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# THE MOUNTAIN VISION

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Nilgiri Parbat

# THE MOUNTAIN VISION

by  
FRANK S. SMYTHE

HODDER AND STOUGHTON LTD.  
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## PREFACE

IN this book I have tried to set down some thoughts about the mountains and what they mean to me as a mountaineer. . Man's approach to Nature is essentially personal, and this book expresses personal views and feelings. The mountains are only one aspect of natural beauty, yet for many their message is the simplest to understand.

When I climb a hill it seems to me that I do not merely exercise my muscles, breathe pure invigorating air and pursue a technical interest. I am happy. The rocks, snow and ice that I tread may be defined as chemical substances, the height I gain be estimated as a measurement, yet these things together produce indescribable effects on mind and spirit.

I count myself fortunate to have trodden the heights of the Alps and the Himalayas, to have sat with friends by camp-fires, to have gasped in the thin air near the top of Mount Everest, to have tramped the heather of the British hills. And more than this, I am happy in the memories of these things. Such visions, such memories are imperishable. There is about them much more than temporary experience. To climb a mountain is to tread not only the heights of Earth, it is to adventure to the very boundaries of Heaven.





## CHAPTER I

### MOUNTAINS AND MEN

ONE hundred and fifty years ago mountains were considered ugly, useless, inconvenient, and even terrifying excrescences placed by an inscrutable Providence in the path of long-suffering man. The art of the period reflected these opinions, and mostly mountains were depicted as angular monstrosities, sombre piles charged with the twin spirits of gloom and fear. There were, however, some men of vision, for every age has produced its poets, philosophers and dreamers, who discerned beauty and peace in the hills.

Fear of mountains is easily understandable. It is the fear of the unknown, the primitive fear of the cave-dweller who nervously threaded his way through trackless primeval jungle. Knowledge alone can dissipate fear. The thunder-clap that frightens a small child loses its terrors when the child learns how and why it occurs. The avalanche is no longer an incalculable and fearful phenomenon when the laws governing it are understood. The peasantry who dwelt in the vicinity of mountains were superstitious and afraid because they were not sufficiently educated in the workings of Nature. Fear has no place in the

philosophy of the scientist, and education is the only antidote to prejudice and superstition.

Many of the early travellers amongst the Alps were well-educated men. Climbing a mountain or crossing a pass might seem to them a dull and fatiguing toil, but at least they had no fear of their environment, and their example exerted a powerful influence on the minds of the ignorant and superstitious natives with whom they came into contact. The fearsome dragons, once reputed to lurk amidst the mountains, disappeared; the ghost of Pontius Pilate was laid on Mount Pilatus; the spirits of the damned retreated into the deepest and darkest caverns; even the blizzard and the avalanche came to be looked upon not as instruments of Divine or Satanic vengeance but as natural phenomena obeying well-defined physical laws.

Fear passed, and with its passing there dawned a new spirit of inquiry which appreciated mountains not only as a field of inquiry for savants but as objects with a deeper significance. Some began to climb hills for no other motive than that they wished to climb them; others desired to view hills for no other motive than that they found such views beautiful and inspiring.

This discovery of beauty in Nature was a slow process. It was the beginning of an understanding which has in its development and fulfilment the promise of an eventual heaven on earth, the dawn of

an era in which primeval fears, lust of conquest, bloodshed and selfish competition will give place to a nobler conception of life on this planet. Why should it be assumed that death is a gateway to a better world? What is wrong with this present world? Admittedly it has certain physical disadvantages. There are parts of it where Nature is still red in tooth and claw, but in the main it is beautiful, and it will seem infinitely more beautiful to succeeding generations, for an appreciation of beauty is a measure of the human spirit in its progress; beauty does not exist as a fixed quantity, but as an association, a link between man and his environment. The ugly and terrifying hills of our ancestors have become the beautiful and peaceful hills of the present generation. Who knows what they will seem to future generations? An increasing sense of beauty is surely man's spiritual destiny. Only thus can Heaven be realised and happiness and peace reign on earth. Every man who seeks to reveal beauty is helping to open up vistas of incomparable splendour for generations yet unborn.

To the philosopher size has no bearing on quality. Beauty is as evident through a microscope as it is from the summit of Mount Everest. But most of us are not philosophers and our senses are as yet restricted and finite. We are in the process of being educated. Nature is part of a great educative scheme. Our education, like that of children, is still in the compara-

tive stage; that is to say, we can only perceive beauty through comparison. The flea is essentially as beautiful as an elephant, but for us it loses by comparison. Similarly, a molehill cannot rouse the same emotion as a mountain, yet every atom of the molehill is as beautiful and miraculous as the mountain. The true gardener scarcely values his blooms by their size; to him the starry saxifrage peeping out from its cranny in the mountain-side is every whit as beautiful as the stately lily. Man has taken a great stride forward during the past one hundred years in his appreciation of the universe. He has had much to contend with in the way of ugliness and unhappiness. Discovery and invention have temporarily outdistanced spiritual progress, and his mental rather than his spiritual faculties have been stimulated as a result. The present catastrophe now convulsing the world is one of the great upheavals that must take place before even an approximate balance can be restored.

Peace and happiness are not dependent on materials other than those to sustain life and promote health. This great fact has yet to be realised in the West. Yet it is beginning to be realised. Man is becoming more and more conscious of his environment. He sees himself not as some slave to material circumstance, but as a free entity capable of living and enjoying life in the sun and air amid the beauties of Nature. For what other reason have the highways and byways of the countryside been thronged with

hikers and ramblers these past few years? For my part, I get a greater thrill out of raising a crop of potatoes than I would out of constructing the largest and speediest of aeroplanes, and while I cannot expect others to subscribe to this view, my conviction is that the happiness of man is linked with the soil rather than with the factory and pavement.

This revolt, for it is nothing less, of man against his self-imposed material environment is in its infancy. It must lead inevitably to co-operation, and through that to a simpler and less selfish distribution of the world's produce. It will lead also to a greater appreciation of the arts and of beauty generally. Let us look farther than the present hatreds and fears. Is it possible that we can glimpse a nobler world? Or are we to build the same ugly fabric on the ruins of the present-day system? Time to think and time to contemplate are as necessary to a man as time to work and time to be amused. A greater beauty and a greater peace are to be perceived through an hour spent seated on a hillside than in a hundred hours spent moving rapidly across the face of the earth in a motor-car or aeroplane. To live beautifully it is necessary to parcel out life into the correct proportions of action and inaction. Always to be doing something, or being amused by something, is soul-destroying in its ultimate effects. The clinics for nervous diseases are full of such cases. Nature teaches man the virtues of calm, of acting deliberately and

thoughtfully. Nature cannot be rushed or bludgeoned without dire effects. Fertilise her with artificial stimulants and she becomes sterile, accelerate her processes and she becomes weak and impoverished. Mankind reacts in precisely the same manner. Let us adapt ourselves to Nature, not continually strive to force her to adapt herself to us.

There are two aspects of Nature that, above all others, have inspired men to poetic and literary heights, and been a source of inspiration to countless millions—the hills and the sea. They share the same mysteries, they speak the same language, they are untamed and uncontrolled by men. In this last lies a subtle and never-failing charm. I am not writing of hills tamed and cultivated by the hand of man, but of those regions of the earth deemed by geographers to be of “no commercial value.” Is it not pleasant to seek the freedom of such places, and the peace? We know now that the hills are beautiful and not to be feared. We know of a new hope and a new inspiration to be found on the heights, a rejuvenation of mind, a healthiness of body.

On a hill it is possible to sense the unity and continuity of life, a rhythm that sends men and worlds on their way. Life and death no longer seem isolated events, but a part of some pattern woven on the looms of eternity. He who finds beauty on a hill finds also an answer to a thousand questions. In that answer there is manifested peace and the serenity of God.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ENJOYMENT OF MOUNTAIN SCENERY

To some, at all events, the subject-matter of this chapter may appear superfluous and even impertinent. All the same, I dare here to give what amounts to some hints and tips on what I believe to be the best way of enjoying hills and of extracting from them the maximum of enjoyment.

Firstly, Nature cannot be hurried. Calm, order and rhythm are the keynotes of the universe, and those persons who care nothing for these qualities have little to live for. To live well is to live slowly, and to understand and appreciate Nature it is essential to adapt ourselves to her, not expect her to adapt herself to us. The hills should be approached in the spirit of the pilgrim approaching a shrine, an attitude receptive of their charms and beauties, not a half-formed expectation that they will conform to our notions as to life and living. Mr. Hilaire Belloc when he walked to Rome discovered for himself the most satisfactory way of approaching them, and his description of his reactions on first sighting the High Alps from the heights of the Jura ranks high among



the literature of the hills. To approach mountains by train is less satisfactory, whilst to fly to them by aeroplane is an artistic anti-climax of the first order. I have only done this last once, and I well remember how unnatural the Alps seemed as the machine planed down to Zürich.

The virtue of a pilgrimage lies not in the objective but in the reaching of it. A striking proof that this is realised was afforded recently when an enterprising firm instituted an aeroplane service to the sacred shrine of Badrinath in the Himalayas, thereby saving the pilgrim many weary miles of trudging. It proved a complete failure.

The man who climbs merely to bag summits or to exercise his muscles misses much. Mountain-climbing can resemble wine-bibbing. To drink too much is to become satiated and uncaring; to drink good wine quickly and heedlessly is to drink with the damned.

Therefore in mountaineering go slowly. Climb the lesser hills as well as the greater; their charms are not less. Well-meaning persons have often said to me, "But surely you find the British hills very tame and dull after the Himalayas?" and have smiled incredulously when I replied, firstly, that I did not, and secondly, that comparisons of this nature are futile and meaningless.

In its beginnings mountaineering appeared such a strange and irresponsible pursuit that men sought to conceal their fondness for climbing beneath a cloak

of science. There were, of course, genuine scientists, but even these were animated by a greater affection for their environment than the average scientist has for the bottles in his laboratory. The remainder, and they were numerous, skulked behind the skirts of science, the better to pursue their nefarious activities. Even bad traditions are difficult to eliminate, and the scientific cum mountaineering idea has survived down to the present day, so that there are many mountaineers who do not consider a climb to be decently done unless the times taken doing it from point to point are duly noted down and afterwards published in one or other of the numerous climbing periodicals in much the same way that a meteorologist reports on the behaviour of the heavens.

No doubt this is of interest in the technical sense, but when all is said and done the best way to enjoy a change of scene is to make that change as thorough as possible. The mountains scarcely appear so beautiful seen through the windows of a superheated luxury hotel as they do when viewed from a remote little inn or club hut, and the view seen from a funicular is never quite so enjoyable as the view from a footpath. Work and enjoyment are inseparable twins.

To be primitive amidst primitive things within the limits of decency and essential comforts is an ideal to aim at during a holiday in the hills, and to do this it is necessary to eschew mechanical transport and let

the legs do the work. It is, for instance, a hopelessly unsatisfactory business to tour a mountainous country by motor-car, whilst mountains viewed from the air have little more significance than a lunar landscape.

Primitivism is not so easy to find nowadays in the Alps. The path of the mountaineer is rendered altogether too easy, and mountaineering in certain districts is fast developing into a genteel pursuit, something so completely conventional that, instead of being a complete change from civilised existence, it is merely a pale reflection of ordinary life in town and city.

One way of getting over this is to visit a remote part of the Alps and camp, and this I am convinced is more pleasurable and instructive than climbing well-known routes from fashionable centres. Standardisation is fatal to free men. Mountaineering is best appreciated on previously untrodden mountains, but this need in no way diminish our appreciation of the Alps. It is to my mind infinitely better fun to find a way up a low peak, or cross an easy range, without the need to refer to a guide-book, than to follow someone else's directions on a long and difficult climb. The man with a guide-book mentality has never emancipated himself from a standardised existence. This truth was first brought home to me many years ago when I was climbing a mountain with a member of one of the earlier Mount Everest expeditions. In response to my query as to whether

he had read up the route he replied, "Certainly not," and went on to say that in his opinion it was much better fun to puzzle out the route without reference to a guide-book. At the time I thought him something of a heretic, but I know now that he was right.

The guide-book writer labours, of course, on the superior assumption that he is conferring something of benefit on his fellows. I would be the last to decry such an admirable intention. He caters for a sport and a technique, and in this he has his own particular niche. At the same time, I repeat that it is better fun and better mountaineering to climb unencumbered with guide-books, and that he who dare not adventure anywhere without having been advised by others exactly where he must go and what he must do not only lacks initiative but misses the greater half of a great sport.

He who fares on hills without a guide or guide-book tastes the subtlest of all joys, the adventure of the unknown. It matters nothing that others have been there before; for him each peak, each pass, is new, each step untrodden. What matter mistakes and minor misadventures so long as the bounds of prudence and safety are not overstepped?

A mistake made by some is in imagining that mountaineers alone really appreciate mountains. There are numberless persons who do not climb mountains, and who are not members of climbing clubs, who love mountains. Among them are many

with limited wages and short holidays who have never been able to afford a visit to the Alps and content themselves with rambles and scrambles on the British hills.

Does mountaineering when carried to excess tend to blunt rather than sharpen the appreciation of natural beauty? Hard exercise and the contemplative faculties are sometimes uneasy bedfellows. To spend a holiday climbing as many mountains as possible may give cause for satisfaction in one sense, but it resembles too perilously the antics of the American tourist who declared that by wearing rubber-soled boots he was able to "do" the National Gallery in forty minutes. Undoubtedly there are some mountaineers who have little if any appreciation of mountain beauty. Mountains to them have much the same worth as scalps to a Red Indian. They are muscularly enthusiastic; they are obsessed by the time and competitive factors; they sweat up and race down; when they have climbed one peak they immediately want to climb another; in a word, they are immoderate.

Now I maintain that the same moderation that sensible men apply to their consumption of alcohol should be placed on physical exercise, whether on or off mountains. Time for contemplation and observation is as necessary as time for strenuous exercise if a mountaineering holiday is to bring refreshment of spirit as well as refreshment of body. Merely to sleep

off bouts of hard exercise or to be forced by fatigue into taking a begrudged "off day" is not enough; there should be easy days, and days of absolute rest, taken deliberately and for no other reason than to appreciate the scenery. A little contemplation, a little thought, would have preserved the Gadarene swine, and the Twentieth Century, from a headlong rush to disaster. Time to contemplate, time to do absolutely nothing, is as necessary as time to work, time to play and time to be amused, and with the lesson of Nature ever before us, the slow rhythmical unfolding of her manifold creations, her winters of rest and recuperation, how can we doubt that this is true?

There are some who when they reach a mountain-top must needs leave it as quickly as possible, so that on their return to the valley they can boast about the short time it took them to go up and down the mountain. I have been guilty of this on many an occasion; what mountaineer is there who does not enjoy a secret satisfaction in having climbed a mountain in less time than someone else? On one occasion, wishing to test my physical capabilities, I set off from Zermatt after breakfast and four and a half hours later stood on the summit of the Rimpfischhorn. I was back in Zermatt in time for tea. I will be honest and confess that I felt a distinct satisfaction at having climbed a peak, which is normally a two days' job, between breakfast and tea. But looking back on the

ascent, I realise that my crowds of satisfaction were more than offset by the disagreeable nature of the enterprise. It was a hard and exacting labour that climb, and not in the least enjoyable. Contrary to the layman's idea, mountaineering is not an intense labour; it is for the most part a rhythmical exercise with few spurts of really intense energy. The ascent of the Rimpfischhorn was altogether different. I went "flat out," my muscular powers extended to the uttermost; it was the difference between a cinder track and a contemplative cross-country ramble. Such energy interposes a barrier between the climber and enjoyment. There is little that is pleasant about an ascent when heart and lungs are pumping violently and the scenery swims through a mist of sweat. Never to hurry, unless circumstances demand haste, not only applies to mountain-climbing but to many another pursuit. Haste and happiness do not pull at all amicably together.

He who appreciates Nature learns to unburden his mind of trivial thoughts. If an interest in topography demands it, spend the first few minutes on a mountain-top identifying and checking by map references objects in the panorama, but having done this, surrender yourself to an enjoyment of the prospect unattended by such trivialities. Absorb and be absorbed by the beauty of the surroundings. Escape from the shell of your small affairs and tread for a while those mysterious paths of the spirit that lead

nowhere and everywhere. Then you will know beauty. You will feel yourself to be a part of beauty, of the earth, the snow, the clouds, of space, the sun and stars. Physically you may feel but a cosmic speck of chemicalised dust, but spiritually you will feel great, for is not your vision capable in one glance of piercing the abysses of space? Is not your hearing attuned to an immortal harmony? On a mountain-top a man feels himself to be no mere interloper on life's stage, no temporary improvisation to suit an obscure purpose, but an entity whose span is timeless, whose scope is magnificent beyond conception, whose birth, whose death are incidental milestones on a splendid road without beginning and without end.



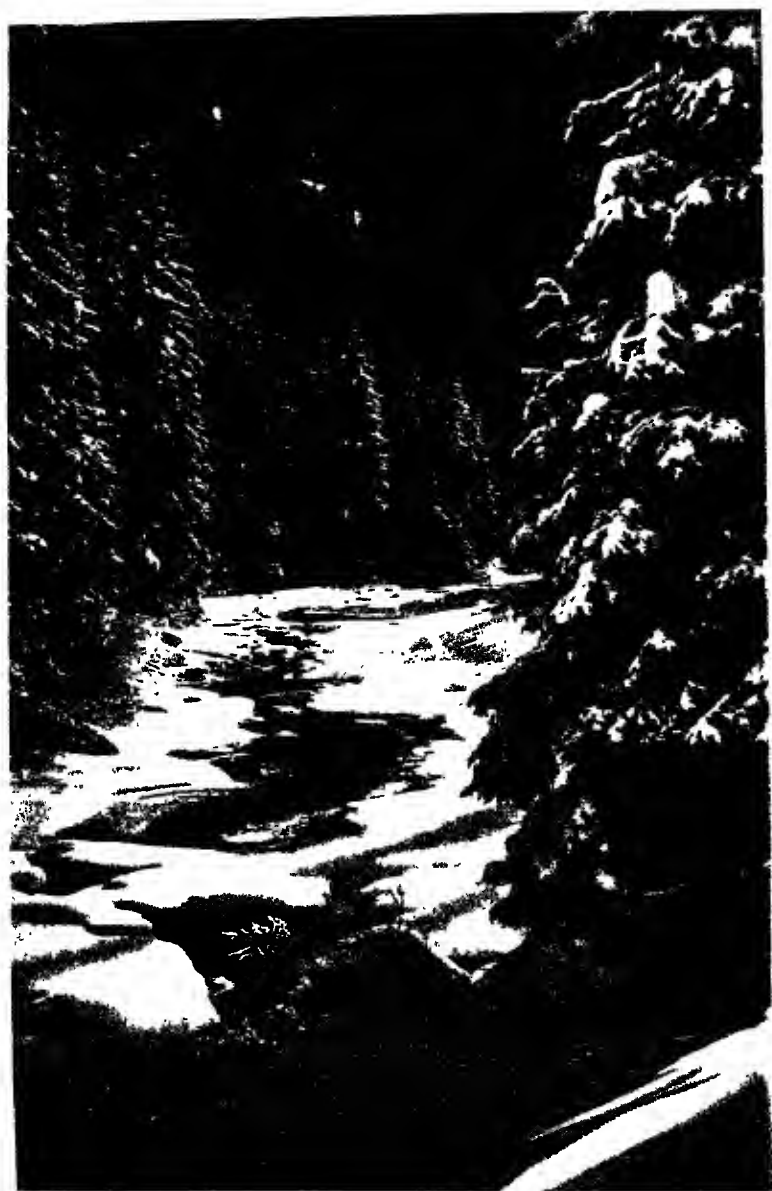
## CHAPTER III

### THE MOUNTAINEER

SOME hold that mountaineering and the aesthetic appreciation of mountains are incompatible. In mountain-climbing, they say, there is small scope for aesthetic enjoyment. It is simply a sport, with no room for sentimental thoughts and feeling. They admit its value as a health-giving exercise, and as a temporary and adventurous change from civilised existence, but beyond this they are not prepared to go. As self-styled "he-men" they are terrified and ashamed of sentimental feelings in themselves, deplore the same feelings in others, and regard as so much bunk any approach to mountains that has in it any element of the mystic.

This only goes to prove that there is nothing so widely divergent as man's approach to, and feelings for, Nature. Some look on Nature merely as a means of earning a living; some associate her solely with lethal instruments; for others she affords a super gymnasium; for a few she means something quite different. What is the true mountaineer, the man who extracts the maximum of enjoyment from climbing mountains? He is one who not only enjoys





climbing mountains, but is never so happy as when he is among mountains and is able to see, smell and hear mountains. He has what Mr. Winthrop Young terms a *feeling* for mountains. Mountains are not things to be seen and climbed for a week or two every year; they are always present somewhere at the back of the mind, ready to spring into the forefront at all times and in all manner of places.

In other sports the sport counts for most and the terrain is a secondary consideration. In mountaineering the terrain and the sport are more intimately associated. Thus it is difficult to agree with those who define mountaineering as a sport pure and simple. If it was, then, presumably, a well-constructed artificial mountain would fit the bill? While admitting the charms of university roof-climbing, an artificial mountain would seem distinctly unsatisfactory to most mountaineers, however high it was raised and however skilfully it might be embellished with synthetic snow and ice. There would be something lacking about it, and however artistic its construction it would seem a trifle vulgar.

If the above be true, then it follows that mountaineers do not climb only to climb, nor even to satisfy some atavistic instinct as some would have us believe, but because they feel impelled to do so by considerations additional to a desire for a skilful and at times dangerous exercise. When, therefore, they endeavour to make out a case for their sport on purely

rational grounds, they are in effect falsifying their own deep-seated instincts and incommunicable beliefs.

Definitions where motives are obscure are valueless, and the mountaineer's best answer to anyone who asks, "Why do you climb?" is simply, "Because I like it." At the same time, mountaineering motives and preferences are always an intriguing study, because, unlike those inspired by material considerations such as the lust for power and money, the desire to kill an animal, or beat a competitor, no such clear-cut definition is possible in the case of the mountaineer. He climbs because he likes climbing; he goes to the mountains because he likes mountains. This is why some enthusiasts are referred to as "mountain-worshippers" and mountaineering as a "religion." The mountain-lover does not worship mountains, nor does the mountaineer regard his craft as a religion, but he sees in mountains and mountaineering an answer to mental and spiritual as well as physical urges. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help" is not incompatible with the most "technical" and exacting of rock-climbs.

This is an age of technicalities, and the art of climbing mountains has become a technical business. This is natural and understandable, inasmuch as to climb efficiently means to climb safely, yet the technical side of climbing has reached to such a pitch that the casual reader of a climbing club publication

would suppose that men do not climb for love of mountains at all, but solely for love of climbing. Cannot a balance be struck in this matter? In mountaineering what we do does not matter so much as what we get out of doing it. Modern mountaineering literature is for the most part appallingly dull. The writers of articles in climbing publications appear incapable of expressing their feelings and reactions, that is supposing they have any feelings or reactions to express. Many of the accounts by the pioneers of mountaineering make delightful reading for all their dry academic flavour. The reader feels that the writers really enjoyed what they did, but this is scarcely true of present-day mountaineering literature, and the fact that pioneer climbs are hard to find and that literary talent is not everyone's talent cannot wholly explain the discrepancy. It is as though a machine mind, product of a machine civilisation, is carried into the mountains, and to read accounts of climbs is to suppose that mountaineering nowadays is a matter simply of "times" and technique. In the Victorian era, which saw the golden age of mountaineering, interests were less specialised. There were no rubber-shoe rock specialists with their horrid jargon of classifications. There were no guide-books to tell the climber where next to place his hands and feet; there was a greater simplicity, a greater love of mountains for their own sake, a greater scope in thought and feeling towards a craft that had in it few

elements of the particular. It is the same in other sports. The man who sits weary hours watching the "safety first" cricket of a modern test match sighs regretfully at thought of the great old days of "W. G.," Archie Maclaren, Gilbert Jessop and other doughty heroes. What the world needs, mountaineering needs—a romantic revival. Is it impossible that we should attempt, as the late Donald Robertson suggested, to record every thought and feeling during a day on the mountains? Is this deplorable sentiment or is it something worth while, an unfettered expression of taste, opposed to that very creed of repression and mass standardisation which we are now engaged in fighting?

It is the mountains that matter, let us never forget that. Never let us obscure our relationship with them by a mess of technical shibboleth. Let us enjoy them simply and well, and on every climb strive to keep alive that spirit of beauty and adventure which impelled the pioneers up their "icy stairs."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GROWTH OF A MOUNTAINEER

WHEN a man is young and active it is natural that he should look askance on the physical infirmities of old age. To the young, old age is something too remote to be contemplated except with that intolerance which is the prerogative of youth. The converse is in some respects true, but old age has at least experienced youth, whereas youth has still the adventure of old age to look forward to. The intolerance of the young towards the old, and the not infrequent intolerance of the old towards everything, are solemn facts that every generation has to face; they are harmless enough until incited by the unscrupulous into active opposition; then a distraught world witnesses a Youth Movement or some such abomination complete with coloured shirts and ritualistic emblems.

Both youth and old age have undisputed advantages over one another, but the gulf between them is such that few at either end of the scale are able to bridge it in understanding. There is perhaps only one standpoint from which to view both with reasonable impartiality, and that is middle age.

The precise point at which youth ends and middle



age begins can hardly be fixed by arbitrary limits; it is definable only by taste, temperament and experience. In mountaineering, physical condition enters into the reckoning, for it is impossible to suppose that the once lithe and lissom youth who insinuated himself gaily into the depths of the Monolith Crack can retain youth and a steadily expanding waist-line at one and the same time—unless, of course, he happens to be a rowing man and strained his stomach muscles beyond their elastic limit at an early age.

At middle age a man stands on a threshold. On the one hand are the green fields of youth with the lambs frisking in the sunlight; on the other looms the dim smoking-room of old age with its comfortable armchairs, its box of cigars, decanters of vintage port and brandy, and committee room (off).

It is my intention here to give from this discreet vantage-point some account of what I conceive to be the growth of a mountaineer, from the time when he first sets eyes on a mountain and desires to ascend it to the time when, faltering in gait but steadfast of purpose, he sets out from the Monte Rosa Hotel at Zermatt to scale the heights of the Riffelalp. It is true that if the view in one direction is still reasonably clear and bright, that in the other is a trifle misty and obscure; I can only hope, therefore, that honest intention will mitigate any offence I may commit, and that any speculation I may make may not be accounted as too malignant a solecism.

Some are born with a love for the hills; they make natural mountaineers, given the requisite physical capabilities. Others discover the hills and become mountaineers. I count myself fortunate to belong to the first category, as from the earliest days that I can remember I liked hills and wanted to climb them. As a boy I saw mountains for the first time from the window of a train near Pontarlier on the Swiss frontier. It had been a stuffy uncomfortable journey from Paris, and excitement had made sleep impossible for me. When dawn came my nose was pressed to the window. As the train passed over the Jura and began its downward rush towards the Swiss lowlands I saw the Alps. They were a long way off, but there swept over me a thrill of pure excitement and amazement such as comes to a human being only once or twice in a lifetime. It was as though I were setting eyes once more on a loved one after an aeon of time, a loved one lost but never wholly forgotten. Fortunate indeed are those who gain the vision of the mountains at an early age, and splendid their adventure.

From the beginning mountains mattered more than the climbing of them. Why should a schoolboy want to climb mountains? This question is unanswerable. Most can love and hate, yet there are only a few who thrill to the vision of mountains. This vision, then, is all the more to be prized. In its beginnings the mountain vision is something wild and untamed;

reaching beyond the boundaries of ordinary sense. There is the mountain; it is strange, elusive, even terrible, a symbol of the power out of which we have been evolved. It calls to us. Fascinated we gaze upon its steeps; our hearts leap at sight of the precipice, the ice-slope, the knife-like edge, the remote summit steadfast in heaven. To think of climbing it! What human skill can avail against a power so great, a strength so terrible? But climbed it must be. Others have succeeded; why not we? We must enter into that brooding presence, commune with that entity of the heights, be admitted to the stern fellowship of rocks and snow. We must learn that mountaineering is no rude adventure superimposed on a static environment, but an outcome of all we know and feel about mountains, the perfect union of the physical and spiritual in our make-up.

But when you are young you cannot think of the mountains quite like this. They are new and exciting and physically challenging. Mountain-climbing is a very gay adventure. It has about it a medieval flavour, the assault of chivalry on well-fortified ramparts. It is intriguing and romantic. What a glorious and gallant thing youth is! Do you, you middle-aged fellow, remember that first unsuccessful attempt to scale a great mountain? Can your heart throb now as it throbbed then with the zest of hard-won height? Can your vision recall the matchless brilliance of the snows? Can you remember the

silence when first you trod a high snowfield? Do sights and sounds bring back to you those other sights and sounds? Does the first rocky scarp, the first lift of heathery moorland, recall the days when the hills were strange and new and the breath of the mountain mist was the very breath of life to you?

For youth, mountaineering is a sport in which the competitive element often predominates. To succeed where others have failed is a pleasant thing, and particularly so for the youth who pits himself against steep rocks, where agility and strength are as necessary as skill and experience. Severely difficult rock-climbing is the preserve of youth rather than of middle age. Yet always to seek the difficult in mountaineering is to gain a false perspective, and if there is one thing the mountains never forgive it is contempt. For many the word apprenticeship spells a dull and laborious routine, yet the pioneers of rock-climbing extracted as much enjoyment from a moderately difficult climb as the modern rubber-shoe expert does from an ascent bordering on impossibility.

At the same time it is natural for a man to test his strength, skill and stamina to the uttermost limit. This is one reason why men go again and again to Mount Everest, and my personal regret is that adverse weather conditions prevented that supreme test.

It might be supposed that mountaineering is essentially a sport for the athletic and the youthful,

but a look round the Alpine Club at one of its meetings would quickly disillusion anyone as to this. Age has its compensations in all walks of life, but in none are these more evident than in mountaineering. The muscles that once propelled their owner up the Grépon may now only serve to lever him up to the Montenvers, but he is still a mountaineer, and more than a mountaineer, for he has learned the secrets of earth and heaven, he has seen the vision of the hills.

