

## IN PRAISE OF CLIMBING

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EVERY hill-lover, returning home dishevelled, has been asked, half in derision, half in earnest, "Why do you do it?" In the days when the Cairngorms and our indulged love of them were taken for granted as a normal part of living, the question remained unanswered. But now that the hills are far away, and the peace and freedom of the sea have set me remembering that other peace and freedom which belong to them, I feel compelled to attempt a reply. As a small boy I judged that the distant hills of marvellous blue could only be made of substance fallen from heaven. All my subsequent wanderings upon them have been a confirmation of this, for every day spent in the apparently material pursuit of climbing mountains has been filled with adventures of the spirit. There lies the answer. We climbed in search of adventure.

Inward experience was a greater part of such adventure than outward physical accomplishment. For this reason we did not find it necessary always to climb precipices; simple walking in the hills brought many rewards and was never despised. Hill-climbs quite devoid of difficulty were yet so full of enlivening human incident and minor adventure, so full of things to pause at and admire, that mind and spirit were continually refreshed. In great part this was because we who climbed were companions by choice. I could not have wished better company. There was Johnny, for example, gay, six-foot, for ever exulting in the beauty of hills, or in the strength of storms, or simply in his own irresistible love of life. A. M., the Irishman, had so learned and infectious a delight in birds that I saw with his eyes their grace and charm, and felt more intimate with them. Even now I cannot bring to mind the pinewoods without friendly recollection of jaunty tits or of those extraordinary



acrobats, the crossbills; nor high moors without hearing the mournful pipe of golden plover, or envying again the airborne eagle. A. M. and I shared an exploring interest in topography. Together we read for ourselves the glacial history of corrie and overflow channel, marched down watersheds, and saw how aggressive rivers had stolen the headwaters of their peaceful neighbours. In the late hours of many an expedition, joint-achingly lengthened in such pursuits, have I blessed his tirelessness and undefeatable good humour. But it was with Grant, the serene, the imperturbable (except when confronted with the fabulous treasure of some rare plant!), that I suffered an incurable double fever, for colour photography and for alpine flowers. No day was too long that found upon a northern cliff the sun-filled globes of trollius, clustered purple saxifrage, rock veronica, white dryas, or the closely cushioned flowers of the dwarf campion. We could hardly bear to leave them, these marvellous plants. It wasn't so much the strange devices by which they had shepherded their spark of life through cold and drought and storm. It was the miracle they had accomplished of creating, out of rain and wind and scanty grains of rock, a richer profusion of delicate loveliness than that of any lowland flower; the courage they showed flaunting so gaily their fragile petals in the grimmest places. Nor was any climb in the dark, even of midwinter, too trying if morning light held expectation of a photographic "master-piece." Even more exciting than such premeditated pictures were the fleeting glories of light and colour that had the habit of appearing suddenly and unexpectedly, to be seized on the instant or lost for ever. To every moment of every expedition the camera added these things: an alert hopefulness that upholds the fisherman; the tremendous possibility, denied to him, of immortalising the magic moment; and a discipline of observation and appreciation that continually increased our awareness of beauty. The loveliness of clouds—"the clouds, the marvellous clouds!"—I had mostly to myself, or enjoyed with Chris, the botanist, a newcomer to the hills, sensitive to beauty, active, eager, and unafraid. But this is no catalogue of friends. Although sometimes I climbed



alone a companion was always better, especially one who could share easy, friendly silences. Some of the most silent of days, whether given over to strenuousness or to idle contemplation, were utterly companionable. And not an hour went unrewarded. Seeking adventure we came upon much beauty; in search of beauty we met adventure. Pleasures such as these described, and others that are hardly communicable, filled our days of hill-wandering.

Hills there are without such reward: hills without flowers, without birds, without water, without clouds even; hills where the sun is hostile and beauty attends only its rising and setting. Watching the mountains of the Arabian Desert, I thought of Huxley's lines:

“ If there were water, if there were  
But a shower, a little fountain springing,  
How rich would be the perfumed air,  
And the green woods with shade and singing.  
Bright hills, but by the sun accursed:  
Peaceful, but with the peace of hell.”

