or perhaps even to safety.

This brings me to danger, which, though it is not an essential to our pursuit, is often an important factor, because it heightens the excitement. When the danger becomes serious, there is doubtless a certain amount of pain as well as of the pleasure which, according to Aristotle, accompanies the free play of every energy. The sense of danger quickens all one's faculties, and gives a vivid sense of whatever individual force, be it mental or physical, one can put forth. It braces up and vivifies the personality. The charm of a dangerous expedition in steep and lofty mountains is like what I suppose the charm of battle must be, though in modern battles danger so often consists in standing still to be pounded by artillery, without being able to do anything for one's self in return, that there may be less in them to evoke individual daring, coolness, and resource than the scaling a rock wall, or the keeping one's

footing on the top of a narrow snow *arête*, or the threading one's way amid huge seracs, involves, even when men are roped together between their guides. It may be wrong to enjoy danger, but one must confess that the enjoyment is intense while it lasts; and though it is one's duty to strongly dissuade anyone else from indulging this taste, I cannot honestly say that if I had such temptations again offered me as have overcome me in past days, I should be sure of resisting them. And let it be said in palliation of the climber who goes into danger without, as I admit, any such justification of an important end to be attained as the soldier has, or the geographical explorer, or the physician in a pestilence, that the cases in which danger is a mere matter of chance are in mountain-climbing comparatively few. Nearly everything depends upon skill, strength, a good head, and perfect self-possession. He who ventures into places where these things will not avail to save him—he who starts for a high snow peak when a storm is obviously gathering, or attempts to cross a stone-swept *couloir* when the sun is thawing the rocks above, and the badness of the footing, or the size of the party, makes a swift rush impossible: such an one is to be condemned; and all the great masters of our craft, from Mr. John Ball and Mr. Leslie Stephen downwards, have condemned him by their example as well as by their precepts.

As to the pleasure derivable from scenery, there are two things to be said. One is that it is much more often alleged as a reason for mountaineering than actually felt, because those who really enjoy scenery are still a minority even among mountaineers. Any one who doubts this may satisfy himself by travelling in Switzerland or Scotland, or anywhere else, in company with a crowd of tourists. The large majority will pass through charming scenes, and not turn their heads to look at them, though prepared to "enthuse" (if a convenient Americanism may be pardoned) whenever the guide-book tells them that they ought to do so. It is not often, however, that this indifference is so candidly avowed as once by an old Alpine acquaintance of mine at

the summit of a magnificent pass over one of the ranges that radiate southwards from the Monte Rosa group. Two of us had reached the grass-covered top, and were lost in admiration of the wonderful prospect of the snow wilderness on the north and the romantic valleys descending to Italy on the south. But he, the third, who had come out thinking only of ice and rock perils, smote his alpenstock upon the ground, and ejaculated, "If there is anything in the world I hate, it is sauntering over a cow col".

The other observation is that, though artists are right in holding that the most sketchable bits, perhaps the most perfect landscapes, are to be found in the glens, or on the middle slopes of mountains, there is also an extraordinary charm in the higher regions, even on the craggy tops of our own hills, and still more in the snowy wastes, pierced by toppling crags or overhung by frowning precipices, of the upper ice and snow regions in very lofty ranges. As Herodotus says, "Whoever has been there will know what I mean". There are thoughts and emotions that thrill through one upon the windswept mountain top, with the contrast between its stern barrenness and the smiling plains in the far distance beneath, which nothing else can rouse.

To these emotions solitude contributes much, and doubtless one of the chief delights of our pursuit—a delight which will be more and more prized as the world grows more and more crowded—is solitude. It is a delight one can now enjoy more perfectly in our Scottish hills than in some of the greater chains, certainly more—if one excepts a few much-visited peaks like Ben Lomond—than on Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn, where one meets so many parties composed, not of true climbers, but inexperienced tourists, who pay a large sum to be virtually dragged up and down for the sake of saying they have done what was once a difficult feat. Some will prefer perfect solitude, and the impression of grand scenery is doubtless then most profound. Some are able to enjoy Nature better when they have a single congenial spirit to whom to express their transports; some more sociable beings like a larger party and the cheeriness it brings, and the foundation which such

expeditions lay for pleasant recollections afterwards, perhaps for friendship ; for hardships borne in common, if they do not destroy friendship by provoking ill-temper, do much to cement it. Even, however, to six or eight men travelling together, the loneliness of the mountains is a joy.

Last among his sources of pleasure come the opportunities which the climber has of studying natural history, especially geology and botany. To those who love these sciences, this counts for a vast deal, doubling the interest and the profit of every excursion ; and if those who are in any case fond of walking or climbing knew in their youth how much they would add to the pleasure of their later lives by acquiring some knowledge of these subjects, far more persons would betake themselves thereto.

I have spoken of mountaineering in general, trying to include our modest Scottish hills as well as the great chains of Europe, Asia, and America. Some of the observations apply less forcibly where the difficulties and dangers incident to snow mountains and glaciers, and to great elevations, are absent. There is comparatively little danger on even the highest and steepest peaks of our own country—none at all on our Cairngorm group—though both in Skye and Arran, and in a few parts of the mainland of Argyll and Inverness, one may find ascents, not of important peaks, but of detached pinnacles, where one's neck can be risked. Skye is, happily, the only place where fatal accidents have occurred, except to wholly incompetent persons. But, if Scotland affords little difficulty, and still less danger, she has three great charms. One of these is the proximity of the sea, which gives their full vertical value to so many of our summits, and adds so much dignity to many of our prospects. Another is the rich, deep, soft, changeful colour of our hills, so incomparably superior to the tints of the Alps—often cold and grey, sometimes even hard and monotonous, over large areas. The third is the fact that in our Highlands we need no guides, but can wander alone, submitting ourselves to the full impressions which the majestic silence of Nature makes. On lofty snow mountains, though most of us have occasionally made guideless excursions to

great heights or over difficult glaciers, and though we recollect such with peculiar delight, whether they were great or small—and it is by no means always the great ascents that are most dangerous, far from it—still, as a rule, expeditions without guides are imprudent. But here in old Scotland, one may properly rely on one's own strength and skill, carry one's lunch and dinner in one's own pocket, and enjoy for days together the full delight of solitude.

Perhaps I ought to add a further charm of Scotch mountaineering—the risk of encountering a band of hostile ghillies, or having an interdict applied for at the instance of Mr. Winans. But as this source of excitement is threatened with extinction, I pass it by for the present.