And what of the intermediate stages between the active flames and the passive but still glowing embers? There are some who renounce mountains when they are no longer able to sustain their high tempo of climbing; they are the annuals not the perennials of mountaineering; to them is denied the eternal song of the hills. Others are more fortunate. The middle-aged mountaineer may not go as fast as his younger brother, but he can go at least as far, and often farther. Experience has taught him to climb rhythmically and to economise energy. Events have proved that the man over thirty is more likely to succeed on Everest than younger and less experienced men. Age and experience enable a man to strike a balance between his physical and mental powers. He is able to weigh, sum up, estimate possibilities and probabilities; he has gained in a sense of responsibility towards himself and towards others. Enthusiasm run riot may equally well lead to success or to disaster, but enthusiasm critically examined and

rigidly controlled conduces to safety and success in mountaineering. The emotional sides of the sport are many, and there is none finer than that inspired by achievement over prolonged and exacting odds, but the mountaineer of experience knows that emotional energy is there to be summoned up at a critical juncture, not dissipated through a reckless disregard of difficulty and danger. He has learned respect for the mountains, and out of that respect is born an affection that persists till the end of his days. This is the greatest lesson to be learned in mountaineering.

With increasing age and experience the mountaineer appreciates mountains not merely as technical problems and a testing-ground for strength and skill, but as a means of escape from the manifold cares of civilised life. He discovers on them peace. He learns that to hasten over them, even to climb too often, connotes a restlessness and feverishness of mind out of keeping with their serene solitudes. He is no longer concerned merely to emulate or excel the feats of others, and his relationship with Nature becomes personal and intimate. In a word, he enters into a harmony with his surroundings which more than compensates him for loss of physical vigour.

Perhaps best of all, he begins to take note of the small things: the flower previously unnoticed in the ardent march to the heights; the small birds that beguile his leisurely way with their song, the smells of alp and pine forest, and a thousand other trifles.

Yet his powers are not only undiminished in physical stamina, they are toughened, so that the longest climbs are reckoned in time rather than in effort. Undoubtedly middle age is the best of all periods in the life of the mountaineer, when with youth behind and old age in front he can halt and take a meditative peep at both.

And now as to the old age of a mountaineer: I dare not dogmatise, and had better, therefore, speak personally. What shall I want and what shall I get? Even when seen from the forties there is something highly speculative about old age and what it may turn out to be. It may prove anything from the *joie de vivre* of a General Bruce to that distressing brand which spends its time alone and unwanted, crawling drearily from one club to another, with a penchant for sending letters (also unwanted) to *The Times*, a liver of chronic instability, and a down on everyone and everything. Few of us are likely to emulate the former—there was only one General Bruce—and all of us pray that we may avoid the latter fate; let us hope, at any rate, that we shall be liked, not merely respected, by the young, for to be thus liked is surely the greatest of all the consolations of old age.

As I see old age, it is essential to cultivate contentment. The man whose interest in mountains is directly proportional to his physical powers, and who, when those powers fail, substitutes golf for mountaineering, has never learned to love the mountains or

discovered the secret of the contentment they can bring. For those who return to gaze on the scenes of past endeavour there is no need to sigh enviously at sight of the strapping young fellows setting out for the same climbs they once accomplished with equal despatch and agility. Possibly the following little story may point a moral.

An elderly mountaineer was seated on the terrace of the Riffelalp Hotel. It was a sunny languorous afternoon, and on the table before him reposed a glass of beer. He was at peace with the world. Presently there arrived a younger mountaineer; he was hot and had obviously been going hard. The latter paused before the elderly mountaineer and explained triumphantly: "I've just been up and down the Matterhorn in six hours." The elderly mountaineer eyed him in silence for a moment, then, "Why?" he inquired quietly.

That is the question, why? Why rush up and down mountains in so many hours? Youth can answer that question; it is the competitive instinct, competition against yourself and against others, a natural enough instinct in a society dependent for its existence on an economic dog-fight. Applied to mountaineering it appears unnecessary, at least to the middle-aged; to the old-aged it seems absurd. I have had it myself, and still do at times. For all the talk about unselfish team work and the like, it is inherent in all expeditions where the goal is prized and difficult to reach. It is



by no means wholly absent from old age, but for myself I pray that when I am old I may sit contentedly like the elderly mountaineer on the terrace of the Riffelalp Hotel, complete with a stomach still capable of assimilating beer without a qualm. Like that elderly mountaineer, all I ask for of old age is to be still capable of going to the mountains, of being able to walk uphill, even perhaps of engaging in some mild climbing. In spirit I shall be on the mountain-tops treading the paths of youth.

It is certain, then, even if judged from the standpoint of middle age, that the growth of the philosophic and contemplative faculties compensate the ageing mountaineer for any loss of physical activity. To be able to stand and stare with a meditative chewing of the cud is not only the prerogative of cows; it is a priceless attribute of old age. But the senses must be reasonably acute. I ask of old age that I shall still have eyes to gaze with upon the hills and ears to hear their message, that I shall feel the warmth of the hill sun, and the vital breath of the hill wind in my lungs. I hope, too, that my sense of smell may remain unimpaired so that I may sniff the same scents, the hay in the valley, the resinous pine forest, the moist turf of the alp and the damp indefinable drift of the hill mist.

Above all, I hope my memory may be unimpaired so that I may live again those glorious days of the past, and in hoping this I must also resolve to pause

at memory's door, where others are concerned, to eschew dogmatism, and seek not to impose my views on any gathering of my fellow-climbers; in a word, never to abuse the privileges I enjoy. Then, paradoxically, I may become an oracle instead of a bore, a sage rather than a fool.

Happy indeed is he who discovers the secret of eternal youth. There are a few who do; they reflect the vigour, the vitality and freshness of the hills. For such, physical powers are of small importance; they radiate a spiritual vitality, and all who come within their orbit are conscious of it. It is as though they discovered and brought down with them from the mountains a dynamic force, a gaiety beyond computation, something to survive through all eternity.

If this is what the hills can do for those who love them, then we may all of us hope that when our time comes to hobble up the valley path or creak into our seats at a mountaineering club dinner we shall have made the same discovery. One thing is certain: whatever we may find on the hills, we shall not have climbed them in vain.

## CHAPTER V

### THE FAR VIEW

IF it were possible to repeat the experience of visiting the Alps for the first time, I should, like Mr. Hilaire Belloc, approach them on foot and view them from the heights of the Jura across the lowlands of Switzerland. At that distance they are in angle only a degree or so above the horizon, yet the impression they make on the viewer is unforgettable. Why this should be so it is impossible to say; in the answer lies the answer to the mystic union of man and universe. In cold language, all we see are so many tons and cubic yards of rock, ice and snow raised so many feet above the level of the sea; what we *feel* has no relationship with known scientific facts.

The Alps have been explored, mapped and almost everywhere trodden, yet they are always mysterious when seen from afar, and their message is always the same, the immemorial call of wild and untamed places to man. You will see the well-remembered forms, so small yet so charged with meaning, the pointed heights of the Oberland, Mont Blanc's cloth of shining snow, and while gazing, while restfully admiring, you will long to be there treading those



The Badrinath Peaks from the Foothills



heights and gazing northwards to the dim cloudlike Jura.

Of a somewhat different character is the view of the Bernese Oberland from Berne. The mountains are nearer and it is instantly possible to identify the peaks, the well-remembered forms of the Jungfrau, Mönch and Eiger and the tapering Schreckhorn and Finsteraarhorn, yet they are not too near for detail to arrest the attention, and the view, like that from the more distant Jura, is profoundly satisfying and serene. Cities endowed with such views as Berne are something more than aesthetically fortunate. For their dwellers, mountain views have a greater significance than they perhaps realise. They may become accustomed to the sight, yet the mountains are ever there, a part of their life and consciousness, a constant reminder of things eternal and serene.

For myself, it is never long before my thoughts revert to the Himalayas. Love the Alps though we may, and there is none with a greater affection for these mountains than I, it is difficult to dissociate them entirely from European war clouds, especially when one has been machine-gunned, denied the passage of passes, and witnessed warlike activities upon them. The Himalayas are different. They have known strife too, but their calm transcends all the malignant ingenuities of man. Barbed wire and gun emplacements have yet to encumber Kang-

chenjunga; loads of bombs have still to be carried over Everest and Nanda Devi.

If I were to have the choice of a particular scene I should choose the crest of a foothill ridge in the dewy freshness of a spring morning. And there I should stand gazing through the still, cool air towards the distant snows. And all about me there would be calm, the calm of singing birds and flowers, the calm of tall trees and trackless forests, of dim half-seen valleys and remote untrodden ranges, and above all, beyond all, the calm of eternal snow. I wish that I was there now, on a ridge of Garhwal or Kumaon, just out of my tent and ready for the day's march with the cheerful chatter of my Sherpa porters in my ears. I wish that I could breathe that hill air, still, pure, peaceful, blessed beyond words; and hear from afar a shepherd's flute trilling across the valley. I wish I could see between the tall oaks the Himalayan snows shining above the hazy breadths of the valleys, the lift and fall of the foothill ranges, the mysterious distances, now pale and cold, now pearly-lit, now crimson-fired. I wish I could feel the presence of those enormous mountains, feel, as I have felt so often among them, an ecstasy, a bliss, a strange heart-yearning.

The view of the Himalayas from the Tibetan plateau in the north is different in character. There are no forest-clad ridges to lead the eye forward to the snows; instead there is an ochreish sandy waste, in

places as flat as a table and in others broken up into minor hills, with here and there a loftier range sparsely sprinkled with snow. Contrast between fertility and frigidity is lacking, but there is scarcely monotony in the tremendous landscapes seen by the mountaineer *en route* to Mount Everest. The scene is lunar in its scope and sublimity, for the high-lights are blinding, and the shadows, like lunar shadows, are harsh stencillings rather than soft impressions on the face of the barren earth, so that the traveller gazing southwards finds his eyes dazzled by the glare of plain and mountain alike.

The Himalayas rise little higher from the Tibetan plateau than the Alps do above the Swiss plain, yet the suggestion of a far greater height is not lacking and in scale the panoramas are unexcelled. Furthermore, they are marvellously tranquil. For all its bitter winds, Tibet is a land of peace and dreams, and the traveller feels that the teeming plains beyond the Himalaya barrier are a thousand miles away.

The views of the Himalayas from Tibet are modified with the seasons. During the winter months they are crystal-clear and bright, but in June the atmosphere loses something of its hardness and they become soft and tender in tone. The most delightful period of an Everest expedition is the return across the plateau at this time. The previously barren plains are clothed miraculously with flowers, the



distances are opal and blue, and huge clouds charge in endless battalions across the Himalayas on to the plateau, where, meeting drier airs, they are presently dissipated, but not before they have poured their vagrant showers on the thirsty earth.

Finally, there is the far view seen from mountains themselves. Purely panoramic views from great heights are seldom satisfactory unless some nearer peaks are present to provide a foreground, and with it a sense of scale and distance. Without any such foreground the sightseer is in the same position as an aeronaut, who quickly tires of an apparently two-dimensional world. Yet this is often compensated for by the sheer scope of a panorama. On the summit of Kamet it was possible to distinguish the eastern end of the Karakoram range nearly three hundred miles distant, whilst among Alpine views I recollect one from the summit of the Piz Bernina in mid-winter that embraced the Alps from well south of Monte Viso to the Gross Glockner and extended northwards to the Black Forest. It is best when confronted by such a panorama not to spend too much time trying to make out detail, but rather to set eye and mind at rest in order that the general effect may be appreciated. The viewer will then take down to the valley a memory not of a muddle of exiguous detail but an impression of serene and restful harmony, and it is these qualities above all that distinguish the far view of mountains from any other view. Tennyson

summed it up in his lines describing the view of the Alps at sunrise from the roof of Milan Cathedral :

“How faintly flushed, how phantom fair,  
Was Monte Rosa hanging there,  
A thousand shadowy pencilled valleys,  
And snowy dells in a golden air.”

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MIDDLE VIEW

THE middle view of mountains is that seen from valleys, minor mountains and passes. The majority of mountain writers and poets were connoisseurs of the middle view, among them being Petrarch, George Borrow, John Addington Symonds, Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Shelley, Tennyson and Ruskin. The last-named in particular held that the beauty of mountains was best appreciated from below, and he stigmatised mountaineers as exponents of a greasy-pole technique who were unable to appreciate beauty and were merely concerned with physical conquest and achievement.

Comparison between different types of scenery is inadmissible, and I do not propose here to attempt it. At the best I can only extol personal preferences. Let me say at once, therefore, that if I had to choose one last view of mountains from one spot I should select as my vantage-point some belvedere commanding a middle view of the mountains. And what precise point would I choose? That is an intriguing speculation. I might make for the English Lake District and gaze up Langdale from the shores of

Elterwater. If the Alps only were to be considered, then I might plump for a glade near the Wengern alp well away from the railway and gaze across the Trumleten Thal at the Silberhorn and the Jungfrau, and along the great Oberland wall to the Mönch, Eiger and Wetterhorn. And if it were the Himalayas, a June vista along the Bhyundar Valley, a view of flowers and forest and snow-clad peaks, is typical of their beauty. Yet if inexorable fate had decreed one spot only, where must this be? I had better compromise. I will stay where I am, in my study, looking out between the birches over the gentle forest-clad ridges of St. Leonard's Forest. There are mountains there, shining in heaven, and a rippling breeze sends a breath, all fragrant with pines and flowers, along the slopes of memory and imagination.

My own memories tell me that the associations of the past have much to do with personal preference in this matter of mountain views, and that it is only possible to form an unbiased opinion when confronted for the first time by a particular scene or vista. Even this last may be frustrated by material or physical circumstance. Leslie Stephen, foremost of eclectic mountaineers, wrote:

"As we walked on down its broad monotonous surface (the Aletsch glacier) I was surprised to find how extremely ugly everything looked. It was a beautiful day, and before us, as we approached the Märjelen See, rose one of the loveliest of Alpine views

—the Matterhorn, flanked by the noble pyramids of the Mischabel and Weisshorn. I looked at it with utter indifference, and thought what I should order for breakfast. Bodily fatigue and appreciation of natural scenery are simply incompatible.”

Similarly, Edward Whymper when he first saw the Matterhorn was not impressed by its beauty: “Grand it is, but beautiful I think it is not.” Later association with the mountain inspired other feelings, and, while he was never a man to express his appreciation of beauty, he returned again and again to the mountain and grew, if not to love, at least to revere its every curve and angle.

In my own case the view up Langdale was the first I saw of the Lakeland hills. Similarly, I first saw the Oberland wall at an early age, and subsequent climbs on it strengthened my admiration for its superb architecture. Others might think the Bhyundar Valley merely one beautiful valley among thousands of beautiful valleys, but for me it is associated with the most delightful summer I have spent among the mountains.

In one respect the middle view scores heavily over the near view, which has yet to be described, inasmuch as it may be enjoyed in peace, free from the discomforts and anxieties that too often beset the mountaineer struggling to complete his climb against time, or in the face of adverse conditions. The sternest test the artist can undergo is to be confronted with beauty





and adverse physical circumstances at one and the same time. In this respect I am glad that on Mount Everest, despite numbed fingers and a body bitterly complaining, I still wanted to photograph the scenes about me. Yet, although memory is happily forgetful of physical discomfort, it cannot be denied that it is altogether more satisfactory to appreciate beauty at the time in conditions necessitating neither mental nor physical fortitude. On the whole, therefore, I have come to the conclusion that Ruskin's preference was not unjustified, and that the mountain walker and Rambler, unhampered by the technical considerations and discomforts of mountaineering, often appreciate mountain scenery better than the mountaineer.

Many will agree that the best Alpine views are those seen from the alps between 5,000 and 8,000 feet. There are practical as well as aesthetic reasons for this. Seen from a valley floor, high mountains appear foreshortened, and nearer and lower details take on a size and importance disproportionate to the whole. The beauty of a mountain depends on correct proportioning, for it is only then that the viewer is able to appreciate line and form. The view of the Matterhorn from the Riffelalp, for example, is superior to that from Zermatt, whilst that of the Weisshorn, the shapeliest of Alpine peaks, is unsatisfactory from the immediate environs of Randa, but gains immensely in beauty when viewed from the



slopes of the Mischabel, 2,000 feet above the village. As a whole, valley views are only satisfactory when the valley is very wide, or else long enough for peaks to be viewed without noticeable foreshortening.

Among middle-distance views must be included those from minor peaks such as the Righi or Pilatus and other grassy summits and foothills close to the great ranges. Thus, to appreciate the beauty of the Oberland the walker should scale one of the hills between it and Interlaken, whilst the full glory of Mont Blanc is not apparent until the mountain is seen from one of the many belvederes outside the range. I had climbed several times up the south face of Mont Blanc, the greatest mountain wall in Europe, before I spent a day wandering along the grassy hills south of the Val Vény, where I was able for the first time to appreciate the scale and beauty of this vast mountain-side. I saw it then not as the huddled mass of buttresses and escarpments seen by the walker in the neighbourhood of Entrèves and the Val Vény, but as a correctly proportioned mountain in which the details of ridges and glaciers were in true perspective.

It is this middle region by the uppermost fringe of the pine forest that provides the artist with his best subjects. Here will be found some gnarled and weather-beaten trees to do duty as a foreground. Nothing else but a cloud or two are necessary for the modelling of a simple and effective composition.

If, therefore, you are concerned with seeing the beauty of the Alps without undertaking any serious mountain-climbing, spend your holiday not merely in walking along the valleys but in following the high-level routes above the valleys.

There is no more delightful walk than that from an Alpine valley up through the pine forests to the alps. The walker should start at sunrise when the smoke of the chalets ascends straight up in the still cool atmosphere. Climbing the winding path with its soft carpet of needles is always a peaceful experience. Yet for all the quietude of the dim aisles there is life and gaiety in the forest. It is full of small voices, the faintest whisperings, the lightest patterings, the queerest breaths.

Then, as the sun gains in altitude, shafts and pools of light appear and grow, shivering a little as the morning breeze awakes in the tree-tops. The warmth draws new scents from the ground, the smell of damp pine needles, moss and drying dew.

The way through a forest is full of minute and subtle differences. Never for a yard is it monotonous, and he who treads it feels a vigour in his every step. At the same time, a long tramp uphill through a pine forest is strangely soothing. The mind has no need to concentrate on any particular object; it is free to assimilate the whole, attuning itself half dreamily to the rhythmical swing of leg and body.

At length the time comes when there is a perceptible change in the scene. The trees are sturdier and more weather-beaten, the air has a different feel from the valley air; it is not only cooler but possessed of some vital quality difficult to analyse or describe.

Then the trees begin to thin out and between them gleams the sky. They are more gnarled, more weather-beaten than ever, and beneath them is turf dotted with flowers. Another moment and the forest, its gloom, its still, resin-scented air is behind. The walker is in brilliant sunlight, with before him a vision of mountain, cloud and sky.

What is the *beau idéal* of middle-distance views? Once again it is only possible to state personal preference, yet I feel that many will agree that there is no view to surpass in beauty that from an alp across a valley to a great peak or range of peaks. Firstly, there is turf in the foreground patterned with flowers; secondly, the scattered pines lead the eye down into the vast fall of the forest and the depths of the valley; and thirdly, beyond the valley, behind and above the gaunt outlines of the sentinel pines, dazzling snow is heaped in heaven. Clouds are necessary to complete the picture; their presence amplifies the majesty of the scene, their movement its serenity, their shadows its mystery.

There are many other types of middle-distance view. There is the panoramic scene, which is rarely satisfactory from an artistic standpoint but has its

own charms of distance and peacefulness, and there is the view along a valley. Such views are by no means dependent for their beauty on high mountains. I know of no Alpine district with more gracious views than Canton Glarus. If you have the time, spend a day or two wandering about the hills south of the Lake of Zürich, and the neighbourhood of the lower Linthal, or camp in the ever-beautiful Maderanerthal; but it is invidious to particularise.

Lastly, there is the valley view. It would seem that I have disparaged this, but previous remarks about foreshortening and so forth are not meant to apply to all valleys. It is true that as a general rule deep narrow valleys afford but poor vantage-points. While appreciating their sublimity and grandeur, I must confess to disliking the gorge-like rifts of Dauphiny with their scanty vegetation and dreary acres of stones. I always want to climb out of such valleys and see over the top of their bounding walls. Much the same thing applies to the more fertile Lauterbrunnen Valley in spite of its spectacular attractions. There is too little of the sky to be seen, and anyone accustomed to open country inevitably feels shut in and oppressed. In this respect many Tyrolese valleys, where the enclosing peaks are neither high nor steep, are pleasanter, and there are wide Dolomite valleys where the peaks are almost incidental to the theme of pasture and forest. Again, there are the enormous valleys that cut into the Himalayas.

It is fine experience to pass through them, but to remain long in them is depressing in the extreme.

Upland valleys are another matter. In the Himalayas the best middle-distance views are to be enjoyed from the 10,000-foot to 12,000-foot level. Physical considerations enter into this; there are no vexing flies or leeches; the air has the quality of Alpine air at 6,000 feet; the sun is warm and the nights cool. It is easy to think of many beautiful upland valleys in the Alps and Himalayas. In particular there are some delightfully open valleys in the Dolomites, but as this chapter is concerned primarily with views, I must confess that my orthodox taste in mountain scenery jibs at these bizarre and fantastic peaks. The Dolomite country is not so much a mountain country as an upland country almost park-like in nature, in which the peaks are incidental. The Föffingerspitze or the Vajolet Towers may be extraordinary peaks, but for me they are too extraordinary to be beautiful. "Belles Horreurs" Mr. Coolidge termed the last-named; "Surrealistic" is more up to date as expressing for many people the conception of art run amok. The Alpine upland valley is a type of its own. It usually boasts some cow and hay huts which are occupied only during the summer months. For the rest there is pasture running up to the screes, rocks and moraines. Higher still, the peaks shine immaculate against a pure blue sky. There is something else less easily described, the atmosphere of these

upland valleys. This is the region where, as A. D. Godley wrote, "the airs of heaven blow 'twixt the pinewoods and the snow." Up on the peaks and snowfields where the sun burns more fiercely and the winds are shrivelling cold, a man is more concerned with physical detail, but in an upland valley he is set midway between the cares of the lower world and the rigours of the upper world. He is free to dream dreams; he is receptive of every beauty about him. Some of my happiest memories of the Alps are of days and nights spent in this realm of sun, turf and open sky. These were the days when I worked at Baden and spent my week-ends wandering among the Alps of Glarus. Later experience of mountains and mountaineering has brought no pleasures greater than those simple and inexpensive pleasures which never cost me more than my rail-fare and food. There comes to me an oft-recurring picture. It is a spring evening and I am seated on the threshold of a hut as yet untenanted by the cow-herds. All around, between drifts of melting snow, crocuses and soldanellas are blooming. Beneath the alp the forest falls into the twilit depths of a valley. Out of the valley, faultlessly distinct on the still air, comes the sound of church bells. In the south the snows of the Tödi glow in the sunset light, and on high the first stars are being kindled.

And so I say, if you would enter fully into the beauty of the middle view go alone upon the moun-

tains, determined not to climb too high and get into difficulties. Plan your route along the alps by the fringe of the forest. Take a light sleeping-bag if you like, and spend your nights as you will, in the open by a fire or on a bed of hay. There is no better way of discovering the beauties of the mountains.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE NEAR VIEW

FOR the purpose of this chapter I define the near view of high mountains as that seen by the climber above the level of permanent snow.

A belief exists among many people that the climber climbs merely to reach the summit and enjoy the view. It is a simple idea, which if generally adopted would rid the mountaineer of many vexing questions as to the whys and wherefores of his sport. Unfortunately, panoramic views from the highest summits are often artistically the least satisfactory of mountain views.

The visitor to the Riffelalp enjoys a more beautiful view of the mountains than the mountaineer on the summit of the Matterhorn, and the conqueror of the Righi gains a better idea of the Alps than the tourist on the summit of Mont Blanc. What then constitutes a beautiful view on a high mountain? The same ingredients that go to make up a good photograph or canvas must be present, and in the right proportions. There must be a sense of scale, an harmonious arrangement of lines, and, most important of all, an adequate foreground. In views from the



summits of the highest mountains these qualities are often lacking. No outstanding objects promote a sense of scale; there are no main lines, but a muddled succession of minor lines which induce a jumpy restlessness, the reverse of repose; then there is no foreground to set off background, nothing to stimulate the imagination or spur on the forward march of the vision. Many mountaineers have confessed to a certain sadness on reaching a summit after a great climb, and it is possible that herein lies the reason: the view came not as a climax but as an anti-climax to the ascent.

Edward Whymper's description of the view from the Matterhorn is little more than a banal catalogue of objects seen; yet the ascent was the climax of his ambition and mountaineering career. Similarly Sir Leslie Stephen, when describing a sunset viewed from Mont Blanc, compares the Alps at his feet to an uneven plain, and was forced hard to exercise his imagination in order to appreciate their scale and beauty.

At the same time, it is not perhaps justifiable to impose the rules governing the production of a good photograph or canvas on a mountain view, for what makes a poor photograph or painting often impresses the viewer with its beauty.

When all is said and done, what really counts is the personal reaction to the view. Human preferences are as diverse in this matter as in most other things.

When Sir Leslie Stephen made the first passage of the Jungfrau-joch he was accompanied by a Welshman named Morgan. He relates how, during a rest amidst some of the finest ice scenery in the Alps, "Morgan, who had spoken very disparagingly of the Wengern Alp as compared with the scenery of Pen y Gwryd, admitted that our present view was not unlike that above Llyn Llydaw, on the side of Snowdon, though, as he urged, the quantity of snow rather spoilt it." It is, however, interesting to note that after the party had vanquished the pass and were walking across the Ewig Schneefeld *en route* to the Mönchjoch, where there is some of the noblest snow and ice scenery in the Alps, "Morgan . . . reluctantly confessed for the first time that he knew nothing exactly like it in Wales."

Roughly speaking, High Alpine scenery may be divided into two main groups: the scenery of glacier and snowfield, and the scenery of the peaks above these. Each is complementary to the other, and the latter may be subdivided into rock-peaks and snow-peaks.

During his climb the mountaineer first of all treads the glacier, the lowermost portion of which is normally free from snow during the summer months. Thence he passes to the snowfields above, the expanses of *névé* which feed the glaciers and act as their perpetual reservoirs, and, finally, to the flanks or ridges of the peaks.

The tourist who visits the tail end of glaciers sees the most depressing aspect of the High Alps. Over and above any impression of beauty or grandeur is the evidence of a ceaseless decay. He sees dirt-riddled ice, grey turgid water and untidy heaps of moraine. His position is analogous with that of the would-be visitor to a palace who, being denied the front entrance, is content to note the contents of the dustbin at the back door. He may, however, satisfy his troglodytic instincts by entering some dank and chilly ice-grotto, hewn out of the glacier snout by the industrious natives, which doubtful pleasure he will pay for in hard cash and, in all probability, an unpleasant chill. At the same time, if depression is the principal feeling induced by the lowermost portions of glaciers, there is an undeniable grandeur and serenity about a great ice-stream, even to the mountaineer who must trudge far over its moraine-strewn surface before reaching the upper snow-fields.

The best place from which to view a glacier is not from the surface of the ice but from the slopes above it, whence the glacier as a whole is visible. The plasticity of ice precludes it from forming abrupt angles; thus a glacier, when it is confined to an irregular valley, imitates a river, the serene curves of which assist the eye in appreciating the scale and beauty of the bordering mountains.

The most impressive portion of a glacier is an

ice-fall. Here the ice, not being sufficiently plastic to adapt its contours to steep declivities in its bed, splits transversely, forming tiers ranged one above the other and separated by wide crevasses. The tiers are themselves subdivided into blocks of ice known familiarly to mountaineers as séracs because of their supposed resemblance to a certain kind of Swiss cheese. It follows that the steeper and more irregular the declivity, the more broken up is the ice-fall. Yet in the most complex of ice-falls the mechanics are relatively simple. As the glacier approaches the declivity the ice splits, first into thread-like cracks, then, as the edge of the fall is approached, into wider rifts. Finally, on the edge of the declivity, the lanes of ice defined by the crevasses bear downwards in tiers, breaking up as they do so to form séracs, which, under the influence of gravity, may tilt over and fall in avalanches to the foot of the ice-fall, where the débris is recompacted.

So much for an ice-fall. A knowledge of its mechanics not only helps the mountaineer to find his way, but enables him to understand the forces at work moulding the mountain scene.

In addition to ordinary ice-falls there are to be found in certain parts of the Himalayas ice-formations of a different character. On the north side of the watershed, where the ice is exposed to cold dry winds and solar heat of great power, the ice becomes at first hummocked, then, as the hummocks are

carried along, it is resolved into tapering pinnacles which, before they reach the snout of the glacier and final disintegration, may attain to a height of eighty feet or more. The effect is strange and beautiful. The climber on his way to Everest mounts the East Rongbuk Glacier, following a medial moraine, popularly known as the Trough, between tens of thousands of these pinnacles. Such a path Kubla Khan might have trodden, a lane through a cold and silent fairy-land of translucent ice gleaming like polished steel beneath the deep blue of the Tibetan sky.

Ice scenery in the Alps, if less spectacular, is no less beautiful. I know of no finer ice scenery than that to be seen from the well-known Guggi route on the Jungfrau. Here the climber must work his way up the Kuhlauen Glacier through an ice-fall of formidable scale and difficulty. Then he climbs the rocks of the Schneehorn and treads a glacier plateau, the gentler beauty of which contrasts perfectly with the wilderness of shattered ice beneath. Finally, in ever lovely contrast with the near view of sunlit snow and wind-turned edge, is a prospect of forest-clad hills thousands of feet below, stretching northward to the waters of Thun.

The greatest of all Alpine glaciers, the Aletsch, cannot boast an impressive ice-fall, yet among European ice-streams there is none to surpass it in dignity and grandeur. To see it at its best the climber should visit it, not in summer when the ice

is running with surface water and the Concordia Platz is a disagreeable morass, but in winter or spring on a pair of ski. Then he will know the meaning of solitude, whether it be by the frozen waters of the Märjelen See or amidst the snowy wastes of the Loetschenlücke or Ewig Schneefeld.