Yet men will climb even these for exertion's sake, and

“ For lust of knowing what should not be known.”

The rewards of exertion are real. Who has not known the joy of using muscles strenuously, and of resting after effort? But there is much more to it than that. How else did we face gladly the bitter toil of climbing throughout whole days of storm when nothing could be revealed to us but our inner selves? Occasional activity on the heroic scale is good; it makes us bigger men. One form of such activity we always found irresistible. In the enthusiasm of discussing a new expedition I might say, “ Shall we make it, C. W. M. ? ” And Grant and A. M. would answer simply, “ Yes.” “ Come-what-may ” meant we'd set out upon the agreed hour and complete that expedition, no matter what the condition of weather or hill. The challenge to our powers was not to be refused. And sometimes, on a climb begun in hopeless storm, the elements would suddenly relent and grant such a vision of beauty as is hardly to be found, and not so greatly to be appreciated, in any other circumstance.



If the weather denied us that, there was much to be said for the asceticism of it, the defying of fatigue and hunger and many kinds of discomfort, not grimly, not thereby humbling the spirit, but raising it in triumph and laughter above the querulous demands of the body. How often we have returned exhausted in body but mightily refreshed in spirit!

Rock-climbing called for more than mere disregard of comfort. What compelled us to it? In part it was the physical well-being demanded and engendered; the challenge of the mountain raising itself upon its precipices at our approach, and growling, "Touch me gin ye daur"; the fascination of committing ourselves beyond retreat to something that asked our utmost powers; the excitement of not knowing if we were going to be successful. There was the thrill of knowing how imperative it was to be calm: not for a moment, whatever befell, could panic be allowed to take hold of us. And after that uncertainty which is the essence of adventure came the relief and joy of achievement. And we exulted without dishonour, having met upon the precipice all the joys and virtues of battle, none of its cruelties and hatreds.

Two aspects of rock-climbing, more than all these, made it for me an enthralling sport. One was the shared adventure, the comradeship of common effort, here raised to a complete and vital consideration and trust between chosen friends. It enabled us to overcome otherwise insurmountable obstacles; and we knew, although we did not say it, that upon this trust were laid the lives of our friends. The other was that, in climbing, we were keyed up to a more intense awareness of our surroundings, to a finer and more vivid appreciation of their beauty. We were exalted. We saw, as with the eyes of God, a world made new.

For all this, it was snow-climbing which gave me most joy. It had all these fascinations, and more besides. No cloud was as sightless as that upon a snow-covered mountain; no wind as cruel as the winter blizzard. We might find ourselves in an empty grey-white shadowless prison, hardly able to tell whether the next step led up or down or into space; or struggling fiercely into a shrieking void, whose



noise and force and desperate cold seemed bent on numbing the power of thought needed to take us safely home. How impossibly remote then seemed the world of warmth and comfort and men! But no memories are more cherished than those of the rewarding days. I have ski-ed and climbed, for example, all through a calm and cloudless night of full moon; and at dawn, when the moon was falling westwards, stood upon Lochnagar summit waiting for the marvel of sunrise. By sun or moon the hills in winter held a splendour and a fascination not to be found at any other season. The tireless exhilaration of frosted air; the million-pointed sparkle of snow-crystals; the light-filled shadow; the gleaming slope that swept up towards heaven; under such spells as these the troubles of the world fell away, petty and meaningless. We knew only that we must conquer those slopes for the prize of beauty. We had discovered that the light of the sun was of an unimagined splendour.

It was also short-lived, and many a night came down to catch us far from home. Then foolish commonsense would whisper, "Miles and miles to go. You'll pay for it now!" But though limbs were beginning to stiffen and ache we'd answer exultingly within us, "What of it? Look where we have been! Was ever such a day?" And, of course, it was true enough; we had been among

"Mountains that like giants stand  
To sentinel enchanted land."

It will always remain so for us: a magic land whose streams make thirst a blessing, where hunger and fatigue are felt to be no hardship; a land of courage, friendship, laughter, and loveliness. And we shall keep the inner resource, the strength of spirit that it gave to us.