Then there is Monte Rosa, a queen among glacier-clad mountains. There is no glacier here to rival the Aletsch in size, or snowfields the equal in extent to those between the Loetschenlücke and Oberaarjoch, but its icy labyrinth is greater and grander than any to be found on a single mountain mass in the Alps, and the scenery from the Schwarzenberg Weisssthor to the Théodule Pass is among the finest in the Pennine range.

Mont Blanc cannot be omitted. Here again there are no glaciers or snowfields the equal of those in the Oberland, but, apart from size, most connoisseurs of mountain scenery will agree that there are no ice-falls more savage and no snow-scenes more magnificent than those of the King of Mountains and its supporting peaks.

Mountaineers are usually prejudiced in the matter of views because there are certain scenes which from personal association are held precious. So it is in my own case, and the south side of Mont Blanc is memorable because of some great climbs up it. Yet I confidently believe that were a number of persons, for whom no region or vista of the Alps held intimate

associations, to be conducted to the principal viewpoints of the Alps, then placed in the neighbourhood of the Col du Géant, a majority would agree that the view of Mont Blanc extending from the Péteret ridge to Mont Blanc du Tacul was the finest view of all.

On one side they would see the snowfields of the Glacier du Géant, which are lower compressed into the ice-stream known as the Mer de Glace; on the other they would gaze down the tangled ice-falls of the Brenva Glacier into the hazes of Italy and up to the glowing cupola of Mont Blanc. They could hardly comprehend the scale, yet could scarcely fail to be impressed by the enormous peaks and pinnacles of the Péteret ridge, the precipices of the south-east face of Mont Blanc, and the icy steeps of the Col de la Brenva. It is a scene dependent for its effectiveness on ice, the riven ice of glacier, ice dismembered by pressure and gravity until it resembles an enormous pavement erupted by earthquake, ice in gentle waves, ice in lines delicate and fine, ice in walls and edges, ice in clusters of giant icicles flashing like sheaves of titanic spears, everywhere ice, and on high, remote, sleeping, cold, the icy dome of Mont Blanc.

Westwards of the Péteret ridge is the Fresnay Glacier. So far as my experience goes, there is no steeper, more difficult and more complicated glacier of its length in the Alps. Except for one minor avalanche-swept plateau at its head it is an ice-fall

from end to end, and this ice-fall is strangled between huge precipices. The scene is too overpowering to be described as beautiful. The climber who threads his way between the tottering séracs feels like a mote on a dungeon floor. He will see about him mountains in their most savage aspects; overhanging sunless cliffs stained dark with seeping snow-water, boiler plates and slices of rock, crumbling crags smitten by the perpetual bombardment of the elements, icy gullies scored with stone-falls, threatening masses of ice lurching monstrosly over the abyss. He will hear the shudders of the glacier, the grinding split of gravity-tortured ice, the hollow percussion and wailing of invisible missiles, the roar of falling séracs, and ice avalanches reverberating louder than thunder between the imprisoning walls. He is strong or unimaginative indeed who cannot feel something akin to dread in such a place, the same dread that animated our ancestors when they ventured into the high mountains, the dread of man in the presence of the incalculable forces of Nature.

Yet even here there is beauty as well as savagery and grandeur. Glance down the ice maze, and you will see between the stern rock walls of the Aiguille Noire de Péteret and the Aiguille Joseph Croux the mountains south of the Val Vény, sunny mountains with gentle snowslopes and snowfields, and blue hills ranked on blue hills fading southwards into the Lombard plain.



Glacier scenery in the Himalayas is naturally more majestic than that in the Alps. Here the steepness of the peaks results in the formation of innumerable hanging glaciers that threaten the approaches to the ridges by which the mountaineer must complete his ascents. Mountains such as Kangchenjunga and Nanga Parbat are defended by masses of ice hundreds of feet thick, and when portions of these break away, owing to the downward movement of the glacier, avalanches weighing tens of thousands of tons fall on to the glaciers beneath. It was hanging glaciers that defeated the attempts of the International Kangchenjunga expedition of 1930 to reach the north-west ridge of the mountain, and one avalanche all but resulted in the destruction of the entire climbing party. No hardihood or skill can combat this danger once it is incurred, and he who attempts a route likely to be swept by falling ice takes his life in his hand. My principal memory of the attempts to climb Kangchenjunga is of constant dangers threatening every moment of the day and night. Such dangers are not in accord with the spirit of mountaineering, which ought never to lose its status as an enjoyable sport. I could not appreciate the beauties of Kangchenjunga as they deserved to be appreciated. To incur danger deliberately and to wrestle with difficulties which have in them elements of danger are two entirely different things, and it is principally in retrospect that I am able to enjoy the beauties of

that marvellous mountain. Yet I have stood at a tent door on a moonlit night and seen cliffs of ice gleaming in the starry sky, and beneath a glacier shining like a spectral river, and known the scene to be beautiful despite the freezing cold and the perpetual menace of the icy bastions. Are the pains and penalties inseparable from high-altitude mountaineering too many to make attempts to climb such peaks as Kangchenjunga and Everest worth while? The Buddhist monk of Tibet may declare, "Why climb so far when with one bound my spirit can tread in peace and serenity what your feet must win so painfully?" But we of the West believe that it is through our physical as well as our mental selves, through toil, struggle, difficulty and danger, that we discover the true worth of the spirit, and that to rise superior to his environment is the greatest privilege of man.

Above the glaciers lie the upper snowfields, expanses of *névé* miles in extent. They are a part of the glaciers and move in the same manner, but whereas a glacier is a well-defined ice-stream, the *névé* is widely distributed in irregular fields wherever snow can gather, and forms the reservoir of the glacier proper. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else above the snowline, the mountaineer is able to appreciate the beauty of the scenes about him, for the reason that, apart from route-finding and care in negotiating crevasses, he has none of the physical details of mountaineering to occupy him.

The best hour of the day is the sunrise hour on a high snowfield. For some time past the mountaineer has tramped by lantern light over rough moraines, made his way along a glacier and perhaps threaded the intricacies of an ice-fall. He has seen the pallor of dawn on the peaks replaced by the sun. He has seen the sunlight, at first pink then white-hot, stealing down to meet him, and has longed for its warm ways. Then, as he treads the frozen surface of the snowfield, the sun rushes hotly over a distant ridge. This is the moment for a halt and the ceremony of second breakfast, the time for the sensuous enjoyment of warmth and the aesthetic appreciation of the scene.

Whenever I sit thus on a snowfield my feeling is one of complete detachment from all that has gone before. The unwilling uprising, the hurried unsatisfactory breakfast, the stumblings and cursings on the moraine, these are forgotten. Time has taken on a new shape and a new meaning; it is to be contemplated and enjoyed only in the present. On a sunny windless morning there is no room for extraneous thoughts, and a wise man yields himself up to beauty. It is good to feel the sun, not the scorching tyrant of an Alpine afternoon, but a benevolent democratic orb desirous only of pleasing his subjects, and to see the shadows shrink before the tide of brilliant light. Later in the day the snow is a glaring expanse disagreeable to tread, but in the morning it has form

and colour, a glittering vestment sparkling with countless jewels.

For the rest there is silence, into which the ear strains and strains, and hears only the surge of the blood through the arteries. Silence and sun are happy partners on a snowfield, the father and mother of man's contentment and tranquillity.

A photograph calls to mind better almost than personal experience one of the most beautiful of Alpine scenes. It is a study of Mont Blanc and the uppermost snowfield of the Glacier du Géant taken from the neighbourhood of the Dent du Géant by that prince of Alpine photographers, Vittorio Sella. In composition it is excellent, in lighting perfect. It depicts the snowfield overhung and shadowed with a few light clouds. Then there are the shadows of the neighbouring peaks of the Tour Ronde, and beyond and above, the brilliant ice-slopes of Mont Blanc. I have seen the same view in almost identical lighting conditions, and know that Sella employed no photographic tricks to obtain his effect; he was in part skilful and in part lucky, a necessary combination in successful mountain photography.

Another scene that comes readily to mind is from the Himalayas. For several hours Peter Oliver and I had worked our way through monsoon mists and drizzling snow across the Banke plateau in Garhwal. We had small idea as to our whereabouts. Finally, believing ourselves to be getting within range of

avalanches, we camped. The weather remained thick until evening, when it began to clear. Close to our camp we saw an easily accessible snow-ridge, and we set off to the crest in the hope of establishing our position and examining the route of the morrow. The mists cleared rapidly as we ascended, and by the time we reached it they had vanished from the vicinity.

We found ourselves on a minor ridge separating the portion of the plateau where our camp was pitched from another and larger portion. Before us was the gently sloping surface of a great snowfield broken at one edge by precipices over which the ice sank in an ice-fall of unknown height, a frozen cascade of huge blocks wreathed about by small wisps of mist that boiled up from a cauldron of cloud concealing a valley thousands of feet deep. At the far end of the snowfield rose a peak some 22,000 feet in height, standing watch over it in much the same way that the Mönch does over the recesses of the Ewig Schneefeld in the Bernese Oberland. But it was the snowfield that was most beautiful. It had lain there untrodden since the last Ice Age and the fashioning of the Himalayan mountains. What is there thrilling about untrodden snow? Go and see for yourself. See, as we did, the little flakes of sunlit mist casting fragmentary shadows over it, the brilliant high-lights, hollows and ripples filled with a tender opalescence. Here is no dead substance, here is

the beauty of space, a floor known only to the sun, the moon and the stars, a place sacred to wind and cloud.

In the valley to the south mists boiled slowly. Now and then pieces were detached from the main body and came lofting up the precipices. As they came within range of the sun they were transmuted instantly from grey and formless vapour into glowing masses that stood out brilliantly against the stealing shadows for a few seconds before dissolving into the frosty green of the evening sky.

As we watched, scarcely conscious of the growing cold, which at these altitudes imparts into night the deadliness of space, the lanes of sunlight narrowed and shrank and the snow assumed a pale alabaster-like tinge. It was time to return to camp.

Where snowfields end and peaks begin it is sometimes difficult to define, as many mountains consist for the greater part of snowfields and the final peak is incidental, whilst others are simply the highest point of a snowfield. Where the final peak is distinct, it is usually separated from the snowfield by a bergschrund, or marginal crevasse formed by the downward movement of the snowfield. As far as the bergschrund the climber's impression is that he is among mountains rather than confined to a single mountain, and his views consist mostly of near and middle-distance views, but once on his peak and engaged in overcoming and solving its difficulties

and problems his interests and views become more concentrated. Thus his outlook is narrowed, and he is conscious of detail in a greater degree than when he was among the snowfields and glaciers beneath. The human mind is so constituted that it tends to remember minor details in a view rather than retain any but a vague memory of a panorama. This is understandable, for general views from mountains are too complex and manifold in their detail for memory to cope with. Happy and fortunate is he whose vision is of that kind which instantly seeks out and memorises simple details representative of the whole. Here is a simple test. If you have visited Chamonix and climbed Mont Blanc, what do you remember best? In my own case there are two distinct clear-cut memories: that of de Saussure with his uplifted head and eager gaze perched on his granite pedestal, then the pure snowy dome of Mont Blanc against the blue of heaven. All else is secondary to this instant and vital vision.

Yet mountain memories have a knack of running amok. I have only climbed the Matterhorn once, and the first thing that comes into my mind is the garlic-charged breath of a guide next to whom I had the misfortune to sleep at the Italian hut. After that comes in order an ice-glazed slope treacherous beneath new snow, a fixed rope thickened with ice to the size of a man's arm, and some unsavoury pieces of stale bread which we were forced to eat in







The Dent d'Yver, France, May 1941

the Solvay hut when we were marooned there by bad weather. One day I hope to climb the Matterhorn again and amass pleasanter experiences and recollections.

It would appear, therefore, that detail more than anything is the measure of pain or pleasure in mountaineering when we come to remember our climbs, and that an appreciation of it is often directly proportional to the severity of a climb. I remember well that when we were climbing the final slope of Kamet there was a small flake of sunlit snow projecting from the summit ridge. As we laboured up the last steep slope I kept my eyes on it and the deep blue of the sky beyond. It always seemed as far away as ever, but suddenly and unexpectedly I found my outstretched hand actually touching it. Another instant and it was broken and crushed beneath my foot as I heaved up on to the summit ridge. There was a prospect there hundreds of miles in extent, a multitude of peaks, ranges and valleys and masses of slow-sailing clouds. But it is that ounce or two of snow that I remember best.

So in mountaineering, as in other forms of activity, it is the small things that are remembered best, that assist our puny memory and intellect towards an appreciation of the greater, grander, less comprehensible vistas. These are perceptible not only through the vision but through all the senses: the smell of mist and flowers and drowsing pine forest,

the smell of burning juniper which transports me instantly to the Himalayas, the acrid smell of falling stones grinding down the precipice to revive many a memory. There is taste also, and touch: the harsh feel of granular snow and the harsher contact of granite, dolomite, gritstone and porphyry. And always sound: the plaintive cry of a chough on the crags of Everest, the hollow croak of a raven out of the Schmitt Kamin on the Fünffingerspitze, the bell-like call of the coppersmith bird from a Himalayan valley, the rustling tread of snow on the roof of a tent. These, and an infinitude of other small sounds, lead towards the greater orchestra of storm and torrent, of rumbling avalanche and bellowing thunder. They are a vital part of our greater experiences on the hills. And lastly, there are the voices of the friends with whom we have climbed. Some are stilled, but they still speak to remind us of happy days and glorious ways among the mountains.

## CHAPTER VIII

### MOUNTAIN PEOPLES

It was my good fortune to be reared among country folk, people of the Kentish hopfields and orchards. Fate decreed a later life in cities and factories, but I have never felt truly at home among cities and the commerce thereof. The sun, the wind and the rain have always meant more to me than crowded thoroughfares with their slits of smoke-veiled sky.

Every city has its personality. So also has every countryside, yet there is fundamentally small difference between the shepherd of the South Downs and the shepherd of the Tibetan plateau, for both are conservative and both partake of the serenity of their environment. Possibly the greatest difference between the plainsman and the hillman is that the former struggles to maintain a standard of living well ahead of essentials, whilst the latter, more often than not, has to struggle for bare existence. It is not the hill air that makes the hillman tough, but a constant struggle against his environment, against drought and flood, avalanche and blizzard. Whether or not such a struggle is mentally beneficial is doubtful. Probably the ideal community is one in which work,

leisure and education are equally apportioned. Then there is the question of happiness. On the whole, it would seem that country folk are happier than town folk because they have acquired the virtues of simplicity, which most philosophers agree is the cornerstone of true happiness. At the same time, there are degrees of simplicity, and the simplicity that is bovine and unfeeling misses experience and adventure. Men need the food of mental and spiritual development as well as physical labour, and he who dwells always in the hills is as likely to starve as he who dwells always in the city.

During the past decade Alpine peoples have been rapidly civilised. The effects provide an interesting sociological study. Undoubted good has accrued. Idiocy due to inbreeding is being eliminated by new blood and the stock improved. But there is evil also. Mere exploitation for commercial reasons of simple unsophisticated peasantry results too often in avariciousness and low cunning, and it is only possible to speculate as to the beneficial results had Europe exported education as well as materials when the scramble for empire began. The half-way house between literacy and illiteracy is a shabby dwelling, and I for one prefer either the well-educated native or his completely uneducated and unsophisticated prototype.

My mountaineering began in North Wales when at the age of seventeen and onwards I used to ramble

and scramble over Snowdon and its neighbours, but I must confess that I have never come to understand the Welsh hill people. They have always seemed to me as far apart from English country folk as a Bashi Bazouk. North Wales is the dourest, most secretive country I know. It has not the great openness of the Highlands or the friendliness of the Lakeland country. For all its beauties, and they are many and varied, it is stormful, wild and grand. These qualities are reflected in the inhabitants. I well remember hearing the greatest Welshman of all, Mr. Lloyd George, make a speech at Criccieth in the late spring of 1918. It was a great speech, one of the greatest I have ever listened to. He stood in the open, the sun ruddy on his face, his hair flying in the hill wind, a block of mountain granite animated by some tremendous force. He spoke of the dawn that was about to break, and it was not the ordinary politician's dawn, but the dawn over the free and windy hills of his native land, the growing light beyond the crags of Snowdon and Carnedd Llewelyn. When he had finished I knew we were going to win the war.

The broadcasts of Mr. J. B. Priestley have done as much as a century of literature to bring home to the Southerner the broad humanity of the North Countryman. Among the hills of the North-West Riding of Yorkshire, the Pennines and the Lakeland fells, dwell some of the sturdiest and best-humoured of all hill peoples. Though I have lived and worked in York-

shire, and have spent many holidays amidst the Cumbrian hills, I am not qualified to reproduce the speech of a Ritson or Tyson, but I have known such men. The dalesman farmer and shepherd of the fells has, as much as any man who lives close to Nature, preserved his individuality. Like his kind, he has an ingrained suspicion of foreigners, which means townsmen; you must prove that you are interested in the same things as he is, in sheep and the prices of sheep, in land and tillage and the misty fastnesses of his native land. Then he may unbend, and you will learn something about him. You will discover that he has much in common with the seaman, a feeling for his environment speculative and watchful, and withal that deeper feeling of man in the presence of untamed Nature. Probably he never gives a conscious thought to the beauties of the hills, any more than the Lowlander gives thought to the beauties of the countryside he tills, but the hills are in his blood, deeply, incommunicably. The plainsman talks of beauty, the hillman knows it. He is a great fellow, the Lakeland dalesman, hospitable and wise, speaking his thoughts honestly, content with his lot, simple, courteous and brave.

My experience of Alpine peoples dates from 1922 to 1923, which years I spent in Austria and Switzerland as an engineering student. On the whole, I prefer the Tyrolese to the Swiss, but my preference is merely due to a closer acquaintanceship with the former.

In those days Tyrol was financially and economically derelict, and the pluck of the people in the face of penury and starvation was something I can never forget. I pray that they will not have to go through the same ordeal again after the present war, if only because the majority of them have little liking for Nazi tyranny. One incident outstands in memory. I was walking up to a hut when I missed my wallet, which contained Austrian notes to the value of about ten pounds, a fortune to an Austrian in those days when the crown stood at over one hundred thousand to the pound. I returned to look for it, and presently met a ragged fellow hastening up the path. He handed me the wallet with a smile. I opened it, meaning to reward him for his honesty, but his smile was at once replaced by a threatening scowl. I was at a loss to explain this for a moment. Then I realised that he thought I was about to count the money to see whether any was missing! Only with difficulty could I persuade him to accept a reward.

Many are the jolly evenings that I have spent in some old-fashioned *Gasthof* at the end of a day's mountaineering or ski-ing, and invariable and touching the hospitality I received in the mountains. Tyrol then was more unsophisticated than it is now. At one remote hamlet I was asked to see a new-born child. It was terribly malformed, indeed a monster, possibly due to the cretinism which still lingered on in that district. I could do nothing except to pray



for its early release. The puzzlement of its mother, who appeared normal, was pitiable to behold. I sensed in it something of that apathetic resignation which sometimes seizes upon those who live among mountains. The cause was of no interest, it was only the effect that mattered. God had willed it so.

Education is still very necessary in many parts of the Alps. The Church can do much; its rites and ceremonies are not incompatible with sociology and eugenics. It is not so very long ago that Edward Whympers expressed his horror at the religious solemnisation of the marriage of a pair of idiots. Alpine purists like myself may regret the spoliation of the Alps, but there is something to be said for the ugliness of commerce if it brings in its train science and knowledge to help people like the poor mother of that remote Tyrolean hamlet.

The Tyrolean and the Sherpas of Nepal have something in common, a happy-go-lucky attitude to life. This may have its dangers in a stable and settled community, but there is something to be said for it in such tragic times as 1922-23, and perhaps even more to-day. One would expect to find it among luxury-loving folk, but wealth is ever one-tenth happiness and nine-tenths anxiety, and only the tramp with nothing but his health and stomach to mind tastes the full flavour of freedom. This irresponsibility of the Austrian is no doubt a product of social and economic instability, and is therefore to be

deplored, but it has its charms nevertheless, if only because it is incompatible with the cold and calculating lust for material gain which distinguishes more highly industrialised and imperialistic countries. Give him some pastureland and a cow or two, a roof over his head, a wife, tobacco for his pipe, wine and a dash of schnapps, and the peasant of the Eastern Alps can discover a contentment loftier than his snowy mountain-tops.

Nothing that I have ever seen was quite so unpleasant as the spreading of the Nazi infection through the fair land of Tyrol, for there is no more pitiable object than the man, once outspoken and free, condemned to furtive suspicions and mean intrigues. Tyrol was beginning to stink when I journeyed through it in 1936; in 1939 the stink was powerful enough to send the British ski team away from St. Anton in disgust. Now these free men of Tyrol, whose ancestors braved with Andreas Hofer the tyranny of Napoleon, are servile to the Nazi gossellers.

One picture, and I am done; a conventional picture no doubt, but such have a knack of most readily conveying atmosphere. It is a winter's night at St. Anton in 1923, and I am seated on a bench in the *Lumpenstube* (vagabonds' room) at the Hotel Post, then an unassuming little mountain hotel. The guides and ski instructors are present—Hannes Schneider with his ebony curls, blond handsome

Oswald Schweiger, the quizzical, good-humoured little Doctor Bernays, the doyen of Arlberg ski-ing, and the rest of them. The quaint old room with its smoke-darkened rafted ceiling is thick with tobacco-smoke and a-clatter with talk, for the soft red wine of South Tyrol is a powerful loosener of tongues. The light from the uncurtained windows reveals snow deep on the ground, and more is falling thickly and without wind, as though all the white roses of Heaven were strewing their petals to earth. It is very silent outside, silent in the snow-burdened village, silent in unseen forest and snow-cushioned mountain-top; it is possible to sense this silence of falling snow in the noisy smoke-reeking room.

Then of a sudden music breaks in upon the din, the clear twanging of a zither. It is played by a young fellow clad in the conventional green jerkin and braided leather shorts of the country, a university student who to see life, and pay for it, has become a strolling minstrel in his vacation. What he is playing I do not know, but I think an old and popular air, because talk is soon hushed and the company takes first to humming, then to singing, the refrain.

I can hear it now, a mountain song, faint and far, a breath, a memory of Tyrol. It takes me away from wails and drones and a screeching firmament to the peaceful Alpine paths, to the summer scents of the pine forest and the silver ski ways of the Arlberg heights. I can hear, too, the strong-throated chorus

of the guides, and feel as though it were yesterday the friendliness and cheer of their company. This is the Tyrol I remember. I never wish to see another.

And now the Swiss. There are no finer and sturdier mountain folk than the unspoiled Swiss peasantry. I write "unspoiled" because I have also seen Alpine people spoiled by civilisation, the sort who are avaricious and mean and charge an outrageous price for a glass of milk when they know you are thirsty and there is no competitor in the vicinity. But such persons are few, and I prefer to forget them. The Swiss has something in common with the North Countryman, reserve and a suspicion of strangers; he has none of the airs and elegances of the Austrian; therefore to get to know him and win his confidence and friendship is all the more worth while. I regret that I have never climbed with a Swiss guide, but I have known several and recognised them as men and gentlemen. The Austrian guide is a climbing hobble-dehoy compared with the Swiss guide, the reason being that he has neither the difficult mountains nor the clientèle of the Swiss and must needs spend the greater part of his life conducting inexpert tourists up easy mountains. I prefer Swiss guides to French guides, whom I have often found boorish and rude, possibly because they are unable to disguise their dislike of the guideless climber, though there are notable exceptions. Guides have fallen on evil days because of guideless climbers, and it has always been

a source of wonder to me that I should have met with such courtesy from Swiss guides; the assumption is that they are naturally courteous and could not, unlike the French guides, be anything else. Guiding of recent years has become for Alpine peasants the merest side-line, and it is likely to dwindle rapidly to extinction, which is a pity because the craft and traditions of guiding have not been built up in a day but over a period of eighty or ninety years.

If I were to enumerate the virtues of the mountain Swiss I suppose I should put cleanliness and honesty first. They are the truest of true democrats, though Heaven knows what evil the Nazis will accomplish among them. If the Swiss have any faults, a somewhat negative complacency is perhaps the worst. Possibly they have been too long at peace and have not had to struggle hard enough; this is the only explanation I can think of to explain the lack of creative talent among them. Mental virility is a product of physical struggle. It needs persecution or a just cause to kindle an heroic faith.

The best guides are often men of fair education, enthusiasm and keen temper. The sturdy, solid, unimaginative type makes a good second but never a fine leader in difficult mountain-climbing, which is not, as some suppose, a sport of brute force and blind instinct, but one calling for an intellect quick to react to circumstance and capable of sudden improvisation and instant decision. The great guide

is not one who merely climbs safely mountains on which he knows every stone, but one who leads with élan on mountains that he has never seen before. This is where education with its gifts of intellectual insight comes to the fore. In this connection I never met a guide who impressed me more profoundly than Franz Lochmatter, a man whom many will agree was the *beau idéal* of a guide, and one on whom amateurs as well as professionals might well mould not only their technique but their attitude towards mountains and mountaineering.

I am reluctant to condemn Chamonix and its guides, but of all Alpine centres I like Chamonix the least. It has become a mountain Brighton. In Zermatt and Grindelwald something of the old atmosphere survives, and the ancient and pleasant traditions are not yet extinct, but in Chamonix de Saussure on his pedestal is a lone emblem of an almost forgotten past. Probably the system under which guides are employed has done something to vitiate the spirit of guiding there. Communism can be admirable when applied to the distribution of amenities such as hydro-electric power in Alpine villages; but it is incompatible with guiding, the most individualistic of all Alpine pursuits. It is desirable that guides should be adequately trained and tested, but guiding is not a business that reacts kindly to over-organisation. Seventy-six years ago the first ascent of the Aiguille Verte by Edward Whymper was not only disbelieved

in Chamonix, but the guides who made it, not being Chamonixiards, were chivied from pillar to post as unwanted foreigners. Something of the same narrow outlook persists in Chamonix to-day, and on more than one occasion my "Bon jour, messieurs" on a mountain path has been returned with a hostile scowl or at best a surly growl. Yet these men have fine qualities also. Their heroism during the rescues on the Aiguille du Dru and other peaks will be ever remembered, and there are younger men, of the same brand as Armand Charlet, above local schisms and jealousies.

It is fortunate for us in the present conflict that the guides of Courmayeur are not representative of Italians as a whole. The only two accidents with which I have been associated occurred on the south side of Mont Blanc above their village; thus I had opportunities of seeing them at work.

The first was a sequel to an attempt on the south face of Mont Maudit, described elsewhere in this volume,<sup>1</sup> when Charles Parry was injured by a fall of boulders during the descent of the Brenva Glacier. Alex Harrison remained with him while I hastened down to Courmayeur for help. The first habitation I came to was a chalet-restaurant near the end of the glacier. There I was able to convey the intelligence that an accident had happened, and within a few minutes of my arrival a boy was speeding on his

<sup>1</sup> See pages 249-252.

bicycle to Courmayeur three miles distant. Meanwhile I sat down to a long-delayed meal. I had scarcely finished eating when the rescue party arrived by car from Courmayeur complete with carrying equipment and a doctor, and I set off back with them to the scene of the accident, 4,000 feet up the glacier. It was a wonderfully prompt answer to a call of distress, and I shall not easily forget the care and attention paid to my injured companion. Finally, when it came to settling up with the rescuers, who numbered six, the question of payment was first of all left to us. We referred it back to them, and at length they asked us whether we thought the equivalent of £10 was too much. I have often wondered what a similar rescue, involving a day's work and the services of six men and a doctor, would have cost on the Chamonix side of Mont Blanc.

My second contact with the guides of Courmayeur was in connection with a search for two Oxford Undergraduates who had disappeared on the south side of Mont Blanc. On that occasion I engaged Adolf Rey and two other men. Rey is a name to be conjured with in mountaineering circles, and I count it a privilege to have made my one and only guided climb in his company. Adolf is a small man with stiff close-cropped hair beginning to grey, a crinkled weather-beaten countenance and shrewd humorous eyes. He looked as though he must be weather-beaten all over, but when he stripped at the Gamba



hut I saw the whitest skin I have ever seen on a man. Anything less like an Italian it would be difficult to imagine, and I suspect that his sympathies were as much on the other side of the Alps as in Italy, for, like other of the Courmayeur guides, he often spoke French in preference to Italian.

After a night at the hut we mounted to the Col du Fresnay. As I had come out from England by air and was untrained, the three hours we did it in were as much as I could conveniently manage. It was an interesting experience climbing for the first time with a guide. Rey, of course, knew every inch of the route up the Brouillard Glacier, for he made the first ascent of Mont Blanc by the Innominata route and had since led many parties up the climb, and it was a pleasure to watch him at work. Like most guides, he disdained crampons, but he cut steps in the frozen ice-fall with great swiftness and precision. Up to then I had only seen amateurs at work on ice. Some were both neat and safe, but all lacked that finish, that indefinable *éclat* and, above all, that speed, which are the hall-marks of a great Alpine guide. An amateur makes step-cutting look as though it were something tricky and difficult; a guide transforms it into the merest child's play. That is the fundamental difference between the guide and the amateur, and it was brought home to me more than once that day.

On the Col du Fresnay we discovered unmistak-



In a Tyrolese Village



able signs of an accident, and presently saw the bodies of the unfortunate climbers on the Fresnay Glacier nearly 2,000 feet lower. I asked Rey whether he thought it safe to descend the long twisting gully of crumbling rock down which they had fallen. He said it was, providing that we lost no time and reached the glacier before the sun strengthened sufficiently to dislodge stones. We climbed on two ropes, two of the guides on one, and Rey and I on the other. Rey, who had evidently decided that I was unlikely to slip, descended first. The climbing was not difficult, but was disagreeable owing to the loose rocks. We clambered down at our utmost speed, but, even so, by the time we reached the point where the gully petered out into an ice-slope immediately above the glacier, stones were beginning to fall. The ice-slope was separated from the glacier by a bergschrund several yards in width, with an overhanging lip some thirty feet high. Fortunately, avalanches from a neighbouring gully had worn a groove through the lip, choking and bridging the rift with débris. To reach the groove and the bridge we had to make a diagonal downward passage across the ice-slope. Rey instantly summed up the situation, and without hesitation set to work to cut the necessary steps, while the two remaining guides sought shelter under some rocks. He had not cut more than a step or two when there was a crash from the precipice above and several stones rushed through the air with a noise like a

covey of partridges. They thumped on the slope before us and skeltered down into the bergschrund. Except for one swift glance, Rey deigned not to notice them. He was cutting with extraordinary speed, yet, such was his strength and skill, his motions were machine-like rather than human. The best of amateurs would have had to pause now and then to renew breath and energy. Not so Rey; it was hack, hack, hack, hack, quicker than I can write these words, and hack, hack, hack, hack, again. The ice-axe lived in his hand, its rhythmically moving head flashing like a swiftly lunging rapier in the sunlight. I had nothing to do but step down the steps he made, small steps but perfectly secure. Descend a flight of stairs and pause to count ten seconds between each step: that was about the speed with which we descended the ice-slope.

No more stones fell near us, and presently we came to the groove. Without pause, Rey cut down it to the choked bergschrund, while I halted to hold him as best I could in case the snow-bridge should prove insecure. It was safe enough, and he called upon me to follow. "Vitement! Vitement!" he enjoined. I needed no spur; the dangers of the groove were all too obvious. I was a step or two from the snow-bridge when once again there came the crash and clatter of falling stones. I jumped down and to one side under the protecting lip of the crevasse where Rey stood. Next moment came a hail of stones.

Some swept our steps in the ice-slope and plunged across the bergschrund with a force that sent the soft snow of the glacier exploding outwards as though it had been struck by cannon balls, whilst others, including a granite block weighing a good half-hundredweight, dashed down the groove I had vacated a second before. But we were safe; Rey's speed had won the day. It only remains to be added that the remaining guides quickly descended the steps without misadventure.

A further instance of Rey's skill was the descent of the Fresnay Glacier. The ice-fall is one of the steepest and most complicated in the Alps, but he threaded his way through the séracs with scarcely a second's hesitation. The other guides, with characteristic independence, chose their own route, but they could not hope to outdistance the master, and we were through the maze long before they were.

I had seen a great guide on his own ground, and before passing judgment on his route-finding abilities should prefer to see him find his way up a peak totally unknown to him. Of his mountaineering skill there was no doubt; it was of the highest order. But what impressed me most was the clockwork methodicity and rhythm of his climbing, which suggested a reserve of strength capable of meeting and overcoming any emergency. With an amateur, however good, I should have been thoroughly scared on that stone-swept ice-slope; with Rey I never had

a qualm; I felt him to be master of his environment, however hostile it might appear.

All the same, great as the experience was, I have not since climbed with a guide. Rey made it plain to me that any moderately active man can be taken safely up difficult climbs by a guide, and that the credit for the great majority of Alpine routes must go to the guides who led them. The position of the man who habitually climbs with guides is analogous with that of the mechanic who is driven in a motor race, except that the mechanic is much more useful to his driver than the average amateur is to his guide. Many will agree that it is better fun to do the less difficult routes without assistance than to be led up nothing but great climbs by first-class professionals.

In order to understand mountain peasantry it is necessary to live among them. Those who have done so declare them to be little different from the peasantry of the plains. It is possible, however, that mountain people are the more devoutly religious, whilst their communities are tighter and less fluid owing to the physical limitations imposed by the mountains. Ardent communists, hankering to change political and social institutions overnight, might well begin their studies in Switzerland, where democracy and communism of the genuine co-operative brand are virtually indistinguishable. The Commune of a Swiss village sensibly recognises intellectual strata and aspirations, yet insists on a common denominator of

classless service and goodwill. Alpine valleys are too small to contain discordant elements, and it is only where adverse economic factors obtrude, in districts such as the Caucasus and the provinces bounding the north-west frontier of India, that feuds and hates are let loose and discontentment is rife.

The Himalayas provide examples of Alpine peoples in embryo. It is impossible to write of their peoples generally, any more than it is possible to write generally of Indian peoples, who are more widely separated in type, creed and custom than European peoples. I well remember the words of a man who had spent a lifetime in India. He said: "People come to India for a few weeks or months, talk to a few Indians who speak English, then go home and write a book about India and the evils of British administration. I can speak several dialects and have mixed with Indians all my life, but I should not care to attempt the job."

From the Hindu Kush to Baltistan, through Garhwal, Nepal and Sikkim to Bhutan and beyond, to say nothing of the Tibetan plateau, there is an immense range of types. One thing all have in common is hardihood and the capacity to survive under rigorous conditions. Another thing all share to a greater or less degree is superstition, beliefs varying from the fairies of Nanga Parbat to the gods and goddesses of Kangchenjunga and Mount Everest.

Of these peoples, the Sherpas and Bhotias have



figured largest in the public eye because of the excellent work they have accomplished on Mount Everest and other expeditions. The Sherpas come from the Sola Khumbu Valley in northern Nepal, near the southern flanks of Makalu and Mount Everest, whilst Bhotia is the native name for Tibetan. The Sherpa is a natural mountaineer and is accustomed to driving his sheep and goats to high pasturelands as well as contriving a living amidst some of the wildest country in Asia. The Bhotia is acclimatised to the bleak plateau of Tibet and is used to crossing the snowy passes between that country and India. He is not usually a born mountaineer like the Sherpa, but he is potentially as good and is accustomed to carrying immense loads. There is much in common between the two races. The Sherpas are said to have been originally Tibetans who emigrated to the more fertile side of the Himalayas. A certain amount of Southern blood has since infiltrated into this race, but it remains largely Mongolian and is Buddhist by religion. No European has yet visited the Sola Khumbu Valley, Nepal being jealous of its territorial integrity, and an interesting anthropological study awaits the explorer as well as a magnificent flora and some of the grandest scenery in the world.

It is interesting to take an imaginary journey to Darjeeling. After the hot night journey by the Calcutta Mail comes the coolness of dawn at Siliguri

and a ride by car, or if you prefer it a narrow-gauge train, through foothill forests and tea plantations to Darjeeling, where the plains people and the hill people meet in trade and social intercourse. From Darjeeling the vision of Kangchenjunga greets the visitor from street corners, terraced roads, footpaths, and pine walks, from the "quarter-deck" of the Planters' Club and the summit of Observatory Hill, where prayer flags rustle in the breeze. And when you have contemplated this, and descended to earth, the next impression after the little town with its mean corrugated iron roofs is of the men you meet in the streets and at the corners, rickshaw wallahs, coolies and odd-job men innumerable. Some are Sherpas, some Bhotias, others hail from lower and middle Nepal, a few are Sikkimese. Most have a Mongolian cast of countenance: a broad face with prominent cheek-bones, thickish lips, almond-shaped eyes and a mop of jet-black hair. Impassive faces they appear at first sight, but in point of fact they are capable of the widest of wide grins, which usually disclose a set of broken and irregular but immensely strong teeth. They are sturdy little fellows, and they walk with that peculiar rolling gait from the hips rather than from the knees which distinguishes the hillman from the plainsman just as the sailor's roll singles him out from the landlubber.

They are clad in the oddest assortment of clothes. To dress "native" in Darjeeling is simply not done,

except among officials and the upper strata of society, who have something better than sackcloth and goat-skins with which to attire themselves. They are clad in a weird and wonderful assortment of clothing issued or left over from the Himalayan expeditions of the past twenty years. Ancient tweed jackets from Harris and Donegal, wind jackets from Everest, sweaters from Kangchenjunga, wasp-like Jodhpurs (these are much prized), breeches of khaki drill patched like Jacob's coat in many colours, shorts, and even plus-fours. Short bandy legs may be encased in gaudy football stockings, whilst feet are formidably booted, though many, particularly the rickshaw men, prefer to preserve their boots and go barefoot. It is, however, in head-gear that imagination runs riot. Ever since Everest expeditions presented Tibetans with Homburg hats, a vandalism if ever there was one, Tibetan hats being beautiful and appropriate, it is considered almost *de rigueur* among the Sherpas and Bhotias of Darjeeling to wear them, though a few independent and conservative souls still plump for the silk-embroidered hats of their forefathers. But what hats! Strange little felt hats beaten and bent into all manner of shapes are to be seen in company with the once elegant products of Piccadilly and Oxford Street, whilst the hottest of hot weather has small effect on the devotees of the Balaclava helmet.

These men have the mercurial temperament of children. They live only for the day, with little

thought of the morrow. Give them a month's pay, and a little later you will hear the rattle and thump of a dice-box. Then they will come to you with a shy little smile and beg for an advance on the next month's pay. Thus it is necessary when engaging them to arrange for a portion of their wages to go automatically to their wives and families. They are only quarrelsome when drunk, and this last is no uncommon phenomenon, though I have known many who seldom if ever touched arrack, possibly because they remembered the evil after-effects of this potent firewater. When drunk and quarrelsome they are apt to become violent and lay into one another with any weapons that happen to be handy. The only occasion on which I have ever struck a native was when I had to intervene in a brawl that threatened bloodshed. They would, however, never offer violence to a European, however much they might dislike him.

The Sherpa can be led but not driven. He has a scrupulous sense of justice and fair play, and the employer foolish or cross-grained enough to abuse it will find himself up against a blank wall of mule-like obstinacy and inefficiency.

If he likes and trusts his employer the Sherpa will do anything for him. Should necessity arise, he will carry the heaviest loads and cheerfully undertake the most difficult and dangerous climbs. He is, however, liable on occasion to go to pieces suddenly. When an accident happens it seems to him that the mountain

gods are displeased; then he is terribly frightened and may become temporarily useless. On the other hand, if he does not attribute an accident to such intervention he will assume a complete callousness and shrug his shoulders as much as to say, "Well, it wasn't me, so why worry?"

His sense of humour is broad and at times peculiar. I have seen men roar with laughter at the plight of a comrade with badly frostbitten feet, and a bleeding wound treated as a huge joke.

When they "play up," they do so in the manner of schoolboys. Bottles of whisky mysteriously change overnight into bottles of tea, whilst one man on the 1933 Everest expedition, in an attempt to convince the Medical Officer that he was stricken with an internal ailment and fit only for the base camp, chewed a red sweet and dramatically spat the result on to the snow.

There is a type of European to whom a native is simply a "coolie," a machine to be worked hard for a minimum wage. Such will never get the best out of a Sherpa, who is quick to sense a generous spirit. "Thank you" may not be in his vocabulary, but he repays fair treatment a hundredfold by his work. Furthermore, he resents intensely being classed as a coolie. He is prepared to work, and work hard, to undergo hardship, difficulty and danger, but he likes to share in the aims and objects of an expedition, be in the confidence of his employer, and be credited

with his fair share of achievement. In other words, there is among the Sherpas and Bhotias an *esprit de corps* which has been wisely fostered by leaders of Himalayan expeditions such as General Bruce and Hugh Ruttledge. It would contribute to the maintenance of this spirit were a memorial to be erected at Darjeeling to those who have lost their lives on Everest and Kangchenjunga expeditions.

It has been suggested more than once that a corps of Himalayan guides should be formed, but it is difficult to see how the Sherpa can make a guide the equal to the Alpine guide. He has deeply ingrained superstitions and he is too careless of danger. He can find his way with almost uncanny dexterity through a complicated ice-fall, but will venture upon an avalanche-swept slope without a thought. He is seldom conscious of objective dangers until an accident happens. He probably resembles the Alpine peasant of the Middle Ages, and his advancement is merely a matter of time and education.

The Sherpas and Bhotias are amazingly tough, and on Everest local Bhotias employed to carry up loads to Camp Two spent nights in the open in temperatures of forty to fifty degrees below freezing-point. At the same time, they dislike a strong cold wind. A European will face and fight it, but more than once I have seen it knock the stuffing out of these normally hardy and resolute men. Perhaps in its remorseless battering—and nothing in Himalayan

climbing is worse than wind at a high altitude—they discern the hostility of the mountain deities.

Cheerfulness and loyalty are their greatest virtues, and who could wish for greater? It is an experience to sup with the men in their tent on Everest. The atmosphere reeking of smoke and unwashed bodies, for cleanliness is definitely not one of their virtues, is something indescribable, but cheerfulness, however rampageous the blizzard outside, is on every smoke-grimed face. "We will do our part. We will pitch a camp as high or higher than any before. Then it is up to the Sahibs to finish the job." Such is their philosophy towards an Everest expedition.

This loyalty to their employers found supreme expression during the ill-fated German expedition to Nanga Parbat in 1934. The climbers were overtaken by a storm at their highest camp and forced to retreat. They had failed to consolidate their communications; there was inadequate accommodation at the camps, and next to no fuel or food. Some managed to regain the advanced base, others, Europeans and porters, perished miserably. Finally, only two Germans, the leader, Willy Merkl, and Willo Welzenbach, were left. Two porters, Gaylay and Angstering, remained with them. They were both strong men, and could have saved themselves had they chosen to desert their employers, but such an action probably never even occurred to them. Then Welzenbach died, and Merkl sent down Ang-

stering, who arrived at the advanced base utterly exhausted and badly frostbitten. He had been in the blizzard with little protection or food for a week. Gaylay could have saved himself also, but he remained with his Sahib and did his best to help him down. But Merkl was too weak to face an ascent over an intermediate rise in the route, and halted for the last time. Gaylay might still have saved himself. He preferred to remain with his employer and died with him, faithful to the end.

It is often asked what induces these men to brave such dangers and hardships when they might be picking up a less hazardous living at Darjeeling, in the tea plantations or as smallholders in their native valleys. First of all, there is, of course, the pay. They receive about a rupee a day, and a few annas more if they are taken far afield, as well as their rations on the mountains. It does not sound much, but it is good pay to them and considerably more than they can earn normally. They also receive substantial bonuses for going high on Everest. Then they get a full equipment of clothing, and this is worth a great deal to them. The Himalayan Club has done good work in ensuring that they receive fair treatment, and that they or their dependents are adequately compensated in the event of disablement or death. There is, therefore, no room in the Himalayas for that kind of traveller who seeks to exploit native labour. But this is only a part of the story.



These men have Mongol blood in them, the same restless blood that sent the followers of Jenghiz Khan on lonely routes and far conquests. They are adventurers. The mountains, the forests and steep slopes of the Himalayas, the wide and windy horizons of Tibet, are in their blood. Both as porters and mountaineers, they have built up great traditions during the past twenty years. Now, thanks to the Himalayan Club, there is a porter corps any of whose members may be engaged with confidence. Like the Alpine guide, these men have books in which employers record facts and impressions. They are very proud of these books and of the personal recommendations of their employers. There is no trade in "chits" at Darjeeling or in the Sola Khumbu Valley.

As with Alpine guides, there are outstanding names and records among the Sherpas and Bhotias. Such men as Chettan, Lobsang, Rinzing, Lewa, Ang Tarke and Ondi come readily to mind among those who have followed the course of Himalayan mountaineering. "Satan" Chettan, one of the "Tigers" of the 1924 Everest expedition, met his death in an avalanche on Kangchenjunga in 1930. Lobsang, who similarly distinguished himself, died during another Kangchenjunga expedition; he was a man of granite. Lewa, who lost all his toes from frostbite after gallantly struggling to the top of Kamet in 1931, was subsequently sirdar of an Everest expedition, and has been even farther afield with Ronald Kaulbeck. Rinzing

I saw cutting steps like a guide on the icy slopes of the North Col in 1936. He distinguished himself in less reputable fashion on the same expedition by getting drunk and pasting an assistant Tibetan Dzongpen (Governor) on the nose. The last two are the Knubel and Lochmatter of Himalayan men. Of Ang Tarke Hugh Ruttledge wrote:

"He is very small and knock-kneed, but this does not deter him from being a great mountaineer and load-carrier. It has been observed before, that if you put him into a ready-made blue suit, with a purple tie and brown boots, and a Homburg hat, he might pass quite unnoticed in London. Yet his name is already famous in the Himalaya."

Ondi Nurbu (or Wangdi) accompanied the six Himalayan expeditions in which I have taken part. He too is a small man, I should say about 5 feet 4 inches in height. In constitution he is none too strong, for he has had pneumonia twice on Everest, but what he has lost in physical disability he has more than made up for in courage, the courage that rises superior to every obstacle, the same internal fire which animated George Mallory. He looks, and is, a "tough." Under a deeply furrowed brow, which suggests at first sight a perpetual scowl, two slit-like and slightly bloodshot eyes flash out over angular cheek-bones. To cap this unbeautiful ensemble is a hard, almost cruel mouth. If you did not know Ondi you would unhesitatingly avoid him. You might

fear for your cash-box, even for your throat. Because of these things it was assumed at first that he was usually in trouble with the police at Darjeeling, but such an assumption does Ondi a great injustice, and I have it on unimpeachable authority that he is a respectable and respected member of the Bhotia community. He is, in fact, abstemious, at all events when in a position of responsibility, and scrupulously honest. Added to these things he is essentially a devil-me-care fellow, wearing his hat at a rakish angle, walking with a swaggering gait, and full of humorous insolence to those about him. His prototype will be found among the costermongers of Covent Garden and the Old Kent Road.

I first saw Ondi in 1930 during the International Kangchenjunga expedition. He was young then, and raw and untrained, but as a porter he stood out above his fellows, if only because of his restless and enthusiastic energy.

At the second camp on the mountain he strayed away from the tents and fell thirty feet into a crevasse. He was not missed, and might not have been discovered before it was too late had I not chanced to hear him. He had been down for three hours, and besides being considerably knocked about, suffered from cold and shock. Next day he was sent down to the base camp, where the doctor told him he would have to remain for some considerable time. Most men would have welcomed a rest, and on full pay; not so Ondi. Two

days later he suddenly reappeared at the highest camp and demanded a share in the hard work then going forward.

The following year he took part in the Kamet expedition, and although he did not attain the summit, as did the gallant Lewa on frostbitten feet, his energy and cheerfulness were a constant inspiration to his comrades. I had already learned to value the man.

On Everest in 1933 he was stricken with a desperate illness. He went up with the first batch of porters carrying a heavy load to Camp One. He was feeling far from well, but said nothing and persisted in taking his load to the camp. He tottered back to the base camp and collapsed with double pneumonia. Fortunately there was oxygen handy. Even so, the doctors considered his case hopeless. Late that evening I went into the hospital tent to see him, as I thought, for the last time. He was lying unconscious on his back, propped up by pillows, his breath dragging in and out with those distressful choking grunts and wheezes that tell of congested lungs. He was *in extremis*, yet there was something inflexible about that hard little face. Ondi was not one meekly to surrender to the demands of Death. My tent was a few yards away, and all night as I lay awake in the bitter cold I heard him fighting for his life, a fight at 16,000 feet above the sea.

Next morning he was still alive. The fight went on and he won. A week or so later he was sent down to

the more genial climate of the Kharta Valley with another sick member of the expedition. The result was similar to that of 1930. One month from the day he was first taken ill a thin, wiry little figure, bowed down beneath an immense load of precious wood, trudged casually into the base camp. Ondi had come back thirsting for a part in the show.

In 1936 he was made an under-sirdar, and, as Rutledge wrote, "greatly distinguished himself." He took part in making the route to the North Col, and when asked to go ahead and do some step-cutting on the final steep slope, jumped into the lead as though by right, and with untiring energy cut a way up the icy snow. A little later, when Camp Four was established on the North Col, he was first man up, although carrying a load, in the very fast time of two hours from Camp Three.

That was the occasion when Shipton and I were in position at Camp Four with forty-two picked porters who told us that they intended to pitch the highest camp higher than in 1933. With such men to back us up, as well as first-rate food and equipment, Everest might have yielded its final secret that year, but, as usual, the weather intervened. Snow began to fall and continued to fall, piling up deeply on the mountain. There was no possibility of going on; it was questionable whether we could retreat safely down the treacherous slopes of the North Col. Those at Camp Three, where little snow had fallen,

had little inkling of the conditions on the North Col. The descent of the slopes I shall always remember as one of the most nerve-racking occasions of my life, for there was every possibility of an avalanche which might have overwhelmed the party. Yet this grim and gloomy business was relieved at one point by an incident which, while it did not seem in the least humorous at the time, appears distinctly funny when viewed in retrospect. I went first down the slopes in order to test the snow, whilst Ondi followed a few paces behind, not in the least aware of the danger and doubtless wondering what all the fuss was about. On the topmost slope it was possible to utilise previously fixed ropes, but lower down these were buried beneath freshly fallen snow. The traverse we had to make was the most dangerous section of the route. I therefore called upon Ondi to hold me on a long rope while I tested the slope. I thought he had thrown down the rope, for I saw an end close by and tied on to it, but when I advanced I was checked after a few paces and could go no farther. I yelled back to Ondi, "Let out the rope!" He shouted something I did not understand. I took it to mean he was doing so, but still I found myself unable to advance a foot. Then I fairly lost my temper, in mitigation of which it is necessary to state that on a mountain bad temper, altitude and dangerous conditions are the Devil's own triplets, and turning in my steps roared back at Ondi, "Why the something

something don't you let out the rope, you something something?" Again Ondi shouted in return, and to my even greater annoyance I thought I detected a grin on his weather-beaten face. Then, suddenly, I realised what had happened. I had inadvertently tied myself not to the rope-end that he had thrown down but to the end of the fixed rope that I had just been descending!

In 1937 I appointed Ondi leader of the four Bhotias who accompanied me to the Garhwal Himalayas. Never for one instant had I cause to regret this. In one sense something of the old devil-me-care irresponsibility vanished and he became, as befits a sirdar, a sober member of society. In another sense it remained, an irrepressible bubbling energy, an infectious enthusiasm that communicated itself to his companions and to myself. He longed to get to grips with difficult jobs of work. There were several. The most exacting was the ascent of Nilgiri Parbat, 21,260 feet. This was made in one day from a camp at about 15,000 feet, and as there was a descent of some 400 feet *en route* the ascent meant a climb of about 6,500 feet. This is a long climb at the altitude, and the technical difficulties are such that I do not hesitate to compare the route with a great Alpine route.

The party numbered three, Ondi, Nurbu Bhotia and myself. All went well until we approached the final snow-slopes, which are over 2,000 feet high,

Here we were enveloped in steamy mist, which not only rendered route-finding difficult, but acted as a diffuser to the intense rays of the sun, so that we felt half suffocated. A long-coveted prize was within our grasp, but it was all I could do to kick and cut steps in the frozen snow and *névé*. The men were lagging, and Nurbu especially appeared disheartened. Great walls of ice oppressed us through the sluggish mists, and the sun burned on the slope with a fearful power. The work seemed never-ending, and the summit far distant. It seemed that we had bitten off too much. My legs felt like trunnions of lead. Time, once in our favour, was now ebbing against us. I remember halting in my steps, bowed down over my ice-axe in the attitude familiar to those who climb at high altitudes. I was within an ace of ordering a retreat. Then I looked back at the men. Nurbu's face expressed only gloom, but in Ondi's I sensed the same unconquerable energy as of old. I pointed upwards. "Achha? Nay achha? (Good? No good?)." The reply was instant. "Achha, Sahib, achha!" "Go on, then," I said, and waved him into the lead.

From that moment the issue was never seriously in doubt. My impression was that Ondi had been husbanding his energies for this moment of leadership. He kicked and pounded and hacked his way up the slopes with extraordinary energy. So fast did he climb that I had difficulty in keeping up with him,



although I had nothing to do but step up the staircase he made.

In his eagerness he did not take the best line, and we found ourselves edging along horizontally beneath a huge unstable flake of ice half detached from its parent cliff. Beyond was a steep ice-corner up which I cut steps, but on the slopes above I let Ondi go ahead again. It almost seemed that the mountain knew it was beaten; the mist broke apart and melted into the blue, and a fresh little wind revived our flagging energies. Little more remains to be told. We reached the summit ridge and proceeded along it. Three times we thought we were approaching the summit, and three times when we reached the point we were aiming for, another and higher point showed ahead. It was a toil of Tantalus, but at long last we topped yet another "summit," and, lo, there was no further doubt; ahead a point of purest snow lofted into a sky of purest blue. This was the summit, the loveliest summit I have ever trodden.

The descent took several weary hours, for the snow was soft, avalanchy and altogether abominable. We were forced in one place to take a different and more difficult route because of the danger of avalanches. Ondi could not understand this. He was all for going straight down the slope by the way we had come, over a foot or more of waterlogged snow resting on ice, so to demonstrate the folly of such a proceeding I made him hold me on the rope while I descended

a few yards. Then, sitting down, I pushed the snow in front of me with my feet. Instantly it began to slide, and in less time than it takes to write this half the slope was in motion. At first it hissed like a serpent, then the hiss was resolved into something louder and more menacing. Finally, with a roar, hundreds of tons of sodden snow poured down the mountain-side into the depths of a bergschrund beneath, leaving an expanse of polished ice in their wake.

Darkness was falling as we regained the camp. We were too tired either to eat or sleep, and I remember well how I lay awake watching the flickering of monsoon lightning on the walls of my tent. But I was happy and content, as were Ondi and Nurbu, for it had been a great day's mountaineering, one of the greatest and grandest of my life.

Only once have I seen Ondi scared, and that was due not to the hazards of mountaineering but to superstition. Together with my men I was crossing a glacier pass above the Bhyundar Valley when we came across some curious tracks in the snow, apparently those of a biped. The men had it that they were the tracks of the dreaded Snowman, or, as he is affectionately known to the Press and Public, the Abominable Snowman. I decided to follow up the tracks, but it was only after much hesitancy that the men agreed to accompany me. They did so in the end because they averred that the Snowman walks with his toes behind him and therefore we were

proceeding in the direction from which he had come. When, however, we returned and I asked them to come with me in the other direction, they refused to do so. I reproached Ondi, and he replied with tears in his eyes that he would go anywhere else with me but not along the tracks of a Mi-go. So I went alone, and completed my investigations. When I returned I was greeted as one risen from the dead, for the men had believed that I was walking to my death. The Snowman, of course, proved to be an animal, a bear, which was identified from the photographs I took of the tracks.

The effect of this incident on the men was curious. For the remainder of the day it was all they could do to shoulder their loads. Their strength, their *joie de vivre*, had ebbed from them and they slumped sullenly along, halting for long rests every few minutes. It was due to this that the camp on Nilgiri Parbat was pitched so low, but, as already narrated, I had nothing to complain of in their conduct the following day.

Superstition has also played its part in the ill-fated Nanga Parbat expeditions. Ondi was one of the porters of the 1934 expedition which ended disastrously in a great blizzard. One evening as we sat by a bivouac fire high above the Bhyundar Valley watching the sunset colours ebbing from the pillars of monsoon cloud in the south, he told me how glad he was to be with me and not with the 1937 German expedition. He said that Nanga Parbat was a cursed

mountain and that many men would die on it. His prophecy proved tragically correct. A day or two later I received news at my base camp of the shocking disaster in which all the members of the climbing party, consisting of six Germans and nine porters, were overwhelmed by an avalanche.

Ondi again distinguished himself on the 1938 Everest expedition. He fulfilled a frustrated ambition of 1933 by carrying a load to Camp Six. I know now that he was far from well when he did this, and that it was all he could do to drag himself up the snow-wreathed rocks of the north ridge, yet the spirit in the man refused to yield, and it was only when he returned to Camp Four that he succumbed once again to his old enemy, pneumonia. Once again oxygen kept him alive through the night. Then came the problem of getting him down the steep slopes of the North Col, but the same indomitable courage that had sustained him in the past refused to capitulate, and somehow or other he staggered down, practically unassisted, his breath jerking from him in wheezy gasps.

I have not seen Ondi since, but I often think of him and those other little men with their stocky legs and broad smiling faces. They have something we have not, for they live and work with the shine of untrodden mountain lands ever before their eyes and their hearts are peaceful and serene. For them:

“Labour, wide as the earth, has its summit in Heaven.”

## CHAPTER IX

### PEAKS AND PERSONALITIES

As mentioned elsewhere, Edward Whymper, when he first saw the Matterhorn, considered it an ugly peak, a sugarloaf with its head knocked to one side. It is difficult to see how, with his artistic insight and training, he could have come to such a conclusion. In any event, he had good reason to revise his early opinion, for the ascent of the mountain became an all-consuming ambition, and after the tragedy attending the first ascent in 1865 he returned again and again to Zermatt to gaze on it. It is true that he did not appear capable of appreciating the beauty of any mountain, but the Matterhorn, for all its harsh revenge upon its conquerors, became for him something much more than a sugarloaf with its head knocked to one side.

As soon as a mountain is climbed it becomes a friend, and subsequent ascents strengthen the regard of the climber towards it. In a somewhat similar manner the experiences of others in the past have a definite bearing on our feelings for a mountain, and the ugliest peak, when associated with some stirring episode, loses something of its ugliness. Man

has imparted an aura of personality to an inanimate object.

The pioneers did something more than record their names in the annals of mountaineering. They left imprints of their personalities on the peaks they climbed. It is surely no mere coincidence that the unique and rugged Matterhorn was scaled by the unique and rugged Whymper, whilst the craggy turrets of the Italian ridge bring back memories of Jean Antoine Carrel the old soldier, who died a soldier's death when he perished from exhaustion after bringing his party down to safety through an appalling blizzard.

In the same way the narrow twisting ice-rift between the Tiefenmatten Glacier and the Col du Lion recalls the thews of Alexander Burgener, a man of iron among guides, and the elegant pinnacles of the Grépon the irrepressible Mummery with his bottles of Bouvier. Again, if you are thinking of climbing the Bietschhorn, read Leslie Stephen's account of the first ascent, and you will chuckle as you pass along the summit ridge to think how that man of letters was dragged time and again into a sitting position by the old guide behind him who hung devotedly on to his employer's coat-tails.

There is perhaps only one Himalayan peak that is associated with human personalities in the way that Alpine peaks are. This is Mount Everest. No one, however uninterested in history, however uncon-

cerned with the feats of his predecessors, is ever likely to gaze up the Rongbuk Valley at the great yellow mountain 13,000 feet above him without thinking of George Leigh-Mallory and Andrew Irvine, and wondering as to the nature and whereabouts of their last resting-place. They were seen through a rift in the clouds "going strong for the top." Then the clouds closed down. They never returned. It is said that Mallory did not want to go a third time to Everest; he had family responsibilities; but in answer to the entreaties of those responsible for the organisation of the expedition he made up his mind for one last attempt. In doing so he left the imprint of a dauntless personality on Everest, just as Mummery left his on Nanga Parbat when he disappeared on that mountain in 1895. What mountaineer would wish to die differently, or would ask for a better resting-place than the highest mountain of the world? The winds that blow, the storms that stalk the yellow slabs, the mist that sets its plume on the final pyramid; generations of men when they gaze on Everest will think of Mallory and Irvine.

It is in these ways that mountains once inanimate become animate, and just as a house rings eternally with laughter, or broods for ever in tears and gloom, so are mountains invested in some subtle way with the personalities of those who climb them. There are happy mountains and unhappy mountains, even sinister mountains. I can remember moments when I have

been alone in misty days on the dark wastes of the Welsh hills when I have felt inclined to turn and run.

My strangest experience happened in the Highlands. I was walking over the hills from Morvich on Loch Duich to Glen Glomach and the Falls of Glomach. It was a bright sunny day, and there was nothing in the least sinister about the vista of cloud-chequered hills and the distant blue of the sea. In crossing the ridge before dropping down to Glen Glomach I passed for a short distance through a grassy defile. There was nothing outwardly sinister about this pass and the sun shone warmly into it, yet when I entered it I at once encountered—that is the only word to express it—an atmosphere of evil. Something terrible had once happened at that spot, and time had failed to dissipate the atmosphere created by it. I was interested in my reaction to the place, and as it was as good as any for lunch decided to halt there and see whether I could make anything of it. Ghosts and ham sandwiches are scarcely companions, but after lunch, when my pipe was well alight, I surrendered myself to contemplation of my environment. As I reclined, drowsily smoking, the atmosphere of the defile seemed to press upon me with an even greater force than before. I did my best to keep my mind unoccupied with anything, to make myself receptive and allow imagination a free rein, and this is what I saw, or, as the sceptical reader will say with perfect justification, what I imagined I saw.



A score or more of ragged people, men, women and children, were straggling through the defile. They appeared very weary, as though they had come a long way. The pitiful procession was in the midst of the defile when of a sudden from either side concealed men leapt to their feet and, brandishing spears, axes and clubs, rushed down with wild yells on the unfortunates beneath. There was a short fierce struggle, then a horrible massacre. Not one man, woman or child was left alive; the defile was choked with corpses.

I got out of the place as quickly as I could. Screams seemed to din in my ears as I hastened down the broad heather slopes into Glen Glomach. I am not a superstitious person, but it seemed to me that I was vouchsafed a backward glimpse into a blood-stained page of Highland history. I know nothing about the history of that part of Scotland and should be grateful for any information throwing light on what I still believe was a genuine psychical experience.

Others have felt the influence of the British hills and moors. To the prosaic Dr. Johnson the Highlands were deserts of unrelieved gloom, and so they must seem to some to-day, yet there are others who sense something more, a spiritual atmosphere exemplifying, as no cultivated landscape can, the freedom of these Isles. War may shake its thunders from the sky, but the hills sleep on. And so men see in hills an answer to their dreams, a serenity and a purpose

reaching beyond every transitory hope and fear. In them the past, the present and the future of Nature and of Man are united in a single chord. For what other reason do our hearts stand still when first there looms over the horizon's brim their well-remembered forms, than that in them we perceive ourselves and our place in the universal scheme?

## CHAPTER X

### ROCK-CLIMBING

BRITISH mountaineers often begin their mountaineering by cross-country walks in all weathers over the hills of Britain. Thence they pass to rock-climbing, and, finally, to mountaineering in the Alps and elsewhere. There are, however, a large number who, lacking the time and funds for travel abroad, spend their holidays climbing on the crags of Britain. Rock-climbing is not mountaineering in the complete sense, but many, unable to resist its charms, devote their Alpine holidays exclusively to rock-peaks.

First and foremost, rock-climbing is a strenuous exercise demanding skill, strength and steady nerves. If there is one lesson above every other that it teaches, it is that skill, experience and rhythm are more important than force and strength. To watch an expert at work is like watching an adept of the ballet; something more than physical activity is discernible, a rhythm consonant with the subject, a harmony in tune with the environment. At the opposite end of the scale is the climber who, through lack of skill or training, sweats and strains his way up a climb by sheer brute strength. He is out of keeping with his





On the Rothhorngrat

environment and ought not to be there. In rock-climbing it should be possible to sense an affinity between man and mountain.

There are tastes and preferences in the art. For my part, I prefer an open face or ridge to a crack, chimney or gully, yet British rock-climbing began with the ascent of gullies and chimneys in preference to ridges and faces, and there are some who feel more at home in these than on open and more exposed faces.

While it is good practice to climb the low crags of Yorkshire and Derbyshire, and as easy to break your neck there as anywhere else, the factors of height and scale are missing.

Routes on the greater crags of the Lake District, Scotland and Wales produce a very different reaction on the climber. When approaching such crags for the first time it is good fun to eschew guide-books and make the first few climbs at least by the light of Nature. In doing this the climber experiences the joys of pioneering and exploration. A friend of mine and I did this on Lliwedd, which, although only a spur of Snowdon, boasts a guide-book of its own describing a network of routes and variations of routes such as would puzzle a tarantula to unravel. Lliwedd is a sombre curtain of rock some 800 feet in height above the waters of Llyn Llydaw. There is one obviously easy way, the west buttress, but we chose a route on the east buttress which looked more

interesting. We reached the top of the crag after an enjoyable scramble, and later meandered back to the Pen y Grwyd Hotel. There we met an expert. He asked us where we had been, and we described a trifle vaguely the route we had taken. He was horrified. "Why," he said, "you've been up a bit of Route Two, some of the Avalanche, a portion of the Roof," and so on and so on. "*You haven't done a climb at all.*" He spoke like a bishop admonishing a curate for putting too free an interpretation on a passage from the Scriptures. We felt crushed and humiliated. For all our enjoyment, for all a splendid and exhilarating scramble, we hadn't done a climb at all.

Ever since, I have been suspicious of experts. They are parasitical. They hang about hotels exuding advice and criticism, doing their best to spoil the pleasure of others, battenning like vultures on the mistakes and ignorances of their fellow-beings.

My memories of British rock-climbing are many and varied, but it is not so much the struggles and achievements that come most readily to mind as the great and glorious stages in which those struggles and achievements were set. I have never enjoyed the slimy gullies of the British hills, and have never revelled, like some troglodytic climbers, in earthy "through routes" and dripping overhanging pitches, but I have always enjoyed the scenic charm of such routes with their gaunt enclosing walls and slit-like

vistas of hill and cloud. Routes involving difficulty and strength beyond my own particular safety limit have not inspired memories as pleasant as climbs within that limit, and I have come to the conclusion that to draw too frequently upon the reserve energies is destructive of fine enjoyment in rock-climbing. In other words, I fear for myself and dislike my environment when pleasant safety is replaced by unpleasant danger, and not even the soothing anodyne of memory can wholly eliminate this. I hold that climbers climb to enjoy themselves, not to expose themselves to foolish risks and unnecessary dangers. Furthermore, the climber who is untrained or physically unfit cannot enjoy climbing as much as he who is fit and possessed of a generous margin of reserve strength, for it is in the preservation of that margin that safety and enjoyment in climbing largely depend.

At the same time, it is an interesting and valuable experience to try yourself "all out," inasmuch as it enables you to assess your powers of strength, skill and endurance, but to make a practice of it is to become like some motoring or flying monomaniac who cannot appreciate a stroll in his garden or a quiet country walk, but must needs spend every available moment lusting for speed and yet more speed. Such climbers are not happy and contented. They live on their nerves, and nerves were given to a man as an investment, not as a current account.

It is the moderate climber who gets the most out of



rock-climbing. By this I do not mean the moderately skilful climber, but the climber who climbs as a general rule on the right side of his physical strength and nervous stamina. The power to meet with extreme difficulty and danger is always there to be called upon should occasion demand. Such a climber does not scorn routes of moderate difficulty, neither is he concerned always in making the hardest climbs. He is a connoisseur of climbing experience. No aspect of climbing is despised. He is content to gather experience as it comes. For him the varieties of climbing experience are more precious in memory than ascents continually pushed to the borderland of the possible. He is not responsive to notes at one end only of the scale, he is master of the whole range, sensitive to all the contrasts in climbing and to every aspect of mountain scenery.

For a sybarite like myself, comfort is always preferable to discomfort. I do not enjoy getting wet and grubby; I dislike a chilly bivouac; numbed fingers on a climb are anathema; the poor food, worse cooking and perpetual taste of paraffin regarded by some as synonymous with Himalayan mountaineering seem to me to be unnecessary and undesirable. I climb to enjoy myself and the scenery, not to pose as an atavistic "he-man."

And so I regard rock-climbing as a pleasant exercise to be delicately executed and aesthetically as well as physically enjoyed. It does not worry me

that So-and-so did such and such a climb in so many hours. I am content to take twice as long, provided that I get back to my hut or hotel in time for a good dinner. It used to worry me when other climbers passed me on a climb, but it no longer does so, provided there is no risk of stones being knocked down on my head. I confess to a malicious delight in being with someone who dislikes being passed on a climb. I can almost hear him thinking, "Why can't that infernal fellow, Smythe, buck up a bit?" Altogether, I must be an insufferable bore to those in whose minds a climb is invariably associated with hours and minutes.

For me the pleasure of climbing is part activity and part passivity. I hold that ledges are meant to be sat upon, and that summits are intended to be restful belvederes on which to contemplate the panorama and enjoy a pipe of tobacco. I well remember once climbing a well-known rock-pinnacle in the range of Mont Blanc. It was the first climb of any consequence that season, and the climb proved unusually strenuous. The leader climbed brilliantly, but obviously upon his nerves. In due course we reached the top, and there I settled myself with a sigh of satisfaction, ready to enjoy the view, and possibly to indulge in a nap, for the next two or three hours. The leader, however, had other ideas, and because he climbed on his nerves demanded an immediate descent. He said that we were in for a

thunderstorm, but there was no thunderstorm then or later, and the few clouds present in the firmament were innocuous fragments of mist. So down we went, the leader in a bad temper because I could not, or would not, hurry, and I in a bad temper because of missing my siesta on the summit. We were back at the Montenvers Hotel long before the last train-loads of trippers had descended to Chamonix, and if there is any anti-climax in mountaineering worse than that I do not know of it.

The most potent factor in rock-climbing is undoubtedly the exposure of a route; in other words, the fewer the bounces of the falling climber the greater is the exposure. In theory the expert climber is unaffected by the exposure, and concerned only with the technical difficulty of a climb, but in practice the drop beneath him always has its own word to say in the matter.

Steepness and exposure are particularly evident in Dolomite climbing, where the contrast between the savage and bizarre and the peaceful and pastoral is perhaps more marked than in any other mountain group. Several instances occur to me offhand. One is the south face of the Tofana di Roces, a wall some 3,000 feet high. On the upper part of the route an unclimbable overhang forces the climber into making a long horizontal traverse across the face of the precipice, until the overhanging section is turned and he is able to climb upwards once more.

There are few Alpine traverses to compare with this in exposure. Carrel's Gallérie on the Matterhorn is perhaps equally sensational, but not so long, whilst a more notable Dolomite traverse, that on the Kleine Zinne, is insignificant compared with it despite a horrific description by the late Sanger Davies. For a long time my companion, Ernest Roberts, and I worked our way across the cliff, following barely perceptible wrinkles, edging like crucified cats round vertical corners and incipient buttresses. At length we arrived at a place where upward progress seemed possible, and I went ahead hoping to reach easier ground which we knew was only a short distance above us. For some time past we had been accustomed to looking up overhanging rocks, and I suppose the rocks we now attempted were merely vertical. At all events, they proved more difficult than we had supposed, and the climbing was sensational in the exact sense of an overworked mountaineering term.

At length, after a hard climb, I approached a small ledge only a few feet below easier rocks. I estimated that if only I could stand on it I could reach up and pull myself over the rocks above it on to the easier ground. Presently, after a most difficult climb on small holds, I was able to grasp the ledge. As I did so I saw that the rocks above it bulged outwards and realised that it might be awkward to stand upright. The pull up to the ledge was difficult and exceptionally strenuous, and as I made it I realised that before

getting my feet on it I must jockey myself into position with my knees. Accordingly, I pulled on my hands. As my body came up above them the pull was changed to a pressure on the palms. The net result of this manœuvre was that I found myself in a kneeling position on the ledge. It did not take a second for me to realise that the rocks above the ledge were much steeper than I had supposed; indeed they overhung. Owing to the overhang there was no conceivable possibility of getting my feet on the ledge, and I found myself with my nose grazing the cliff above and my body just balanced on the palms of my hands. How long I remained in that position I cannot say; it is impossible to estimate time when set against such agonising circumstances. I knew that if I removed my hands or even altered the pressure I should topple off backwards. Could I remove one hand and snatch at a hold above? No, it was not to be thought of; the risk was too great, and if I stuck on the overhang there was no hope of retreating safely. Could I descend? I *must* descend; it was the only way out.

I turned my head, turned it with infinite care because my balance was so critical, and glanced down. Some sixty or eighty feet below was Roberts; I could see a bit of him. He shared my anxiety, for he called out imperatively, "Come down!" But he could not see what was going on, which was fortunate for his peace of mind. He was well belayed but

could do nothing to check a fall on my part, which would be through the air without touching anything after the first bound. Beyond Roberts there was nothing, no vestige of the precipice beneath, only forests and sunlit pastures thousands of feet lower. I well remember seeing a road with a slow-moving vehicle on it, probably a charabanc full of tourists enjoying a pleasant day's excursion. It was not a mountain view so much as an airman's view, and it seemed unreal. There was also something ridiculous in my position, balanced precariously on a precipice 3,000 feet high. To this day I can see those sunny pastures, the dark woodlands, that thread-like road, and the moving speck of the charabanc; and I can feel again the hammer-like beating of my heart and the waves of hot sun beating off the rough Dolomite.

Everything depended on a change of grip, then, when the change was made, whether the small holds utilised during the ascent could be found by my feet as I hung by my hands from the ledge. I suppose that most climbers have at one time or another been in a position from which one action, and one alone, could extricate them. Obviously it is best to act quickly, yet the resolution necessary to overcome delay is considerable, particularly in those cursed with an imagination vivid enough to picture the result of failure. So it was with me. I hesitated long, too long. Could I do it? Supposing I could find no footholds? Supposing my strength failed?

Supposing I overbalanced? Roberts's voice came up to me again urgently. "Come back, man, come back!"

The change was made, balance was maintained, the small holds found with swinging legs, the descent made.

"Sorry to have been so long," I apologised, "but I got into a bad position on a ledge—on my knees—couldn't move up or down."

That was the end of it and of the climb, because, as so often happens in such cases, we found an easy route a few yards to one side. On the way up I took a look at the place I had attempted. The rocks above the ledge were overhanging and impossible.

If I have dwelt at length and apparently irrelevantly on an isolated incident of rock-climbing, it is because the incident served as well as any other to bring home to me not only the meaning of exposure but the power and beauty of the mountains. Such moments of tension and danger are indelibly engraved on the minds of most mountaineers. It would seem that we live most acutely at the moments of greatest difficulty and danger. How else should I recall so vividly that brilliant picture of sunlit forest and pasture as I balanced precariously on the face of the precipice? This is no pleasurable memory, but it is none the less potent on that account.

The point I wish to make is, that whereas beauty is normally most easily discernible through inaction

and contemplation, it is also discernible through action, and sometimes action of the most unpleasant and dangerous nature. If mountains seem hostile, then it is the climber's fault for venturing upon them. It is he who imposes danger upon himself, not the mountain, which is supremely indifferent as to whether he comes or goes, lives or dies.

How much of beauty does the rock-climber extract from his craft? There is the beauty of well-ordered and perfectly controlled rhythmical motion, in itself a beautiful thing to anyone who appreciates the marvellous mechanism of the human body. Then there is the beauty of the setting in which this activity is carried out. In my own memory I can range from the sandstone slabs of Everest to the rough gabbro of a Coolin ridge, from spicular Dolomite towers to the clean-limned granite of the Chamonix Aiguilles. And if out of these any composite picture is possible it is this: great slabs, warm and dry in the sun, ranged solidly mass on mass, a vast uprush of power; then, far above, tremendously remote, where the light mists waver and play, edge and ridge, peak and pinnacle, ending in the blue of a perfect morning.

Rock-climbing is not the hectic sport that some imagine. It is essentially peaceful, and particularly so in Britain, where time is a friend, not the ruthless slave-driver that it is on a great Alpine route. I know of nothing more peaceful than to spend a warm sunny day in rubber shoes softly treading the dry ridges and



buttresses of some Welsh or Cumbrian crag. These are occasions when strenuous activity alternates with blissful inactivity, so that there are moments spent reclining in the sun on some bilberry-clad terrace when the ear strains to catch the singing silences of the hills.

In the Alps and Himalayas there is all too often evidence of the destruction that is pulling mountains to pieces, but he who climbs on British rocks is seldom aware of this. He climbs not amid unrest but in a region of sleep, and because of this our hills and crags seem friendly; they invite repose as well as activity; their rocks may be small in stature but they are possessed of a wonderful dignity. To climb on them is to climb on the face of the past. These same crags facing the heathery slopes have seen the birth and growth of all that we cherish and revere.

## CHAPTER XI

### SNOW AND ICE

SOME climbers who have graduated in their climbing on the crags of Britain continue to prefer rocks in the Alps to the exclusion of snow and ice. Snow and ice are for them somewhat monotonous substances to climb, and associated in their minds with long uninteresting slogs, or at the best tedious and exacting step-cutting. It is possible that in some cases they are introduced to snow-mountains in quite the wrong way. I remember meeting a well-known British rock-climber who had been taken up a mountain by a route of no difficulty that lay entirely over tiring snow-slopes. The result was that he was thoroughly bored by the climb and announced it as his intention to remain a rock-climber pure and simple.

It is only through experience that the mountaineer comes to appreciate snow and ice for what they are worth, and it is necessary that this experience should be acquired in the right way. The difference between rock-climbing and climbing on snow and ice is like that between walking and ski-ing; the one is a natural and the other an unnatural movement, and

a man who takes naturally to rock-climbing may feel decidedly uncomfortable on the first steep snow-slope he is called on to scale. Rock-climbing is a fine art, but most mountaineers, and certainly all Swiss guides, would affirm that the climbing and understanding of snow and ice is a greater art in mountaineering.

Rock-climbing has made enormous strides during the present century, and routes once considered impossible are now climbed as a matter of course. In snow and ice work, though appliances such as crampons and pitons assist the present-day climber, the technique is substantially the same as it was in the golden age of mountaineering, though it must be remembered that the study of snow conditions, in particular of avalanches, has greatly advanced. A rock-peak such as the Grépon, once considered the most difficult climb in the Alps, is now "an easy day for a lady," but the traverse, say, of the Col Dolent is reckoned to-day just as difficult a snow-and-ice expedition as it was when Whymper's party made the first passage in 1864.

The all-round mountaineer would be the last to deny beauty and interest in rock-peaks and rock-climbing, but he will always find mountains clad in snow and ice even more beautiful and interesting. Rock is a hard angular material; it suggests the restless fires of the earth, it speaks insistently of ruin and decay. Snow has a different message. It flows

in serene lines, it is moulded into harmonious curves; it is restful and tranquil. Is there any natural object more satisfying to the eye than a simple point of snow shining aloft in a blue sky?

The perfect mountain-summit is that formed by the intersection of two or more snow-ridges. Such summits are fewer than might be supposed. Even the Zermatt Weisshorn shows rocky bones on its topmost pinnacle, and I can think of few major summits meeting the condition of sharp snow-ridges uniting at a mathematical point. The Aiguille de Bionnassay, airiest of mountain-tops, is crested by a knife-like ridge, Mont Blanc is capped by a massive ice-dome, whilst peaks such as the Jungfrau, Bietschhorn, the Dufour Spitze of Monte Rosa and a hundred other great mountains all have their projecting crags on or near their topmost points. It would seem that the condition is most often fulfilled by secondary summits less exposed to the winds that deprive the greater and more exposed peaks of their snow.

Snow by smoothing out irregularities simplifies and beautifies mountain-form. The finest mountains are those built up of elliptical lines, and elliptical faces and edges are always beautiful when composed of snow. Is there any Alpine slope finer than that falling from the Obergabelhorn towards Zinal, or any peak more satisfying to the eye than the sweeping pyramid of the Grivola? In these and numberless other peaks Nature dramatises her effects by means

of snowy ellipses. Almost equally beautiful are the snowy parabolas between the peaks, cols which it is a joy to approach and cross. Of minor details the most beautiful are the flutings worn out by avalanches in steep snow and ice slopes. These attain to a great size in the Himalayas and add much to the scale and dignity of the mountain-sides. There are no more amazing sights in mountain scenery than the fluted ice-faces of Kangchenjunga and Mount Everest. The scene from the base camp of the International Kangchenjunga expedition was outstandingly magnificent. Immediately opposite across the glacier rose the Wedge Peak, a wall-sided mountain with precipices 8,000 feet high supporting an ice-ridge so thin that the sun shone through it, investing the outline of the peak with an aureole of cold fire. Parallel ice-flutings, like the caught-up folds of some vast drapery, fell from this ridge, leading the eye downwards in a flight of shuddering magnitude to precipices and ice-cliffs over which innumerable avalanches plunged with wild uproar on to the glacier.

Then there is the view of Mount Everest from the Rapiu La, and not only Everest but its gigantic neighbours Makalu and Chomolönzo. From this point Everest is seen end on, and its north and south-east faces rise in elliptical sweeps to unite in the miles-long north-east ridge which ends in its turn against the final pyramid, whence wind-churned mist



Snowfield



and snow flaunt a vast plume. The north face consists largely of rock, but the south-east face is of snow and ice, and the continual downrush of avalanches has worn out innumerable channels. These channels are separated by thin flutings moulded by sun, wind and frost into delicate blades of ice the regular parallel lines of which first arrest, then lead the eye downwards in a majestic sweep. This view of Everest is beautiful and appalling, beautiful because of the supreme simplicity of the mountain, appalling because of its steepness, its size and a constant grumbling of avalanches that resembles an erupting battle-front.

Snow has always fascinated me. As a small boy I would spend hours, my nose pressed to a window, watching its falling flakes, and a mountain for me means snow and ice and the subtle thrills of treading it. I have climbed in the Dolomites and enjoyed the experience, yet after a while I found myself longing for snow and ice, for the curve of a glacier or the lift of a snow-ridge. No rocks, however bold, can compensate for snow and ice; the boldest, most graceful mountain-forms are incomplete without an ermine mantle. Snow adds not only beauty but character to a mountain, for the region above the permanent snowline is constantly changing its features according to the moods of wind and weather. In snow the mountaineer treads the visible essence of purity; in its delicate substance it is possible to perceive the grandeur of creation and the glory of the universe.



Finding a route up a great mountain-side through a maze of snow and ice is the most delectable process in mountaineering. Rock-peaks and rock-faces remain static and are only susceptible to immediate changes of the weather, to storms and superficial quantities of snow and ice. In snow and ice peaks changes are more momentous and less calculable. Thus a route which may be practicable one year may be impracticable the next, and vice versa. The North Col of Mount Everest affords a good example of this, for the broken ice-slopes up which the climber makes his way are, in reality, simply a steep glacier in such rapid movement that the route, while broadly the same, varies greatly in detail from year to year, so that each expedition has different problems to solve. There are scores of Alpine routes of similar characteristics—the Brenva route on Mont Blanc and the Guggi route on the Jungfrau, to mention two examples—where the climber may thread his way through séracs and crevasses with ease in one season and in another have his powers tested to the full. It is in this capacity for change that much of the charm of high mountains lies, and that ability in route-finding discovers its greatest scope.

There is no more exhilarating sight than a first-rate guide at work on a complex ice-fall or steep ice-slope. The skill with which he threads his way up the former seems nothing short of miraculous. He relies on instinct based on experience. He could probably

not explain why he chooses one line in preference to another, but his preference is due to the fact that, having made his way up many ice-falls, he has learned instinctively to sum up the general appearance and behaviour of ice under many varying circumstances. Thus he gains an apparently uncanny knack of seeing round the corner. He is a mountain psychologist; like a good general, he has learned to study his opponent's strengths and weaknesses.

Step-cutting is a different art. At first sight there would appear to be nothing particularly difficult or interesting in the hewing out of footholds in ice. For some amateurs the process spells merely fatigue and boredom, yet it is one of the most delicate arts in mountaineering. Like rock-climbing, the secret is not so much strength as knack, confidence and rhythm. To the average amateur who pecks and puffs his way up an ice-slope the sight of a guide calmly cutting steps for hour after hour is a revelation. It is easy to argue that the guide's muscles are toughened by much mountaineering and wood-cutting, but this is only a small part of the story. Through practice and experience he has learned to economise energy and to apply rhythm to his every movement. When Frank Woolley makes an off-drive, his bat lifts and swings through an apparently effortless arc; there is a crack, and an instant later the ball is passing the extra cover boundary. What is the secret of this apparent miracle? How is it that the brawny slogger

cannot perform a similar shot with similar ease? The answer lies in perfect footwork, perfect timing, and a body and limbs in which every muscle plays its part. So it is in step-cutting; an ice-axe "lives" in the hands of a guide.

Your cricket-bat may save your side from defeat, but your ice-axe may save your life and the lives of your companions. Look well to it. Then it will become a part of you, your friend.

I remember arriving one year at the Montenvers Hotel above Chamonix just as two bodies were being brought down in sacks. A Frenchman and his wife had attempted to climb the Aiguille Verte. The woman slipped. The man drove his axe into the snow and looped the rope round it, but when the strain came the axe snapped in half. It transpired that a leather band had been tacked to the shaft in order to prevent a sliding metal ring, to which was attached a loop for placing round the wrist when the axe was not needed, from slipping off the axe. The leather soaked up moisture and slowly rotted the wood.

Cases where a single axe has saved several climbers from destruction are many. George Mallory once prevented a whole party from sliding to destruction on Mount Everest by plunging his into the snow at the crucial moment and hitching the rope round it. The incident was treated as mountaineering incidents are, all in the day's work, and the maker

of the ice-axe was not even mentioned in the account of the accident; yet his craftsmanship saved four lives.

One of the better moments during a climb is that when the ice-axe is first called into play. The climber has made his way lethargically up the moraine and the glacier; he has warmed up on the snowfield; by the time the upper slopes are reached he is positively enjoying himself. Then on an icy steepening surface the axe comes into its own. It does so with an indescribable sound, a kind of thudding as the pick strikes the slope, which becomes a joyous litany as step by step height is won. Stroke by stroke the work goes on. The detached fragments of ice and snow slither and skip downwards, the sun laughs brilliantly out of a clear sky, not a breath of wind violates the frosty sanctuaries of early morning. The valley is shadowy and remote; above, the slope lifts to a shining crest against the deep blue sky.

Later in the day step-cutting can become a hard and monotonous labour. This is particularly the case where a long ice-slope has to be descended, the most exacting process in mountaineering, principally because of the muscular effort involved in bending the knees and the constrained position of the body.

One of the most thrilling stories in mountaineering history is that of the attempt on the north face of the Aiguille du Plan by Mummery's party. It was described in a paper to the Alpine Journal by Ellis Carr, entitled "Two Days on an Ice-Slope." I first

read it many years ago, in the days of my mountaineering novitiate, and was thrilled by a tale of skill and determination as fine as any in the annals of mountaineering. This formidable mountain-side, which is draped in ice-slopes of terrific steepness, was assaulted by the party without the help of guides. After a whole day of strenuous step-cutting they were eventually forced to bivouac on some slabby rocks that projected through the ice. A great effort deserved to be crowned with success, but next morning doubtful weather and the great difficulties of the upper part of the climb forced them to retreat down the ice-slope, a retreat which can be better imagined than described, demanding concentrated and unremitting care for every foot of the way.

One of the hardest ice-climbs I have ever taken part in was on the same mountain but on another face. This was when J. H. B. Bell and I climbed the east ridge. Icy rocks on the lower part of the ridge forced us into a couloir at the side. The only way we could gain the ridge was to climb an ice-slope out of the couloir. This ice-slope was so steep that for much of the way handholds as well as footholds were necessary. To me fell the task of step-cutting. It took several hours, and I well remember the job as one of the toughest of my life. It was straightforward enough: there was the ice-slope, slanting up to the crest of the ridge at a tremendous angle, and time and energy alone were needed to overcome

it. There was no retreat; behind us the couloir we had left chattered and hummed with falling stones; the job had to be done, and the sooner the better. To this day I remember how deceptively near the sun-warmed rocks of the ridge appeared, yet as the hours passed they seemed no nearer. It was worse for Bell than for me. He had to endure a constant bombardment of ice-chips, and to stand with numbed feet and chilled body in the steps, moving, as it must have seemed to him, with the clogged paces of a nightmare.

Such climbing involves as much mental as physical energy, and I have often marvelled at myself for having been able to continue such work for so long with little rest or relief, especially as I am neither brawny nor muscular. It has often seemed to me that to endeavour to assess the capabilities of the human body by medical tests, as is done in the case of Everest expeditions, is futile. What really counts in mountaineering is a man's attitude to the job, and most of all his capacity for enjoying the most exacting jobs of work. Many a time have I seen strong men quickly tire themselves out when cutting steps, simply because they looked on the job as nothing more than a tedious part of the climbing. For the true ice-man, an ice-slope spells something much more than hard work. There is something simple and serene in the sight of it, and the mountaineer who discerns this is given an extra power, a power beyond the normal

powers of flesh and blood. Mere strength and athleticism are the least parts of mountain-climbing.

I remember such climbs as the ice-slope of the Aiguille du Plan with something greater than pleasure, for they have shown me not only the power of the mountains but taught me how I myself may partake of that power.

This relationship between man and mountain ceases to exist where there is danger, not the danger that can be countered by skill and knowledge, but the danger that is deliberately incurred. I well remember my feelings on the ice-wall of Kangchenjunga. We were trying to scale the lowermost edge of a hanging glacier which might collapse at any moment. It was an unfair risk and we knew it. My heart was not in the task, and the business of hacking out steps in the ice was, for me at any rate, terribly fatiguing. Mountaineering is something you must do with all your heart; it is not in any sense a "war" between man and mountain as some would have us believe.

There are, of course, many times when monotony breeds fatigue on snow or ice. Many climbers will remember how tired they have felt on a long ice-slope on which the sun beat with pitiless intensity. Then at last they have surmounted it and reached a ridge where, confronted by new interests, their fatigue has vanished like a snowflake in the sun.

Safety and danger in rock-climbing are easily assessed; they are not so easily assessed on snow and

ice. Many people when they hear of an avalanche accident regard it as nothing else but an act of God. Yet not one per cent. of the accidents that have taken toll of ski-ers of recent years need have happened had the unfortunate participants studied the moods of the snow. It is easy to preach, I have had my narrow squeaks which might well have proved fatal, but the fact remains that were visitors to the winter Alps to study not only the technique of ski-ing but the snow they ski-ed upon there would be fewer avalanche accidents. To understand snow and its reactions to sun, temperature and wind, and to learn what it can and cannot do at certain angles and in certain positions, is to appreciate its beauty and the beauty of the mountain it rests upon, for the capacity to understand and appreciate beauty arises not from ignorance but from knowledge. Regard snow, then, not as a physically uninteresting compound, not as something treacherous that may strike unexpectedly and without warning, but as a substance intensely interesting, obeying well-defined physical laws. In the British Ski tests a sound knowledge of snowcraft should be worth at least as many marks as the ability to master ski-ing turns.

The mountaineer who climbs only during the summer season gains but little knowledge of snow as compared with he who climbs in winter. In summer when snow falls it is quickly affected by the sun and the warmth of the air and, becoming sodden,



slides off in avalanches. Comparatively little experience is necessary to determine whether or not it is safe to tread, and the wise climber allows it time to consolidate before venturing upon it. Winter snow is an altogether different matter. It may avalanche in a dry state, and much experience is necessary to foretell exactly what it is likely to do. The worst trap of all is the wind-slab. This is formed when loose powdery snow is blown by the wind and collects in compact slabs or shields, loosely knit to the older snow beneath. A slight disturbance may detach an enormous cake, and this cake, as it slides away, breaks up into hard blocks which crush and overwhelm anyone unfortunate enough to be within range. Wind-slabs may remain unstable for a fortnight or more before consolidating with the underlying snow. Worse than this, they can still remain dangerous under a further layer of snow which in itself may be safe. It would be difficult to conceive of a deadlier trap than this last, and though it is fortunately seldom encountered I have come across examples. Local knowledge is often invaluable, for local wind-currents and the situation of slopes, particularly slopes on the lee of a wind-swept ridge, all play their part in forming wind-slab.

It is commonly supposed that spring is the most dangerous season for avalanches. Certainly the biggest avalanches come down then, the great ground-avalanches which bare large areas of mountain-side

and, tearing up earth, stones and trees, pour tens of thousands of tons of sodden débris into the valleys. But these are easily avoided; indeed their descent is a regular phenomenon, and it is only in unfrequented valleys and on the heights that the ski-er must be careful.

The following is a good example of the kind of problem that confronts the springtime ski-er. One morning in April I set out to cross a pass of nearly 9,000 feet from a hut some 3,000 feet lower. The ground was unknown to me, but from my map I saw that to reach the pass I must follow a narrow valley for some distance, then mount steep slopes at its head to the pass. I decided to leave the hut early so as to reach the pass before the sun had time to soften the snow at all dangerously. This was all the more necessary because the valley ran roughly north and south, and the east-facing side of it would receive the full warmth of the morning sun, which at that time was being reinforced by more than a suspicion of Föhn wind. I went quickly along the valley, but by the time I approached its head the sun was full on the long steep slopes that enfiladed the route I must take in order to reach the pass. No avalanches had yet fallen, but the warmth in the air suggested that a big one might come down as soon as the sun had melted a film of frost on the waterlogged snow. The problem was whether I was justified in proceeding. Would the frost hold the snow *in situ*

until I was out of the danger zone? I decided that it would and proceeded at my top speed, keeping a careful watch on the threatening slopes to my right. I passed them and mounted leisurely to my objective. I reached the pass and sat down to enjoy a meal. Then the avalanche fell. There was a dull roar as the slopes peeled off. The avalanche rushed down with that stealthy speed which is so fascinating to watch when you are not in its way, and a few moments later a portion of my track was buried beneath hundreds of tons of sodden snow. I experienced a certain feeling of snug complacency at the time, but subsequent and soberer reflection inspired the reluctant thought that even though my judgment proved correct it only proved just correct, and that the margin of safety was not as wide as it ought to have been.

Danger on mountains is not always to be foreseen and avoided through the exercise of ordinary prudence and skill, for there is always the weather to be contended with. It may, of course, be argued that weather can be foretold, and that if there is any doubt as to its intentions the mountaineer must retreat forthwith, but these are counsels of perfection and there is no such thing as a perfect mountaineer. One of the worst traps into which I have fallen was due to a sudden and unforeseen change in the weather, which resulted in the transforming of a safe and pleasant expedition into an unsafe and unpleasant

adventure. This was in 1934 during a trip on ski across Switzerland. My route took me from the head of the Linthal to the Maderanerthal and Amsteg by way of the Clariden Pass. This pass is a safe and delightful ski-run over gently sloping fields of *névé*, but the approaches to the glaciers on both sides have an unenviable reputation for avalanches, and instances are on record of whole parties being overwhelmed. The weather was not altogether settled when I set out from the Clariden hut, and I did not much fancy a lurid sunrise between layers of long smooth-looking cloud. However, there had been a sharp frost overnight and the snow was hard frozen as I mounted the easy slopes towards the pass. In any case, I argued, I would be down the other side safe at the Hüfi hut, or even in the Maderanerthal, before the weather made up its mind one way or the other.

There was some mist on the ill-defined crest of the pass, but nothing to worry me, and the snow continued well frozen and the air frosty as I slid down the Hüfi Glacier on the far side. Lower down, where the glacier narrows and steepens into a formidable ice-fall set in the jaws of a wall-sided gorge, it is necessary to leave it and traverse more or less horizontally to the hut across steepish slopes above the precipices of the gorge. This traverse I knew to be the trickiest part of the descent, so I lost no time and set off across the slopes to the hut, which I could see in the distance perched on some rocks. The air was then appreciably

warmer, but I put this down at first to the fact that I had descended some distance from the pass. In any event, the snow was still good and there seemed no reason for the slightest anxiety.

I was well on my way when it became obvious that not only was the air warmer but that it was getting warmer every instant. I could feel it against my cheeks in hot puffs. It was as though someone were breathing at me, and each puff seemed hotter than the last. Something queer was happening to the weather, but what? At first glance there seemed nothing abnormal about the sky. The long smooth clouds of dawn had thickened considerably, but there were blue channels between and no sign of an impending storm. Yet these clouds were sliding up like oil out of the south, and it did not take me long to realise that they presaged the Föhn. I had known many Föhns before. They made for dangerous ski-ing conditions, but their onslaught was reasonably gradual, and as a rule the warm southern air took some time to infiltrate the upper regions. Then, as I stood considering the matter, it became evident that this was no ordinary Föhn. Someone had opened wide a door, and "Mussolini's hot air," as the Swiss called it, had flowed quickly across the Alps, pushing the cold air before it in a manner that his troops could never hope to push an enemy.

The snow? I could almost hear the frost-hardened crust softening beneath that tide of warm, moist air.

Already it was wet and sticky beneath my ski. What was to be done? I was nearly half-way across the slopes. If I retreated to the pass it would take me some time to regain it, and by then anything might have happened to the weather, and a snowstorm was no pleasant prospect on the complicated snowfields between it and the Clariden hut, which is not easy to find in thick weather. On the other hand, I could not be more than half an hour from the Hüfi hut, and it seemed reasonable to suppose that the slopes would remain safe that long. These things passed through my mind far quicker than they take to write, and I was ploughing forward through the snow almost before my decision to go on had been made.

It was a ridiculous change from my former leisurely and comfortable progress. Everything depended now on getting to the hut at the utmost possible speed. So far the slopes had not avalanched, but for some days past the spring warmth had been working on them, and it needed only a bout of Föhn to dislodge them.

As hard as I could shove, slide and press my ski through the sodden snow I pounded along. Above me the mountain-side already seemed full of menace, whilst below the precipices fell into the glacier-filled gorge. There was not a sound. No avalanche had yet fallen, but never have I known a silence so ominous, charged as it was with the possibility of violent and destructive uproar.

My principal emotion was an intense annoyance.

I felt that the mountains were making me look a pretty fool, that they had let me down. Yet in my heart I knew that, unexpected though this sudden Föhn might be, it was I who was the fool. I should have heeded the danger signals in the sky that morning, and I cursed myself for not legging it harder over the pass. I had dawdled, and now every minute was vital.

Softer and softer became the snow, until it seemed that it must slide at any moment. Worse than that, the slopes I was traversing steepened perceptibly. I rounded an incipient buttress, and there before me, not two hundred yards off, was the hut, the long-desired hut, perched safely and securely on some out-jutting rocks.

But I was not there yet. Between me and it lay the worst slope of all, a wide steep slope of unbroken snow. There was no way of avoiding it above or below; it had to be crossed.

As I felt certain that my ski would exercise a cutting effect and bring the whole slope down on top of me, I decided to take them off and carry them. There is another advantage in removing ski on dangerous snow; the man without them on his feet has a better chance of remaining on the surface of an avalanche. This last, however, was unimportant; the precipice below would even things up in *that* direction.

It was no easy matter floundering forward on foot. At every step I sank deeply into the snow, so deeply that

my progress was dreadfully slow. At the same time the heat seemed to pour down on me so that I dripped with sweat. There was not a breath of cool revivifying air, nothing but a moist clammy oppressiveness.

I was in the middle of the slope when I heard a sudden hiss above me. There were some scattered rocks higher up the slope, and from one of these a small fragment of snow detached itself. It fell on to the slope. There it began to roll. As it rolled it augmented itself with other snow, just as a child forms a big snowball by rolling a ball of it along the ground. In another instant the snowball no longer pursued its solitary course down the slope; the weight of it set the snow sliding in front of it. At first the sliding snow was a harmless insignificant little layer, but it quickly widened, like a broad inverted V, until a great wedge of the slope was in motion. The first sibilant hissing was resolved into a deeper, more menacing sound, as though someone was passing an enormous piece of sandpaper over a wooden board. The snow was sliding, wider and wider it was sliding, and before it the slope rumbled up in a broken irregular wave. And it was coming straight for me. Instantly I saw that there was only one chance of avoiding it. I dropped one ski, but clung on to the other, why I do not know, and plunged desperately forward. Every moment I expected to feel the overwhelming weight of the avalanche; it would bear me irresistibly off my feet;



I should be carried down in a casual impersonal way, struggling absurdly and hurled over the precipice into nothingness and eternity. This is the time when a man is supposed to pray. I did not pray. With each outward gasp of breath I said blast, blast, blast. I was frightened, very frightened, but I was also exceedingly angry—with myself for being there.

The avalanche missed me. I heard the rush of it behind me as I laboured across the slope. I came to a stop. I was absolutely blown, and felt as though I had just run the hardest "quarter" of my life; actually, I had not covered more than a few yards. Leaning forward on the snow I recovered my breath. As I did so I looked backwards at the avalanche. It was quite a small one, not more than twenty or twenty-five yards broad. Furthermore, it had not poured over the precipice. About one hundred feet lower the slope eased off, forming a narrow shelf a few yards in width. This, and the lack of momentum of so small a slide, had been sufficient to stop it a few feet from the edge of the precipice. But it had taken my ski with it, and I could see no sign of it amidst the jumbled masses of sodden snow which were piled some three feet deep athwart the slope. Another and larger avalanche might come at any moment, but I felt that I could not abandon my ski, as, apart from the fatigue and difficulty of descending ski-less to Amsteg, it had been one of a pair that had borne me faithfully across Switzerland all the way from Bludenz

in Austria. So I descended a few yards by the side of the avalanche, searching for it. I did not expect to find it, but suddenly I saw its tip sticking out of the sodden snow. I greeted it with a shout of joy and made haste to retrieve it.

After that I laboured up the way I had descended until I was able to renew my traverse of the slope. The snow was as bad as snow can possibly be. Another and far larger avalanche might come at any moment and from higher up, or the slope might crack away from beneath me, yet I was no longer conscious of danger; I felt that my luck had held and would continue to hold. All the same, I lost no time in crossing the remainder of the slope, and my clothing was soaked through by the time I had ploughed through the abominable snow to some rocks on the far side.

For a long time I had not seen the hut, and did not know exactly where it was, or whether it was above or below my level, but as I gained the rocks it came suddenly into view. It was only a few yards away. A short scramble and I was there, treading the stone steps up to the door in safety. It was a wonderful feeling.

I unbolted the double doors and went inside. It was dark and quiet there and smelt of straw, blankets and mattresses. I threw open the shutters and rummaged around for wood with which to set the stove going. Then I made some tea. How comfortable and comforting these small domestic arrangements seemed.

As I ate my lunch I heard the avalanches falling one after the other, not small slides such as the one I had escaped from, but monsters that roared and reverberated as they poured down the mountain-sides. When a little later I went outside to sit on the stone steps of the hut and puff at my pipe, I saw that the slopes I had crossed had been swept from end to end.

The Föhn continued until evening, and earth and atmosphere vibrated continuously to more avalanches than I have ever seen in a single afternoon. Nightfall brought frost and silence, and next morning I was able to make my way down without further misadventure to the Maderanerthal and Amsteg.

In the Himalayas the behaviour of snow and ice is less easily calculable than it is in the Alps. This is because of a greater alternation of heat and cold, due to violent winds and altitude. During the monsoon the cold at great altitudes maintains snow in a condition not unlike that of Alpine snow in mid-winter, whereas snow at lesser altitudes resembles that of the Alps in mid-summer. As may be imagined, between these two extremes lies an astonishing range of conditions, and far more than ordinary Alpine skill and knowledge is necessary in order to climb safely.

The North Col of Mount Everest has afforded some classic examples of the fallibility of experts, for it has on several occasions deceived mountaineers who were certainly skilful and experienced enough to climb safely in the Alps. Let it be said at once that snow

and ice obey the same laws in the Himalayas as they do in the Alps; it is because these laws operate in more complex fashion in the Himalayas that danger lies. The slopes of the North Col are at a height midway between winter and summer conditions. Both above and below the 21,000-feet to 24,000-feet level it is possible to estimate with reasonable accuracy the behaviour of the snow under certain circumstances. Above 24,000 feet the snow during the monsoon season remains for the most part dry and powdery, but below 21,000 feet it is wet and heavy. It is the meeting of these extremes that produces complicated and dangerous conditions on the slopes of the North Col. The worst trap the climber has to contend with is the slab-avalanche. It was avalanches of this nature that killed seven porters in 1922, and all but killed Shipton and Wyn Harris in 1936. The huge avalanche that fell in 1935, after Shipton's party had reached the North Col, was a similar form of avalanche. One thing would appear certain: such avalanches are originated by wind. The 1936 avalanche was undoubtedly a dry wind-slab similar to those that occur in the Alps in mid-winter, whereas the 1935 avalanche was a wetter form of the same type, the result, it would seem, of many days of hot sun and moist air working on slopes covered by the snow which is constantly borne over the crest of the col by strong north-west winds.

The available evidence points to the fact that the

slopes are safe during the winter when the air is cold and dry and the relative humidity low, and that they only become treacherous shortly before the advent of the monsoon snowfalls, when the relative humidity rises sufficiently to enable the wind-blown snow to become dangerously unstable. Later, as both air temperature and humidity increase, wind-slabs that did not fall in the first place become waterlogged and ready to break away at any slight disturbance, such as the movement of the glacier ice on which they rest or the passage of a climbing party. These avalanches may be very large, and the layer of snow that broke away in 1935 was about six feet thick. Had the snow detached itself when the party were traversing it, there would have been a major disaster.

If I have been technical in what is essentially a non-technical book, it is because an understanding of snow and ice and its behaviour in certain conditions not only contributes to the safety of the mountaineer but to his appreciation of the mountains. Mountains can be wonderful and beautiful to the ignoramus, but they become even more wonderful and beautiful when we understand the nature and texture of their matchless raiment of snow and ice and the forces constantly at work on them.

Lack of exact knowledge always spells anxiety in mountaineering, and the slopes of the North Col, so different from any in the Alps, have caused many anxious moments to Everest climbers. The provi-

dential escapes of 1936 are still fresh in memory. There were no less than three during that expedition. The first was when Shipton and I with forty-two porters were established at Camp Four on the col, ready to pitch the higher camps and attempt the summit. Our hopes were shattered by heavy snow-falls, as it proved the first burst of an exceptionally early monsoon. Two thousand feet beneath, at Camp Three, little snow fell, and those there, not understanding the situation, urged us to carry on and try to pitch Camp Five. There was of course no hope of doing this, for conditions were even worse higher up the mountain, and our immediate and urgent problem was to descend safely to Camp Three before the snow piled up to such a depth as to make a disastrous avalanche a certainty. If the route had been straight down the slopes we need not have worried, for it is usually possible for a descending party to avalanche the snow in front of them and descend safely in the wake of the avalanche, but owing to the complex nature of the slopes the only route traversed above ice-cliffs over which the party must have been precipitated in the event of an avalanche.

During the monsoon season snow often falls in the afternoons. So it was in the present instance, and we decided to retreat while there was still time in the morning. It was later suggested that it might have been safer to descend in the evening. The reason for

not doing so was that every inch of snow added to the slopes increased the risk of avalanches, coupled with the fact that wind-slab-avalanches are not dependent so much on the temperature of the air as on its humidity. Thus, the dangers of descending in the evening were in all probability no less than those at any other time. Furthermore, it would have been a difficult and dangerous operation to have escorted forty porters down in darkness.

It was a gruelling and anxious retreat. I doubt whether any of the porters understood the danger, but Shipton and I had no illusions when at every step we sank knee-deep into soft freshly fallen snow. I went down first, probing with my ice-axe, on the lookout for snow of that curious velvety texture which usually indicates a wind-slab. On the steepest slope of all, where the route ran diagonally downwards above a line of ice-cliffs, there was a sudden ominous thud as the snow settled, and my heart leapt momentarily into my mouth, but that was the only sign of avalanchy conditions and happily nothing fell. At the same time, I hope that I shall never again be responsible for the safety of so large a party on so doubtful a descent; to this day I can picture the scene, the glaring slopes of unstable powdery snow, intersected by ice-cliffs of a hungry feline green and, strung out in a straggling line, forty-two dots of slow-moving men.

Some time later we attempted to reopen the route

to Camp Four. It was obvious then that the monsoon was in full blast, but we hoped against hope that there would be a break in the snowfalls, and that the north-west wind would re-establish itself and blow the snow from the upper rocks of Mount Everest. If these good things came to pass, it was essential to be in a position at Camp Four so as to take full advantage of them. Nothing of the sort occurred, and we spent an unpleasant and profitless day in trying to force our way up the slopes of the col.

It was a forlorn-hope attempt. We knew full well that our failure meant the failure of yet another Everest expedition. It is not easy to maintain that sober and unbalanced judgment necessary for mountaineering safety in such circumstances.

I was in charge of the party of porters, and I well remember feeling that we had to get up if humanly possible, and that on getting up depended our last chance of success.

I think now that the attempt was pushed to the utmost limit of safety. The weather had much to do with our discomfiture. The morning was frosty and the snow at first in good condition, but as we mounted the air increased rapidly in warmth; it seemed to come in hot steamy puffs and the sun beat mercilessly on the slopes. By the time the traverse above the ice-cliffs was reached it was obvious that further progress was out of the question. Could another and more direct route be forced to the crest of the col?



An attempt was made to cut up ice-slopes overlaid with loose snow at a tremendous angle. This also failed. Then Shipton, who was in charge of the rearmost porters, wisely gave the order to retreat. As the foremost porters were preparing to retire, the slope we were standing on settled under our feet with a deep crunching sound. There was a horrid second of suspense. Would it slide? It did not. Hotter and hotter grew the air as we made our way down, strung out in small widely separated groups of men.

The temperature of the air was primarily responsible for avalanche danger that day. In my mind's eye I can visualise only too clearly what might have happened, a disaster similar to that of 1922 when seven porters were killed. There is a line of toiling, heavily laden men. Then suddenly, there is a deep cutting sound. A small crack appears in the snow. For an instant there is silence. Then slowly, irresistibly, thousands of tons of snow begin to move downwards. The line is broken. Men turn and try to run; there is no time; they are a part of the moving snow; they are caught up in waves of it, and thrown off their feet. They disappear. Faster and faster, with enormous momentum, slides the avalanche. Below are the ice-cliffs, a hundred feet or more in height. Over them the avalanche pours with the deadly deliberation of some mighty cataract. The first harsh rush of sliding snow changes to a dull

roaring. The snow impacting on the slopes beneath the ice-cliffs billows violently outwards like the discharge from a battery of cannon. The roaring diminishes; the clouds of snow settle; there is nothing to be seen, nothing but blank-white snow.

This is what an avalanche means on the North Col of Mount Everest, and this is why most mountaineers now agree that any attempt to climb the mountain during the monsoon season invites disaster, and that before or after the apparent onset or decrease of monsoon conditions any party that makes the ascent should have with them someone well accustomed to avalanche conditions, equipped with an instrument for measuring the humidity of the air. Failing such care, I dare venture the prophecy that further escapes, and it may be disasters, will occur on the North Col slopes before Everest is climbed.

Enough has been written to show that the study of snow conditions is not only of interest but of vital importance in mountaineering and ski-ing. Both sports owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Arnold Lunn and Mr. Gerald Seligman for their researches into snow conditions, yet it is to be doubted whether one ski-er in a hundred takes more than a passing interest in snowcraft. During my last visit to the Alps in winter my two companions and I were descending a certain ski route near Zermatt. Recent high winds had formed wind-slabs in many places. The route in question normally descends a wide gully several

hundred feet in length. As this was exactly the kind of place where wind-slab was to be expected we avoided the gully and descended to one side. Even so, the snow was in an unstable condition, and over the steepest portion of the route we removed our skis and tramped down on foot. We were engaged in this when we saw a solitary ski-er gaily curvetting down the gully in a series of Christianias. As an exhibition of daring and faultless ski-ing it was superb. Only in one place did the snow settle down with that ominous thump which tells of wind-slab. No avalanche came away, yet the risks attending such a descent were undeniable, and we did not feel disposed to put on our ski until we were past the dangerous area. In Zermatt we found the avalanche-buster, who was also one of the best ski-ers that Britain has ever produced, and as tactfully as possible pointed out to him the risk he had taken. His reply was, "Well, you see, I was going so fast that if an avalanche had come away I would have been down before it had time to get a move on." Mercury himself could hardly have given a more disarming explanation.

Before I went to the Himalayas, General Bruce warned me against venturing anywhere within range of a hanging glacier. He told me that when Mummery and his two Gurkhas were making their first attempt to climb Nanga Parbat, which is, contrary to popular belief, by no means the sole preserve of German

mountaineers, they camped on a ridge separating two couloirs. When they returned to their camp after an unsuccessful attempt to climb the mountain, they were astonished to find that an ice-avalanche from a hanging glacier had not only filled one of the couloirs with its débris but had overflowed the ridge and wiped out the camp. It is a good rule when climbing in the Himalayas to choose a spot where you think you are safe, then double the distance between that spot and the nearest hanging glacier before camping. It must also be remembered that ice-avalanches that travel long distances across a glacier at the foot of a mountain-face are not always those that fall the farthest, but often those that only fall a comparatively short distance. The reason for this is that avalanches that fall thousands of feet down precipices are pulverised, and while they may displace a devastating blast of wind, their solid débris is ground up into small fragments that are incapable of sliding far across a level surface, whereas ice-blocks that fall a comparatively small distance may remain whole and slide great distances because of their weight and momentum. Failure to recognise this was responsible for the disaster to the German Nanga Parbat expedition of 1937. They pitched their camp apparently well away from some ice-cliffs, but the ice-masses that broke away were of sufficient size and weight to travel the intervening distance and overwhelm the camp, killing its sixteen occupants. In

direct contrast to this is Eric Shipton's account of the ice-avalanches that constantly fall down the immense precipices of K. 2. They start as huge masses, but are so broken up in their fall that they reach the glacier as mere ice-dust.

If snow adds beauty to a mountain, ice increases its sublimity. The beauty of Mont Blanc is vested not only in its snow-dome but in the broken edges of the dome along the crests of its supporting precipices, the icy diadem of the crown. The culminating interest of the ascent of the mountain by way of the Brenva face is in passing through these icy walls. I remember nothing more dramatic than the finish of the route made by Professor Graham Brown and myself in 1927. For many hours we made our way up rocks and ice towards what previous inspection had led us to believe was a breach in the ice-cliffs. From the highest rocks an ice-slope of great steepness led up to the cliffs, which were outlined brilliantly and with faultless distinction against the deep blue sky, with immense icicles dependent from their edges glittering like polished spears in the afternoon sun. Never have I seen serenity mingle more harmoniously with savagery, and never have I appreciated better the stupendous sweep of the great mountain-side we were scaling, the hazy depths of Italy at our feet, the crags, ribs, buttresses and gullies we had already climbed, the steepening lift of the ice in which we were laboriously cutting steps, and that final wall of ice

shining in the air, fairy-like in its beauty, gigantic in its suggestion of illimitable force.

With ever-rising excitement we cut step after step. As we had seen from below, there was a breach, a sagging down of the wall in one place, the one weak point in the battlement. Soon we were in it and level with the wall, looking along it as though along the line of a Channel cliff. Now the wall was beneath; from its icicle-fringed edge the vision passed in a single leap of 11,000 feet to the meadows of Courmayeur. The slope ended. In a single step we passed from one of the greatest mountain-sides of the Alps on to the gently sloping snow-dome of Mont Blanc.

These are but a few aspects of snow and ice and the climbing of it. The variety and beauty of such climbing and scenes is infinite. From the moment when the high snows shine palely out of the night to that when the sunset glow fades and the peaks gleam from the kindling stars with the purity of flawless alabaster, there is enough of beauty and tranquillity to fill the soul of man with thankfulness and peace.

Then there are moonlit vistas when the mountains seem too remote, too ethereal to be real; then we gaze beyond ourselves and beyond our world. Every mountaineer should make at least one ascent by moonlight. I do not mean merely an early start, but an ascent that finishes at sunrise. I have made several, but the one I remember best was that of the Col Maudit on the range of Mont Blanc.

When Graham Macphee and I left the Torino hut there was not a cloud or a breath of wind. In complete stillness and silence we tramped up the path to the Col du Géant, with the lights of Courmayeur behind us blinking sleepily out of the depths.

I have many times passed across the uppermost snowfields of the Glacier du Géant, but have never known them so beautiful as they were then. The snow was frozen and our boot-nails creaked on its crusted surface. Before us Mont Blanc was enshrined in soft moonlight, and the parabolic edge of the Col Maudit showed between the mass of Mont Blanc du Tacul and the sharp peak of Mont Maudit; it might have been a mile, it might have been fifty miles away. Stars glittered like diamonds above its crest and the ice-cliffs beneath were waxen in the moonlight.

As we walked across the snowfield my mind was filled with the queerest imaginings, and this dreamlike quality persisted throughout the climb. Always we moved in silence. Once an ice-avalanche fell from Mont Blanc du Tacul, a noise harsh and unexpected that sent startled echoes pounding round the cirque of Mont Blanc, but after that the silence closed in deeper, more profound than before.

In this silence we made our way across the snow. We moved easily and quickly, yet the mountains seemed to change little in position. Then suddenly, almost as though we had been magically transported the distance, we found ourselves close beneath the

cliffs leading up to the Col Maudit, now directly above our heads.

Moonlight has a curious effect on any estimation of difficulties, and to this day I cannot tell whether the climb was easy or difficult. I cannot remember distinctly any of its details, except for the final diagonal climb to the right between the rocks of Mont Blanc du Tacul and the ice-cliffs crowning the col. I can only remember the scrape of boot-nails jarring and distinct in the silence, and the abrupt thud of the ice-axe. In the gentle moonlight such physical details seemed almost vulgar. The shadows of the Tour Ronde ridge stole across the snowfield at our feet, then, as the moon declined, deep shadows engulfed us.

We gained the col as the dawn was quenching what remained of the moonlight. There for the first time we noticed clouds, sullen angry masses piled along the south. It seemed incredible that storm should succeed such calm, but so it proved. A cold little wind met us on the col and a spiteful blast assailed us with ever-increasing violence as we made our way over Mont Maudit to the Col de la Brenva.

The remainder of the way over Mont Blanc was tramped in increasingly bad weather. Macphée's nose bled, and the blood falling on to his moustache coagulated and froze into a cluster of icicles so that he appeared like some terrible Eastern deity. A blizzard was blowing on Mont Blanc, and we were glad to bustle down the ordinary route to the Grands Mulets



and the Pierre Pointue, whence a walk to the Mont-envers completed the day. It had been a climb of singular contrasts: calm air, soft moonlight, then wind and storm; yet in such contrasts the charm of mountaineering lies.

Since then I have been privileged to see vistas of snow by moonlight in the high Himalayas, but many marvellous scenes have passed unheeded at high and uncomfortable altitudes. Yet, such is the power of memory, the climber can view them in retrospect freed from the physical burdens that robbed him of aesthetic pleasure. For my part I am content to spend an evening by the fire and let my mind wander back over the scenes I have witnessed. It is strange then how almost forgotten incidents will shape themselves in memory. Such ponderings may tend to colour rosily what was in reality dull, tedious and unpleasant, but what matter that? There is surely no sport in which memories count for so much as mountaineering; indeed, if we measure its value by these alone, then it is assuredly the best of all adventures.

## CHAPTER XII

### SKI WAYS

SKI-ERS who are also yachtsmen say that there is an affinity between the two sports. Both demand skill and nerve, but whereas in yachting expertness depends largely in familiarising yourself with many intricate technical details, and in learning how and when to apply a knowledge of them, in ski-ing it lies in mastering a pair of wooden boards, a simple enough matter in theory but extremely difficult in practice.

I have never been, and I suppose now never will be, even a moderately good ski-er. This is because I was foolish enough to omit instruction in the art. I set out to learn ski-ing with the preconceived and entirely erroneous notion that it would come naturally to me. I did not realise that although it is, apart from walking, running and swimming, in some respects the least artificial form of motion known to man, it is in other respects no more natural than flying: thus its technique must be laboriously, systematically and patiently acquired, and the bad habits into which the beginner so easily falls prevented at the start.

Another and even less logical reason why I never

learned to ski well was because I regarded ski simply as a means of getting across country and climbing mountains. I put them in the same category as crampons. Now, alas, when it is too late, I know how mistaken I was, and realise that if ski afford a pleasant means of climbing mountains they also afford an infinitely pleasant and thrilling means of descending mountains.

It is always an interesting experience to be in the Alps at the onset of winter. By November the glory has departed from the birch forests, and even the pines seem starker and grimmer than before. On the pastures the herbage is browning and belated seeds are falling to earth. On high the peaks gleam in a mantle of freshly fallen snow against a sky profoundly blue. In the valley a great stillness reigns. Scarcely a zephyr stirs; the summer hazes have been absorbed into a frosty atmosphere and the views are clear and vital in the brilliant sunlight. Week by week the snowline creeps valleywards, clothing the bare bones of the lower mountains, chasing the cattle down from the alps, powdering the upper fringes of the pine forest. Then one day grey clouds congregate and release a deluge of cold rain into the valley. Hour by hour they creep lower. They are linked to the hill-sides with a slate-grey veil, and through this is dimly seen the dead whiteness of freshly fallen snow. The veil droops and droops. The rain in the valley is replaced by sleet. Then comes the snow, at first in





On the Gorner Glacier

soft wet flakes, then in drier smaller fragments. The wind rises, binding into ice the slush in the village street, sending the snowflakes hurrying and scurrying round the chalets, marshalling them into sharp-edged drifts, driving them into every crevice and cranny.

Next morning the sun rises in a cloudless sky. The damp humours of autumn are gone and the valley air seems almost to creak in the grip of an intense frost. The great transformation has taken place. There is snow, snow everywhere, pure, brilliant, unsullied, untrodden, a foot or more of sparkling powdery snow. The *hôteliars* and the shopkeepers rub their hands. The wires to London hum with their messages of snow.

There is probably no sport that caters for so wide a range of tastes as ski-ing. Some prefer to knock split seconds off a funicular-served run, others prefer the charms of untracked snowfields, a few, like myself, look on their ski as a means of climbing mountains which would be inaccessible or laborious on foot. There is much to be said for all these approaches to the sport, and if the ski-mountaineer cannot resist a dig at the exponents of the downhill only school, the latter are equally justified in inquiring why on earth anyone should go to the trouble of climbing thousands of feet uphill when so many runs are accessible by funicular. I can only write about what I know and prefer. Incredible though it may seem to some of my ski-ing friends, I enjoy a long

climb uphill as much as I do the run down. This is not only because I am an indifferent and timid ski-er, but because I have always held that it is impossible to appreciate mountains fully unless one climbs them by one's own unaided efforts, and that the greatest pleasures in life have to be worked for. When I am transported uphill by funicular I seem to miss something. At the back of my mind is a vague dissatisfaction. I regard the view rather as though I were sitting in a cinema watching it flash past on the screen; there is something almost unreal about it; in some curious manner the day has been thrown out of joint. Possibly a certain ingrained conservatism is responsible for these feelings. For me a day on the mountains in winter means an early start from the valley, an uphill trudge through the pine forest, and a descent in time for dinner, and to ascend by funicular and be back at some ungodly hour in the forenoon throws a time-honoured ritual clean out of gear.

Some of my happiest recollections of ski-ing are associated with Tyrol and the Arlberg, where I used not only to climb mountains but wander across country for many miles. There is enjoyment and interest to be found in journeying through forest land and over hills and passes of moderate height. In theory miles of forest travel may seem dull, but in practice this is far from being the case. No two yards of the way are alike, and every pine in the close-packed ranks is subtly different from its neighbour. It is best to

make such a journey after a snowfall and in calm weather. Then the traveller will know the meaning of silence; not the silence of dead wastes, but the silence of Nature asleep, the most potent of all silences. As he slips along through the still aisles he hears nothing except the light swish of his ski, the creaking of the bindings, and his own blood-stream singing in his ears, but he feels all about him the presence of the trees and a great peacefulness.

There is much to be said for mid-winter ski-ing over dry crystalline snow that sparkles like diamonds or lies in shining petal-like flakes. On such snow the ski-er seems at times to float rather than slide. Then in winter the heights are often warmer and sunnier than the valleys where the cold air collects like a liquid, whilst the views are marvellous in their clarity.

One of the few major peaks that I have climbed in mid-winter was the Piz Bernina, and, as I have mentioned elsewhere, the view extended from Monte Viso to the Gross Glockner and the Black Forest. The party numbered three and we spent the first night in the Boval hut. Next morning we ascended the great ice-fall of the Boval Glacier, which is appropriately known as the Labyrinth. The crevasses were as dangerous as crevasses can be, for the snow masking them, though deep and powdery, was powerless to bear our weight. Two on a rope in such conditions is asking for trouble.



In cold shadow we slowly threaded the maze. It proved too difficult for ski, and we were forced to remove them and proceed on foot. At last we were through and luxuriating in the warm sunlight that flooded the upper snowfields. In spite of the shortness of a January day we could probably have reached the summit and returned to the Boval hut before darkness. Instead we elected to spend the night at the little Marco e Rosa hut, the highest refuge in the Bernina range. It was a wretched experience. The hut is Italian and was therefore ill-constructed and dirty. A black frozen slush covered the floor, whilst snow had penetrated sundry cracks in the walls and formed drifts on the bunks several inches deep. As for the blankets! Skunks and ferrets would have scorned to sleep in them, whilst such pillows as there were were greasy with the hair-oil of past inmates. In this disgusting hovel we spent a wretched night.

It was good to escape next morning into the open air. The contrast between our filthy lodging and the pure snow, sparkling with frost crystals, was something I shall not easily forget. The ascent was not difficult, easier indeed than it is in summer, and we quickly mounted firm wind-compacted snow to the summit ridge. There were a few cornices here but nothing to give us pause, and within an hour and a half of leaving the hut we were seated on the summit.

Forgotten now like a bad dream was our night in

the hut. In brilliant sunlight we toasted on the rocks by the cairn. There was not a breath of wind, not a solitary fragment of cloud floated in heaven. Everywhere there was sunshine and snow; a thousand mountains, a thousand snowfields showed radiant and serene with scarcely a hint of the intervening valleys. And over this splendid scene, over peak and snowfield, from horizon to horizon, reigned a superlative, an absolute, calm.

There we sat, poised in an atmosphere so still, so translucent, it seemed that a single sound might shatter the crystal firmament.

Perhaps it is best to be alone on such occasions. I recollect many ascents where I was the only living soul within miles, when I gazed out over a silver and blue world and saw nothing but the emptiness of space and the loom of peak and snowfield, except for the solitary thread of my ski track curling into the depths.

Is the downward run from heights hard-won and short-enjoyed a climax or an anti-climax? Perhaps it is both. It is an anti-climax in the sense that any physical action is after a vigil on a mountain-top, and a climax in that an effortless ski-run down a snowfield after many hours of strenuous climbing concentrates within a few short minutes the beauty of a motion that is nearer to flying than any aeroplane can ever hope to imitate.

The Alps are beautiful in winter. They are even

more beautiful when the first of the crocuses and soldanellas breathe their way through the edge of the retreating snow. This is the time, from March to May, that High Alpine ski-ing is at its very best. The days are long and warm, yet the snow is in perfect order. It is not only consolidated over the crevasses, so that the ski-er may run unroped in safety, but there is often a covering of powdery snow resting on a hard substratum, and there is no better ski-ing snow than this. Many of my happiest days have been spent ski-ing at this season, and if I had to make a choice between winter and spring I would not hesitate. I have ski-ed in the spring over Tyrol, the Arlberg, the Silvretta, the glaciers of the Oberland and elsewhere, sometimes with friends and sometimes by myself. Some may deplore solitary ski-ing. The dangers are obvious. You cannot afford to cripple yourself, whilst a lingering death in a crevasse is not to be contemplated for a moment. You have to be careful, run with the utmost discretion, never take a risk, and above all cultivate an observance of detail, of mountain, snow and weather. Then you will taste to the full the many and subtle thrills of solitary ski-ing; the snow will become for you an almost living substance, and the mountains will be your friends—not always friends perhaps, but companions who react kindly to the sweet persuasions of knowledge and experience. Then, and only then, will you extract the fullest measure of pleasure and satisfaction from

the wooden runners. You will know that, except through circumstances outside your skill and control, they are unlikely to bear you to danger and destruction. You will hear them rasp over the frozen snow at sunrise. They will bear you upwards to silvery heights, whisper to you as they part the frost crystals, sing to you as they surge down the snowfield. And when you have descended on them through the hot noonday glare, and have entered once more into the realm of life and growth, you will sniff as you have never sniffed before the scents of pasture and pine forest, and you will seat yourself on the turf amidst the flowers and never for one instant regret that you must carry your ski on your shoulder down to the valley.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE HIMALAYAS

THE great Gangetic plain of northern India stretches level like a table-top to the foothills of the Himalayas. There are no preliminary rises in the ground, nothing to suggest the proximity of the highest mountain range of the world. The plain is hot; it supports a teeming population; there are paddy-fields and primitive villages, fine cities, railways, roads and forests. The people who populate it work beneath blazing suns, enduring diseases: typhoid, malaria, cholera, dysentery. They are born, they work, they die, millions upon millions of them, simple industrious people whose lives and livelihood are linked with the never-failing waters of the Ganges.

Then come the foothills. One half-mile the earth is flat, the next it rears skywards. A man may walk several hundreds of miles on the level, then, suddenly, he will find himself climbing steeply uphill. In this contrast lies one charm of the Himalayas. On the plain, men's lives are ordered with precision. They see the sun rise above a flat edge and set behind the same flat edge. Trees, fences and houses alone break the level vistas. But the hills, even the first of the



On the Zermatt Weisshorn



foothills, are different. There is nothing monotonous; instead there is a vast disorder. And this disorder suggests a struggle against forces which must be met and countered if life is to be sustained. True, life is easy enough in the Himalayan foothills, but the implication of struggle is always manifest, and is reflected in the character of those who dwell among them. Men who dwell on the lean hills of Asia are the superior in courage, strength and initiative to those who dwell on the fat plains.

The first uplifts of the Himalayas are inspiring to the traveller who approaches them. He is suddenly braced, fired with new hopes and aspirations. A plain has its charms for all to see, but the charms of the hills are mysterious and must be sought.

I well remember my first approach to the Himalayas. I had travelled from Calcutta through the night to Siliguri, which lies beneath the foothills of the Kangchenjunga range. During the greater part of the journey the heat was intense, but towards dawn the temperature dropped many degrees. The air was renewed with freshness and vitality. I could sense, I could smell the hills. The train was passing over the plain, over ground absolutely flat. There were trees here and there, and water gleaming in the paddy-fields as a fiery sun rose out of the heat mists. Then I saw the hills. They were not many miles distant, but they seemed immeasurably remote. It was impossible to associate them with the common



things of life. They were unsubstantial and yet substantial, near and yet far. From such paradoxes mysteries are born. Then I saw something else. Above and beyond the hills shone a little triangle of gold. For a moment I failed to realise its import; then I recognised it as the snow-crest of a high peak sixty or eighty miles distant. I remember that my heart seemed to stop for an instant, then jerk on again, and that my body, languid with heat and lack of sleep, braced and tautened. I was feeling what many another mountaineer has felt when he first saw the peaks of a new range. The Himalayas came to me not as mere mountains, not as something to be gazed at with dispassionate interest, but as a vision snatched from eternity. For a few vitalising instants I experienced the same feelings that I had had as a boy when first I set eyes on high mountains. I had seen this vision before; I had toiled and striven, lived, loved and died within sight of the snows. My vision of the Himalayas was no passing emotion. They were a part of me, those mountains, and I a part of them, an indissoluble union.

The foothills extend for varying distances between the plain and the high snows, anything from fifty miles to one hundred miles. They are forest-clad, and the forests range from sub-tropical jungles to upland forests of rhododendron, oak and fir. Climate plays its part in determining the character of the foothills. Eastwards the lower jungles are moist, but in the

north-west they are drier. To approach the Himalayas via the Teesta Valley in Sikkim or via the Kuari Pass in the United Provinces is to experience different types of scenery and climate. The Teesta Valley is in many ways as fine an introduction as any man could desire. Here is an enormous forest-matted rift down which rush in grey turgid fury the snow-waters of Kangchenjunga and western Bhutan. The warm moist air drones and vibrates with the song of countless insects, and innumerable blood-sucking leeches lie in wait for the traveller. To anyone not used to tropical jungles the dark overgrown aisles are mysterious, and at night, when the forest is full of furtive whisperings and rustlings, menacing. Yet to know the jungle is to appreciate it. It may be red in tooth and claw, it may epitomise the eternal struggle for existence in which force and fear are potent factors, but there is dignity, grandeur and beauty about the forests girding the knees of the Himalayas. Where the trees are thin, and from glades and clearings, great mountain-sides are visible lifting towards cloud-wreathed snows, and the power of the peaks is manifested by the muffled thunder of the glacier-fed river.

Himalayan valleys because of their narrowness and depth induce a sensation of imprisonment, and the foothill ridges are always to be preferred for the sense of airiness and freedom they confer. From these ridges the "Snows" are seen in the north. Darjeeling

is justly reputed to be one of the finest view-points in the world. The visitor should go to Observatory Hill on the outskirts of the town at dawn and during the sunset hour. Then he will appreciate the influence of the "Abode of Snow" on the native mind. Before him are foothills, range upon range, and dim abysmal valleys; the forest-clad ridges loom a deep purple in the half light, and above them Kangchenjunga shines in pale ethereal splendour. Watch the changing tones, the subtle shades, the ever-varying lights of this tremendous mountain. See it before sunrise lofting in sharp hard outline. Note how the snow separates itself from the rock, cold and pallid in the dimming stars, until the whole of the northern horizon is hung with a luminous splendour and the indistinct mass of mountains is resolved into detail: rocks, snow, ice, glacier, precipice and ridge.

Over all broods a great silence. The only sound is the rustling of the Buddhist prayer flags in the dawn wind. Otherwise the silence is final and absolute, the silence of space and distance, of cloud, atmosphere and eternity. In this silence a watcher sees beyond physical beauty, sensing something greater than calculable earth. These titanic outpourings of the world, immobile in the growing light, confer a spiritual blessing and a ceaseless benediction on mankind. Here is earth untrodden, mysterious, sublime. Here exist ageless things; here blow unfettered winds; here

rage unbridled storms; here is eternal snow and the serenity of God.

Over these hills the pilgrims trudge. In their cells the hermits meditate and pray. In their monasteries the monks chant their orisons. On his windy plateau the Tibetan goes on his way in peace.

The light grows and grows. Of a sudden the crest of Kangchenjunga is afire. The light creeps earthwards, then, in one tremendous stride, passes westwards to the next summit. Swiftly it flows downwards and outwards, touching peaks, then snowfields and minor ridges, until the whole of the northern heaven is alight. The shadows are opal with reflected light; every snowfield and ridge stands revealed; every summit is limpid in the golden air. Now the sun steals over the huddled foothills, touching a point here and a ridge there, sending its shafts deeply into the haze-encumbered valleys. Infinitely delicate are the tones, greys and blues blending imperceptibly with opal and rose. In a single sweep the eye embraces a hundred miles of mountains, in a single lift it travels from sub-tropic valleys over forest and upland, alp and stony waste, glacier and snowfield, to icy steep and frigid summit.

Minute by minute the colours change. Purple gives place to blue, and blue to opal. The green of the nearer forests is slowly revealed. Sounds come out of the valley beneath: the chatter of monkeys, the crowing of cocks, the barking of a dog.

The first rush of rosy light bursts into a white heat. Kangchenjunga, a little while ago a spectral curtain, grows in breadth and depth. Unsuspected ridges and buttresses are revealed. Glaciers and snowfields are no longer featureless expanses; they are moulded by the slanting rays of the sun into a thousand details, curves and folds, ripples and valleys. Detail constantly changes as the sun lifts and the shadows recede. Ice-fluted ridges shine through the clear air, pinnacles are etched sharply against the deepening blue of the morning sky, rifts delineated by slender pencilled lines. Such artistry, such complexity outruns the eye and brain. The watcher must content himself with the whole, not delve in search of multitudinous detail. Only thus can he appreciate the beauty of the scene.

There is something about the Himalayas not possessed by the Alps, something unseen and unknown, a charm that pervades every hour spent among them, a mystery intriguing and disturbing. Confronted by them, a man loses his grasp of ordinary things, perceiving himself as immortal, an entity capable of outdistancing all change, all decay, all life, all death. And when he has experienced this, when he has seen the Himalayan vision, he will want to return again and again, to see through the swirling mists of physical change the eternal loom and lift of changeless things, to smell the same flowers, to listen to the same stream, to enter into the same communion with the heights.

I have written so far only of one or two aspects of the world's highest mountains. There are many more. It is best to let fancy ride unfettered across the busy countries of memory. What do I remember best that I may give lucid pictures to those who have never seen the Himalayas, that I may convey something above and beyond a mere permutation of words and jugglery of phrases? I can remember mornings at Ranikhet when I slept on a bungalow verandah and on waking used to watch Nanda Devi and Trisul reveal themselves in the dawn. I can see, too, the lift and sweep of the deodar forests and the twilit troughs of the valleys in between, and gaze northwards, away from the swarming plains to where the blue and silver of the snows shines out from between tall pillars of thunder-cloud. This is the country sacred to all Hindus, for here the Ganges has its source. From the twin summits of Nanda Devi, past the snows of Trisul and Nanda Ghunti, beyond the granite pyramid of Kamet to the snows of Badrinath and Tehri Garhwal where the Alaknanda and Gangotri rivers have their source, the glaciers form an inexhaustible reservoir for the sun-parched Gangetic plain. Of all countries this is the one I love best. Its lower jungles are not dense masses of tangled vegetation thriving in a humid atmosphere like those of Sikkim and Bhutan, but more often than not fragrant forests of deodar and pine clothe the lower ranges of foothills, well-spaced trees with little undergrowth in between suggesting a vast

parkland. Over this country, the complicated ranks of foothills, each a little higher, a little bluer, a little more remote than the last, the eye travels to a gigantic chaos of snow and rock, this supreme dismemberment of earth called the Himalaya. When a man gazes thus, perhaps in the first pearly light, perhaps in the afternoon when the peaks loom out from between towering thunder-clouds, perhaps in the evening when all is suffused with gold, he will, like the simple native who journeys on pilgrimage to the sources of the sacred river, like the sage who lifts up his eyes to the hills, sense a mystery, a harmony, a presence and a peace.

It would be easy here to analyse and compare, but analysis and comparison are at their best intellectual exercises. Happiness and peace are not products of the intellect, they spring from deeper sources. To enjoy mountains, to enjoy any aspect of Nature, is impossible when the intellect alone is employed. Attend to science also; visit the Himalayas to unravel geographical problems, solve the secrets of their complicated structure, collect botanical specimens, attend to one or other of the sciences, but go also to enjoy their beauty. Go like a child into this region of wonderful things; be sensible to the harmonies of creation; do not be afraid to be awed; be humble. Do not take too much account of time, for Nature is timeless. Rhythm, not time, is her motive. Enter into this rhythm. Then you will hear the music of the heights and the voice of far and lonely places.

The Tibetan dwelling on his wind-swept plateau far above the teeming plains and cities knows peace. To our minds he is primitive and, it may be, dirty: medical science, sanitation and hygiene have passed him by; he is hard put to it to wrest a livelihood from the scanty soil; he is a slave to superstitions; but he is nearer to discovering what the West has failed so far even to visualise, contentment. Height, remoteness and the commercial valuelessness of their land have all played their part in moulding the character of the peoples who dwell on the Roof of Asia. Few Tibetans could rhapsodise on the beauties of Tibet; like all genuine countrymen, they are too much a part of it; also they are denied the contrasts experienced by the travelled European. But the feeling, if latent and inexpressible, is there. For all its harshness, its biting winds, its cold, its flesh-shrivelling suns, Tibet is a land of ideals and dreams. The Tibetan lives in an atmosphere clear and limpid like hill-water. In this marvellous air the Roof of the World stretches golden in the sunlight, a celestial shore on which time is measured only by waning and waxing shadows, the coldness of winter and the brief warmth of summer. Yet if British eyes are unaccustomed to such clarity and the sandy hills seem to be etched with brutal distinctness against the deep blue sky, there are other times, in southern Tibet particularly during the monsoon season, when distant hills are as ethereally blue as they are in Scotland on an April day. At this



season also there is little or no wind, except when rainstorms wander up from the south, fragments of the moisture-charged clouds that pile up against the Himalayas at this season. Then the winds sleep and there is a great silence.

Tibet is beautiful. Go out from your tent at night. You will see a sky blazing with stars shining undimmed from horizon to horizon, stars unlike any stars seen on the clearest nights from these islands. Here in one glimpse is the grandeur, the appalling miracle of the universe. Who am I? Whence have I come? Whither must I go? must have been the thought of many a traveller in this land.

\*                      \*                      \*                      \*                      \*

One night the 1933 Mount Everest expedition was camped at Shekar Dzong. Immediately above the camp a rock rose twelve hundred feet from the plain. On the side of this rock is a monastery housing several hundred lamas. No one knows when it was built, and it is a miracle of architectural and engineering skill. The buildings, like other Tibetan dwellings, are flat-roofed with cunningly conceived elliptical walls, which relieve every block from an otherwise monotonous rectangularity and bring symmetry to the whole edifice. The blocks are arranged one upon the other in step-like tiers, the whole effect being simple and entirely satisfying, harmonising as it does with the simplicity of the surrounding country. Lastly, they are in the main whitewashed, though some are

coloured a reddish ochre. Finally, to cap all, an ancient fort is perched on the summit of the crag.

The moon was rising that particular evening and the biting dust-laden wind had fallen to a calm. The moonlight had not yet reached the plain over the hills, but it already shone on the crest of the rocky pile above. Slowly it crept downwards and lit the monastery, bathing the white buildings in its glow so that they stood out brilliantly from the darker background of rock and the deep purple of the star-filled sky. Of all sights that I have witnessed this was the most extraordinary. Up in the stars was a fairy palace come to life, the dream-castle of childhood had materialised. Another member of the expedition and I gazed spell-bound at the spectacle. Then, with singular appropriateness, the lamas began to chant their evening prayers, a chant that rose and fell, punctuated at regular intervals by the deep booming of a horn. Measured and calm the harmony floated down to us from the stars, the perfect accompaniment to a scene that I can never forget.

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Nilkanta is a mountain in Garhwal near the source of the Alaknanda River. It is an isolated mountain of tremendous steepness, and is well known to the tens of thousands of Hindu pilgrims who annually visit the shrine of Badrinath and the sources of the Ganges.

During the Kamet expedition of 1931 the expedi-

tion was camped near Badrinath on its return journey to Ranikhet. We were all hoping for a view of Nilkanta, but it was the monsoon season and the peaks were often obscured by clouds. It was a cloudy evening as we dined in our mess tent, but soon after darkness the clouds dispersed, and as we strolled outside we suddenly saw Nilkanta. It was framed in the precipitous walls of a narrow valley. The valley sides were in darkness, but the rising moon shone full on the great ice-clad mountain. The night was very still; no sound came to the ear except for the rumble of the Alaknanda River; the warm turf at our feet breathed a fragrance of flowers. And in front, immeasurably high, glowed this marvellous mountain, the icy crystallisation of beauty.

Six years later, Peter Oliver and I attempted to climb Nilkanta. We failed, principally because of monsoon weather, but we scarcely grudged the mountain its victory. We approached it up a hitherto unvisited valley to the south, and although our base camp was pitched on the flanks of the mountain it was some time before we saw it. The circumstances were very similar to those of the first occasion. There were the same monsoon mists, the same dispersal after nightfall, then the electrifying vision of the peak bathed in radiant moonlight far up in the stars.

Now I can never smell burning juniper without recalling a camp-fire on a Himalayan mountain-side. A barrier of war and suffering stands between the

mountaineer and that remote mountain land, but nothing can destroy his memories, the memories of friends, of peaceful evenings under the stars, of strenuous climbs and grand adventurings. There crowd into my mind visions of flowers bending their heads in the caress of the morning wind, forests above the flowers, and higher still silvery snow lifting to peaks unnamed in the rich blue of the Himalayan sky. I can hear the note of the glacier torrent as I settle down in my sleeping-bag to a dreamless slumber. And I can stand on a foothill ridge and see between the towering larches the distant snows high above the crowding ridges, the opal valleys in between, and clouds that form and re-form, weaving their glowing canopies out of the skeins of space.

Here is a Nature that can be harsh and cruel, and here is a Nature that can be friendly and beautiful. It has its pains and griefs, but there is in it a perpetual harmony that runs heedless of all else. In it it is possible to sense a continuity beyond material creation and dissolution. In it a man sees himself and his visions, not as something temporary and ephemeral, but as part of a benevolent and loving scheme. He becomes aware of beauty and the virtues of serenity. The Indian has long recognised the value of the Himalayas in his spiritual progress. The European, brought up in a close-knit community which only a spirit of service can operate happily and efficiently, scorns the hermit for his exclusiveness and selfishness, and apos-

trophises the dreamer and philosopher as unpractical and unrealistic. Perhaps the true art of living lies half-way between the two extremes.

The traveller to the Himalayas is brought into sympathetic contact not only with the beauties of the world's highest mountains but with much that is normally denied him in civilisation. For one thing, he learns to appreciate the unimportance of time. In the city efficiency is wont to be measured in terms of time, but in the wilds time is no longer a hard taskmaster and ceases to be of vital account; it is measured only by the rising and setting of the sun and by bodily needs and functions.

I remember well an occasion on which the implications of time were brought home to me. This was in 1937. I was travelling in the Himalayas accompanied only by native porters. I was entirely my own master and could go where I wanted. My route to the mountains took me from Ranikhet over the foothills to Joshimath, a trek through beautiful country which culminated in the crossing of the Kuari Pass. My time was entirely my own, yet all the way I progressed with one eye on distance and the other on my watch. I was concerned to know how long it took me to march so far; I looked at my watch when I set off in the morning, and again when camp was pitched in the afternoon or evening. I looked at it when I went to bed, and again when I got up in the morning, when I stopped to rest, and

when I had a meal. Time had ceased to have any practical value, yet I was still obsessed by it; in a word, I had carried civilisation into the wilds. I was still its slave when I reached Joshimath, having done the last march of so many miles in so many hours and minutes.

Joshimath is on the edge of the high Himalayas, with a view across the deep rift of the Alakanda Valley to a wall of mountains rising thousands of feet towards the peaks of the Badrinath and Zaskar ranges. It is a wonderful view, and the traveller realises that he stands at the threshold of high mountains. And so that evening I sat outside the dak bungalow under an apricot tree feeling that the first part of my journey was behind and that my way henceforwards lay in wilder, sterner and, for me, more interesting and beautiful country; there were peaks to climb, and the thought was thrilling after the tramp across the foothills.

The evening was calm. During the afternoon thunderstorms had growled and muttered among the ranges, but the clouds were dissolving and I sat and watched the setting sun firing the mountain wall opposite, and the blue haze in the Alaknanda Valley deepening to purple. The calm and the peace of the scene weighed subtly on my senses. For the first time since leaving England I relaxed, really relaxed, letting myself absorb and be absorbed by the beauty of my surroundings and the serenity of eventide.

And as I did so it came to me suddenly that time, as I knew it, had ceased to be of account. I saw myself as a small figure toiling and moiling over its small affairs, self-conscious and self-important, and always with one eye on time; measuring time, calculating time. I saw this same small figure slogging across the foothills in the wake of the same tyrant, hypnotised by the Dictator, Time.

From that moment time ceased to be of any particular account. I rose when it was light, I ate when I was hungry, I went to bed when I was tired. Except during long and difficult mountaineering expeditions, when it was necessary to calculate the speed at which climbing was being done and estimate whether or not it was possible to return to camp by nightfall, I never so much as glanced at my watch. I got along very well without time.

I have written enough to show that the Himalayas exercise a profound influence on men. You will see this influence in operation among those who dwell among them. Never have I seen simpler, happier, more contented folk than the villagers and shepherds of Garhwal and Kumaon. In the Alps there is sometimes to be discerned an atmosphere of restlessness and discontent due to uncertain political and economic factors; I have never been conscious of this in the Himalayas. My impression is that a serene beneficence invests these mountains. Of course there is struggle and disease, and deceit and cruelty are to

be found wherever men congregate, but on the whole he who travels in these mountains will have peace. He will sense this peace not only in the vistas of peak and valley but in the toiling pilgrims who travel from afar to pay their respects to Mother Ganges, who worship at the shrines of Shiva and Vishnu or circumambulate the sacred peak of Kailas. They too have left the plains, have passed for a while from the material to the spiritual, from time to timelessness.



## CHAPTER XIV

### MOUNT EVEREST

My first impressions of Mount Everest were gained through photographs and a cinematograph film. I saw a mountain of almost incredible harshness of tone and contour set amidst a scene of lunar bleakness and desolation. If it was the object of the photographers and cinematographers of early expeditions to present to the Public a task of brutal unremitting labour set on a cold stage harshly limelited by a blinding sun, they certainly succeeded. In point of fact, these effects were produced by the simple means of over-filtering panchromatic negatives. Then I met a member of the 1922 expedition, and he gave it as his opinion that the highest mountain of the world was ugly to look at and easy to climb, a slag-heap needing only endurance and good weather to surmount. Thus, when in 1933 I first took part in an Everest expedition I did so prejudiced against the mountain by what I had seen and heard, yet determined at the same time to extract every ounce of interest and enjoyment from the experience.

In order to reach Mount Everest the climber must pass through the verdant sub-tropical forests of Sikkim,

cross the Himalayas to the plateau of Tibet, and approach the mountain from the east and north.

It would be difficult to imagine a grander introduction to the high Himalayas than the Teesta Valley. For several days the traveller follows a well-made path through steaming forests packed with animal and insect life. In his ears is the humming of tree-crickets, the throaty clatter of bull-frogs and the dull roaring of the glacier-born Teesta River raging over its rocky bed towards the Plain of Bengal. Great hillsides enclose him, forest piled on forest with tremendous steepness, here and there rifted by gorges and torrents, a wild ungoverned profusion of vegetation. Now and then he catches sight of the snows, and, if he is lucky, may glimpse Kangchenjunga from the dak bungalow at Singhik.

Presently he climbs up out of humid heat into humid chilliness, from the sub-tropic to the sub-Alpine, from a region of orchids, tree-ferns and bananas to forests of scarlet tree-rhododendrons and creamy magnolias, and higher yet to an Alpine country of conifers, birches and meadows, a country of innumerable flowers which have brought a wealth of beauty to our English gardens.

At length, pressing ever upwards, he passes beyond the tree-line and the shrub-line into bleaker lands, through a portal of icy mountains 22,000 feet high, through airs ever drier and winds ever colder, to the 16,000-feet pass of the Sebu La separating India from Tibet.

Few journeys can provide so many contrasts within so few miles as this journey from India to Tibet. The traveller who crosses the Himalayas does not merely cross a pass into a different country, he emerges into a new tradition and a new life. The view, as he stands on the wind-swept pass, prepares him for what he will see and experience. Behind him is the valley leading down through Sikkim towards India, before him is Tibet. Used as he is to fertility, he pauses amazed, even appalled, at the stupendous barrenness of the scene. There are no trees, no fields, nothing but rolling hills, yellow like honey in the sunlight, brilliantly distinct in the moisture-free atmosphere. Above, in a gentian sky, a few clouds pass, casting blue shadows on a stony waste. Eastwards, westwards the Himalayas extend their gigantic wall, a barrier between peoples, between religions, between material progress and age-long traditions, between reality and unreality. Tibet is a land of dreams, for in its golden vistas, in its silences, in its white-walled monasteries, is the stuff of dreams. Yet the dominant note is stability. There is something dignified and sonorous in the very atmosphere, in the names of the great mountains verging its windy plains: Kangchenjunga, Chomolhari, Kartachangri, Gyachung Kang, Arma Dreme, Chomolungma. When a man visits Tibet he does not merely step up so many feet, he does not merely set eyes on a different landscape, he enters upon a new spiritual plane. He may encounter dirt and disease, fear



*View from 25,000 feet on Mount Everest*



and superstition, but he will also discern happiness and peace, a peace ageless and timeless like the girding hills.

For all its harsh cold winds, its dust-storms, its stinging blizzards, Tibet will clasp you in a strange embrace. On its plains, in its illimitable horizons, you will come to forget the world you have left, the world of noise and speedy locomotion, the world in which men tramp out their time in factories, streets and roaring highways. For in Tibet men live in the open, under the sun and sky, the life human beings were meant to lead. Here is no place for the goosestepper, the robot and the slave. Wild places are for free men. The scream of the dictator sounds pitiful and absurd amid the silent recesses of Central Asia. God save Tibet from the Gadarene rush of Western Civilisation.

In one respect an Everest expedition has always seemed to me a trifle futile. Here is a group of men, a self-contained unit of civilisation, equipped with wireless apparatus, canned food and the like, moving across one of the most interesting countries of the world. They regard the people as ignorant and inferior because they have no wireless sets or canned food, backward "natives" of small account. I am not advocating that any equipment necessary for the ascent of Everest should be discarded, but I do believe that we should approach the mountain with the greatest possible simplicity, in the manner of pilgrims rather than buccaneers. We should enter into the spirit of the country and its people, not barge blindly

forwards towards an Imperial goal. The Germans are even more case-hardened in this respect, and cannot go anywhere without waving their flags and impinging with Teutonic force upon the countryside and its inhabitants. He is a true traveller and explorer who casts aside civilised pretensions and, escaping from his civilised shell, allows himself to be absorbed into the country he is travelling through or exploring. I have been guilty of much that I have criticised, and it was not brought home to me how interesting and delightful Tibetan travel can be until circumstances involved me in a solitary journey accompanied by Tibetan porters along a portion of the route to Everest. On that occasion I was entertained by Tibetans and learned more about them in a few days than in two previous expeditions.

One episode I shall always remember with pleasure. I had paused for a rest by a path when some Tibetans approached. They gathered round me, talking and smiling. I could not understand what they were saying, but presently an old woman, whose ragged clothes were not worth sixpence, came up to me, undid a leather purse and emptied the contents into my lap. Possibly they put me down as a beggar or a pilgrim, but I felt then, as I had not felt before, that feeling of kinship which must be kindled in the heart of every traveller if he is to make worth-while journeys and enter into the spirit of travel.

To eyes accustomed to the soft climate of Britain the colours of the Tibetan plateau seem at first brutal

and hard, but this is soon forgotten and the eye becomes not only accustomed to, but enchanted by, the clarity of the atmosphere. As the mountaineer advances westwards across the plateau he sees Everest many miles distant, a tiny triangle of white among a tangle of peaks and ranges. He sees it again on various occasions, from the hills above Shekar Dzong and Khampa Dzong, and the Kang La. There is nothing to dispute its sovereignty; it stands out above everything, usually with a great banner of cloud trailing from it, the celebrated "plume" about which so much has been heard and written. The finest view of all is that from the Kang La. From this 18,000-foot-high pass the eye ranges from the complicated peaks and ridges in the north-west past the great mountains of Cho Oyu and Gyachung Kang to the peaks of Lhonak east of the Arun gorges. In the centre of this splendid panorama stands Everest. There is no doubt about its size, but is it beautiful? Never, I think, was comparison more odious than in the case of Everest. To compare its lines with those of the Matterhorn or the Weisshorn, to estimate its artistic worth against the snows of Kangchenjunga or Siniolchu, is to fall into an artistic trap. It may be that those who first saw Everest were best able to estimate its worth, for since those days the mountain has become associated with so much of human tragedy and endeavour that the climber is no longer able to take a detached view.



Let me state at once that my first impressions of Mount Everest were not of an ugly mountain or a beautiful mountain; they were rather those of someone who is confronted by a presence and a personality. I did not find myself struggling in a morass of comparisons. It is possible that anyone ignorant as to the nature of the mountain might not be impressed with its beauty were he set down in the Rongbuk Valley. At the same time, were he to see Everest from the Kang La, whence practically the whole of the north and north-east faces are visible, he could hardly fail to be impressed not only by its size but by its modelling. He would note first of all an uncompromising simplicity, then his glance would rest critically on the details of the mountain. First he would see the north-east and north-west ridges. The former rises from a snowy col, the Rapiu La, some 21,000 feet high, and sweeps up for nearly four miles to the north-east shoulder over 6,000 feet higher. After this it rises less steeply, except where it is broken by two abrupt cliffs known to climbers as the first and second steps, to the foot of the pyramid which crowns the mountain, an abrupt rock-mass with a tent-like edge sloping gently from east to west to the final point, 29,002 <sup>1</sup> feet above the sea. The north-west ridge is little less long. It is based on a snow-

<sup>1</sup> According to latest unofficial measurements, the height of Mount Everest, allowing for the gravitational pull of the Himalayan mass, is 29,146 feet. In any event, 29,002 feet is merely the mean of a number of observations made from distant survey stations.

covered shoulder from which ice-slopes and ridges of tremendous steepness radiate downwards to the Rongbuk Glacier and the Hlo La. From the shoulder the ridge rises some distance at a more or less uniform angle; then, as it nears the summit, it steepens and is broken by some formidable walls, the jagged ends of the rocky bands that seam the north face of the mountain forming the steps already mentioned in the north-east ridge.

From this bald description it might be inferred that there is nothing particularly interesting or beautiful about the mountain when viewed from the north. In general form it is conventional, built up of main ridges supported by subsidiary ribs, shoulders, and buttresses. Yet, curiously enough, unlike many mountains, Everest has never reminded me of any other mountain. It is true that the north-west shoulder and ridge is vaguely reminiscent of the Zmutt ridge of the Matterhorn, but I cannot recollect any mountain ridge resembling in its general characteristics the north-east ridge, whilst the final pyramid is unlike any mountain-summit of my experience. I have seen various peaks that reminded me of the Matterhorn, the Weisshorn and Mont Blanc, but so far as my experience goes, Mount Everest is unique.

Whether it is beautiful is a matter of opinion. The view up the Rongbuk Valley is scarcely worthy of the world's highest mountain. It has been described as drab, and this is to some extent true, for the mountain-

sides framing it are stony, unattractive expanses devoid of vegetation. Furthermore, the valley is too long and too straight for the mountain to burst on the mountaineer with any great dramatic effect. Yet I would not describe even this view, although it is undoubtedly the least attractive scenically, as drab. Howard Somervell's paintings and natural-colour photographs have disclosed striking colours which, like all mountain colours, react dramatically in tone to the vagaries of atmosphere, weather and the angle of the sun. At the same time, it is unfortunate that the North Peak interposes its unhandsome bulk where it is least wanted, thus spoiling the superb downward sweep of the north-east ridge from the shoulder to the Rapiu La. If there is any offender to beauty it is this mountain, which is certainly impressive but cannot by any stretch of imagination be termed beautiful, even when its relative insignificance is allowed for.

So much for the first impression of Everest when viewed from the north. Few mountaineers have seen it from the west, none, I believe, from points sufficiently distant to eliminate the evils of foreshortening, and certainly none from the south other than far distant points on the Himalayan foothills. On the last-mentioned side Lhötse, the South Peak, interposes itself, but it is probable that the Everest massif viewed from this direction must be one of the grandest sights in the world, for vantage-points would be at a lower elevation than the Rongbuk Valley, and forest-clad

slopes and fertile valleys would afford a necessary contrast between the pastoral and the sublime. There is, however, one aspect of Everest that many mountaineers have seen in which the beauty as well as the grandeur of the great mountain is apparent to the most critical eye. That is the view from the east, from the neighbourhood of the Kharta and Karma valleys. From this direction Everest is seen end on like a gigantic wedge. To the south the wedge falls in an ice-face perpetually grumbling with avalanches some 10,000 feet to the Kangshung Glacier, to the north it sweeps earthwards in a rock-face almost as high to the Rongbuk Glacier. Both faces are elliptical, and unite in a sharp summit fully worthy of its supreme elevation.

Perhaps the principal impression of the Everest climber is the individuality and power of the mountain. There is no mountain that imposes on the climber a greater ordeal of wind and storm, cold, breathlessness and discomfort. For these reasons Mount Everest has been variously described as treacherous and hostile; to it has been attributed a destructive and terrible personality. Yet it is surely presumptuous to invest any mountain with human frailties and malignancies? The mountaineer climbing on Everest exposes himself to forces inimical to life. He is an invader of a realm and, as some would have it, a sanctuary unfitted to sustain life. The hostility and treachery, if any, are his. Mount

Everest is passionless. There is nothing malevolent about its tempests. They are merely a part of the order of things. Yet logic is apt to stumble during the upward toil towards that wind-swept pyramid, and I remember well that, as I stood gazing wearily and apathetically towards the final uprush of yellow rocks, pale and remote in the dark blue of space, Everest seemed imbued with some personality, something fascinating but coldly indifferent, something serene and aloof from the petty conquests of men. Here no ordinary effort will avail against, nor will any mechanism dominate, that proud summit with its knightly plume of flying mist.

Toil, discomfort, freezing cold and burning sun, failing appetite, sleeplessness, irritation, boredom, these are some of the penalties of Everest. But out of them the climber gains an incommunicable peace and happiness; out of defeat is born a great satisfaction; out of the misery of life at high altitudes shines a splendid vision. It is beauty. A man does not, cannot, appreciate beauty when every nerve is straining, when every muscle, every ambition is assailed by a deadly weariness. Yet in the midst of weariness, during well-nigh intolerable discomfort, eye and mind are recording scenes and registering beauty, so that when he descends once more to common, comfortable earth he is able to review what he has seen. As I write there pass through my memory a thousand scenes of beauty, and I now know

that in seeing and experiencing them discomfort and danger counted for little, and that I would gladly return to gather more. I can hear as though it were yesterday the roar of the wind across the north face as it flings itself on the frail little tents at Camp Five, a wind of bitter intense cold, bereft of every quality of life and gentleness, elemental, from the abysses of space. Once more I am facing that wind, shuddering while attempting to manipulate a small camera with numbed fingers. The sun is about to set behind the great mountains Cho Oyu and Gyachung Kang, which rise above a sea of monsoon cloud embracing the lower regions as far as the eye can see. These clouds have cut off the camp from all sight of the earth. Uneasily they billow and twist in random air currents as they pour ceaselessly out of the Nepal valleys in never-ending battalions. At the time I recognised them as forerunners of bad weather that was to ruin our plans and send us discomforted down to the base camp; but now, seated in comfort with warm fingers and easily working lungs, I know neither discomfort nor anxiety and remember only a scene of marvellous beauty. The mountaineer often looks over a cloud sea, but few have looked over one from an elevation of 25,700 feet on the highest mountain of the world. And the scene was commensurate with its elevation and magnitude. The sun was setting in a clear sky, but no warmth was perceptible in the thin atmosphere. Its almost level rays touched the clouds so that each crest stood out

brilliantly lit, range upon range of shining crests apparently as solid and impermeable as the huge peaks that rose above them.

Except for one tenuous cloud ablaze with prismatic colourings that hovered near the summit of Cho Oyu, the sky was clear. Already in the east it was indigo in colour, and a deepening shade spread swiftly towards the zenith, sprinkling innumerable stars. Overhead the sky was a deep blue, and this blue extended westwards almost to where the sun blazed, so far were we removed from the water-charged atmosphere that brings soft colours at dawn and sunset to lower heights. It was a scene such as an adventurer to another planet might expect to see, harsh, brilliant, hard, brutal in its fidelity.

Two thousand three hundred feet above our heads rose the summit pile of Everest. It was harsh also, and terribly cold. The wind was fiercer there. It seemed to moan and groan; there was a shuddering under-current of sound, a percussing surge like the booming of breakers beneath a leaden sky. The final pyramid shone palely in the deepening blue, and from it streamed in endless and enormous volume a rush of mist and snow. It was terrible that view. There was no life in it; nothing could grow there; it was utterly dead, not a mortal deadness but the deadness of petrification and extinction. As I watched I could see little spirals of wind-blown snow flitting ghost-like across the yellow slabs, until they were whirled over

the rocky edge of the north-east ridge and lost in the vaster whirl of the plume.

Such was the scene that evening. Uncomfortable it might be. The wind might freeze the blood in our toes and fingers, the thin lifeless air deprive us of ambition as well as of breath, yet it was beautiful also. This beauty was not to be analysed in terms of line and form, tone and colour; it was not dependent on height, remoteness or isolation, on depth, scale or distance, it had not only a material but a spiritual significance. Outward form is but the shell of inward meaning. Photography and cinematography might reproduce the shell, but the meaning could only be appreciated through contact and knowledge. We were above the clouds, not borne up by mechanical means but brought there by our own exertions. And beneath those clouds was the world we had left, the world of men and affairs, a necessary world to which we must return, but, viewed from Everest, something unbelievably remote. That was the living world. Our world on Everest was dead, a world of pallid snow and riven rocks, of clouds and storms, silence and loneliness. But it was a beautiful world, untainted by misery and distress, unknown to evil, untamed, unshaped by man, marvellously pure. The stars paced over it undimmed by fumes and smoke. We stood not in the presence of death but on the very threshold of eternity.

The sun set. As it did so its glare was softened to



crimson for a few moments and the spiralling columns of wind-driven snow became incipient flames flitting across the mountain-side. The glow lifted skywards. The final pyramid was the last of all the world to receive it, and its yellow rocks lit with a ruddy unearthly glare against the awful emptiness of space.

But I did not see much of this. I was deep in my sleeping-bag, trying to restore circulation to my cold-stiffened fingers. And so must it ever be on mountains. Climax and anti-climax are too often associated. A man may spend his time on a hard-won summit in voracious eating and drinking, or waste a few precious minutes in aimless and unnecessary conversation, or else fatigue or cold may render inoperable any appreciation of beauty. It lies in the power of memory to differentiate the relevant from the irrelevant, and the most blessed attribute of this faculty is its incapacity to recall physical discomfort and suffering. Thus scenes for which our aesthetic appreciation was ruined by unpleasant circumstances earn their appreciation retrospectively. Were this not so, I doubt if anyone would climb twice on Mount Everest. Some may argue that it is intellectually dishonest to describe as beautiful scenes which were completely unappreciated in the first place, but I venture to maintain that much of the value and enjoyment of life lies in retrospection. What we remember having done is as important as what we do, and the former is of little value without the latter. Memory

is a spur to future endeavour, and experience begets experience. It is for these reasons that men return again and again to the mountains; they are concerned not only with physical achievement, but are possessed of a spiritual exaltation vivified by memories of Nature at her noblest and most beautiful.

Other memories of Everest crowd into the mind. There was, for instance, the view the morning Shipton and I left Camp Six for our attempt on the summit, and I remember especially a glimpse over the crest of the north-east ridge, from a point high up on the great roof-like belt of sandstone slabs known as the Yellow Band, into a cloud-filled abyss, and the distant snows of Kangchenjunga shining in mid-air over the rolling legions of monsoon mist—a fragmentary vision gained between gruelling lung-racking work, and completely unappreciated at the time, but enduring. As I sit at my desk gazing over the woodlands of Sussex I can feel as though it were yesterday the cold breath of those icy depths, and my muscles tauten yet again at sight of the final pyramid, serene, pale and splendid in the profound blue of heaven.

And I remember well that moment when I knew I could climb no higher across the snow-masked slabs of the pyramid. What a feeble instrument the body is at 28,000 feet! How it pants and strains, how weak, worn and pitiable it seems, a mere husk of physical and mental activity! A man who climbs near the top of Everest is a poor dull creature, barely existing in a

grey world devoid of pleasure, a world very different from that vital plane in which men normally live and breathe, and he seems to tread some shadowy line between consciousness and unconsciousness, between, indeed, life and death. I remember pausing, and when my lungs had ceased their laboured pumping, of hearing the loosened snow slide swishing down the precipice. And when that was done, of straining myself against an almost intolerable silence, as though to resist like Atlas the whole weight and power of the universe. Then of gazing up, up and over those terrible walls of overlapping, overhanging slabs to that untrodden summit, a thousand feet, no, a thousand weary miles, above me, the piled-up yellow rocks heaped crag on crag and cliff on cliff, the plastered snow chalkily white in the glaring sun, the summit plume streaming with an endless enormous energy against the blue-black sky. I remember, too, the northward vision down the brown desolation of the Rongbuk Valley with its shaly slopes and huddled moraines, past the speck of the Rongbuk Monastery and away over the golden plains of Tibet, where the wandering clouds were couched on their own shadows, to the blue distance where the earth bent over into the fastnesses of Central Asia.

## CHAPTER XV

### SOLITARY CLIMBS

THE dangers of solitary mountain-climbing are obvious. There is no one to hold you on a rope if you slip, and what would be nothing worse than a minor accident with a companion to help you down or summon assistance may easily bring about total disaster. On the other hand, it teaches self-reliance, makes a man observant and, if it is to be safely carried out, imposes prudence and self-control. Best of all, it brings the climber into intimate contact with the beauties of the mountains.

In 1922 and 1923 I lived in Tyrol and Switzerland and frequently made solitary ascents. This was because no companions were available, because I was unable to afford guides, and because I had fallen so completely under the spell of the mountains that I wanted them entirely to myself, to investigate from the beginning, and in my own way, their every mood and feature. Companions or no companions, I wanted to be as often as possible on them and among them.

Fortunately I had the sense to realise that it was necessary to start at the beginning and to learn

diligently the art and craft of mountaineering. Yet my progress was not always smooth; there were peaks and depressions in the graph, irresponsible wanderings from the strait and narrow path, scrapes which I remember with anything but pride. However, the mountains were kind and I survived.

As mentioned elsewhere, pleasure in mountaineering depends on being the master, not the slave, of a situation, and when fear enters into the picture pleasure ends. This was brought home to me with telling force on a peak in the Stubai Alps. I set out to climb the mountain, and in due course reached the summit after an entertaining scramble. Then some devil entered into me and I decided to return by a different route. This meant descending a steep ice-face several hundred feet in height and a snow-covered glacier rifted with numerous crevasses. Worst of all, but unknown to me as it was invisible from above, a bergschrund (marginal crevasse) separated the ice-face from the crevassed glacier.

The actions of human beings are at times as inexplicable and unintelligible as those of animals. People ask the mountaineer, and with perfect justification, why he climbs a mountain at all when it is both safer and more comfortable to remain in the valley, and the mountaineer, while he may fail entirely to satisfy their curiosity, is at least able to justify to himself his motives for so doing. I confess, however, that my decision to descend what was obviously a difficult

mountain-face with a dangerously crevassed glacier at the foot of it was totally inexplicable to me at the time and afterwards. I am reminded of a bear whose tracks I saw in Garhwal, who for equally inexplicable reasons decided to descend an equally difficult mountain-face and a crevassed glacier in preference to several safe and easy routes. I have since asked myself why I did it. Was it for the thrill of cutting steps down an ice-slope? Was it some perverted atavistic instinct urging me to get into danger for the sake of getting out of it again? Was it simply to show off? I cannot say; I only know that some inexplicable whim sent me scrambling down a mountain by an unconsidered and unjustifiable route.

To this day I remember details of the climb. It was the first time I had had to exercise all my strength and skill on a mountain. Up to then mountains had been kind to me. The peak I had climbed had seemed friendly as I scrambled up its sun-warmed rocks. Now, as I clumsily and laboriously cut my way down the ice-slope, it became somehow gradually more and more hostile to me. In one sense I welcomed this hostility. It was something new for me to be up against real difficulty and danger. I was violating every canon of mountaineering—I knew that—and what was worse, was delighting in my crime. In short, I was beyond myself, beyond common sense, beyond reason. So I continued, on my foolish career, my arms and knees aching from

the unaccustomed and awkward process of step-cutting down steep ice.

The slope was not by any means all ice, but it was a long time before I approached the foot of it, my arms leaden with fatigue and my clothing drenched with sweat.

There I came to the bergschrund. I had seen bergschrunds, but this was the first occasion on which I had been confronted by one in the least formidable, and the closer I approached the wider did it appear.

With that cavernous rift beneath me the ice-slope seemed not only steep but unpleasantly insecure and slippery. Tired as I was, I cut bigger and bigger steps. Then, to my relief, I saw a tongue of snow bridging the rift. I cut down to it, but when at length I reached the edge of the bergschrund my joy evaporated. With a companion holding me on a rope I might have risked the passage of the snow-bridge, but even to my inexperienced eye it was apparent that the snow was sodden through and through and would probably collapse beneath my weight. What then? Deep crevasses have always fascinated me, and even now I will go out of my way to gaze into a fine specimen. The bergschrund was deep, how deep I do not know. It was beautiful also. Along its irregular edges as they went in and out in conformity with the lowermost edge of the mountain-side was the uneven layer of the last snowfall. Then came a thin dirt band marking the accumulated

débris of the previous summer. Below that was *névé*, banded in the same manner. The *névé* blended gradually into blue-green ice. The afternoon sun was reflected from the upper lip of the crevasse into the mouth of the rift, but fifty feet lower a bottle-green gloom faded into impenetrable twilight, a sombre nothingness of unplumbed depth.

The bergschrund would have to be jumped. Its width where it was spanned by the snow-bridge was perhaps nine or ten feet; the upper lip, however, was not more than a few feet above the lower, and I could not count on much of a downward parabola to assist the leap. I had been a useful long-jumper at school and rather fancied myself at the art, but the more I looked at the distance I had to jump the less I liked it. It was little more than half the distance I could have jumped on a sports-field, but here no run was possible; it was a standing jump which had to be made from a slippery stance on an ice-slope. Supposing the jump failed? At least I should alight on the snow-bridge, and this might hold sufficiently to enable me to scramble out on the other side. And if it did not? It was not pleasant to gaze too long into those bottle-green depths. With the reckless confidence of youth I told myself that I was making an absurd fuss over something which I could manage with the greatest of ease, and without more ado set to work to cut out a wide and solid platform as a take-off point for the leap.



As I cut away I was no longer conscious of being tired; I was too anxious to get the job done and the jump made. The westering sun shone benevolently across at me, and salty sweat stung my eyes. The afternoon was profoundly quiet, but in the south some tall clouds were thickening and uniting into a glowing copper-coloured anvil. Once or twice I felt rather than heard thunder, the faintest vibration of a calmness that embraced earth and atmosphere like unruffled water. Apart from that, the only sounds were the thudding of my ice-axe striking the ice and the noise made by the dislodged fragments of ice as they skipped into the rift at my feet. This last sound reminded me of a disused well into which as a small boy I delighted to throw pebbles, a strictly forbidden practice but fraught with an awful fascination. It was the same hollow diminuendo of sound. In the well's case it ended in a distant plop; with the bergschrund the sounds merely grew fainter and fainter, until they faded away into silence.

The platform was made at last. It was a good one, with plenty of room for both feet, and I made as certain as I could that it would not break away and vitiate the power of my spring. Now that everything was prepared for the leap my doubts returned to me with redoubled force. Why not return to the top of the mountain? Even if I were benighted I should get down all right. No, the steps I had made would be melted away by the hot afternoon sun and would

have to be made anew; I was too tired to remake them. Worse still was a perverse devil of pride. I had set off down the mountain by a different route, deliberately selected, and I was going through with it come what might. What an idiot I was! Then out of the south came a loud concussion of thunder. It needed something outside me to force a decision. The thunder with its threat of approaching storm did it. I shuffled my boot-nails well home into the ice so that I had a good purchase, grasped my ice-axe in my right hand, its pick projecting outwards and away from me, bent my knees and, putting everything I had into it, jumped.

The upper part of my body alighted on the edge of the bergschrund. My feet struck the snow-bridge, driving through the sun-softened snow into nothingness. But the ice-axe pick had driven well home into firm snow and the balance was in my favour. Next instant I had pulled and levered myself forward and upwards on to the solid lip of the bergschrund. There I lay panting and trembling. At the same time I heard the fragments of the broken snow-bridge thudding into the depths of the bergschrund. I ought to have been thankful for a providential escape—I have never forgotten that feeling of useless legs, unattached and dangling in space—but my predominant feeling was shame at my stupidity and clumsiness. I deserved to be dead, but I was still alive.

I got to my feet, feeling curiously weak about the

legs, and examined the scene of my foolishness. The summit of the peak and the ragged line of my steps down the ice-slope looked absurdly near, but when I looked at the bergschrund I realised that if I had not been a strong jumper I could not have cleared it.

I was not yet entirely out of the wood. A small but snow-covered and considerably crevassed glacier had to be descended. I was taking no further chances, and I went down it with unremitting care, sounding with my ice-axe at every step for concealed crevasses. More than once it drove through snowy arches, and every time it did so I had much the same feeling as I had had when my legs hung in space. Unaccustomed as I was to such work, I felt like a soldier in a captured village filled with artfully concealed booby-traps.

But at last I was through. Never in my life have I felt anything so comforting, so solid, so assuring as the terminal moraine of that glacier. It was hours since I had eaten, and I plumped myself down on the stones, opened my rucksack, and ate. As I ate I noticed little flowers all around me, peeping out from among gritty places in the rocks, the starry blooms of saxifrage and androsace. It was evening now and the sky was filled with storm-clouds. Thunder was crackling and booming angrily from the peaks, and what was left of the setting sun glared out from between leaden mists. Yet the mountains seemed no longer hostile. They were beautiful again; the

flowers, the stones, the rippled glacier down which I had so laboriously and hesitatingly made my way, the distant thread-like bergschrund I had jumped, the ice-slopes I had descended, the peak I had climbed, these were all beautiful.

That day it was instilled into me that to appreciate mountains it is necessary to be complete master of your every action. The best adventures of mountaineering are reserved not for fools but for wise men.

Since that experience I have never ventured alone upon a dangerously crevassed glacier, though I have frequently made solitary glacier ski tours in spring when conditions were at their safest. The Arlberg was my happy hunting-ground during a season that lasted from November 1922 to May 1923. During that period, when I seldom had companions, I climbed on ski and foot practically every peak in the district. St. Anton was an altogether different place then to the world-famous and fashionable ski-ing centre it has since become. Hannes Schneider was making his *début* as a ski-ing instructor. He was already a fanatical exponent of the stem-Christiania. I only made one tour with him, and that in an entirely unprofessional capacity. There had been a heavy fall of snow and I did what I had learned to do in such conditions—the telemark. I shall not easily forget his disgust. When we were back at St. Anton he looked at me sternly and said, "You will never learn to ski like *that*." It is true that I never have

learned to ski well, one reason being because I have ski-ed so much alone, when it is essential to run slowly and cautiously, as even a slight accident may prove fatal should it mean a night out, but it would now appear that the once-despised telemark is again recognised as a useful turn by ski-runners.

On one occasion I spent five days by myself at the Darmstädter hut above St. Anton. There was no hut-keeper in residence, and the only signs of life in the hut were the mice, which became tame and friendly when I fed them on bread-crumbs. It was a strenuous five days. I climbed several of the neighbouring peaks on ski and foot, but found plenty of time also for that meditation which is the greatest charm of solitary climbing. There was no one to hurry me up or down my mountains, and I spent long lazy hours on the sun-warmed rocks of their summits looking at a wealth of ranges drowsing in the clear spring sky; the snows of the Arlberg, the glaciers of the Silvretta, the distant monarchs of the Swiss Alps. Then, happily, unhurriedly, peacefully, I would descend to the hut, cook my evening meal, watch the pageantry of sunset, and afterwards smoke my pipe by the stove while the stars glinted through the frost-laced windows.

Another favourite haunt was the Konstanzer hut. Only on one occasion did I see a fellow ski-er. I had just returned from a run when I found, to my annoyance, that someone else had arrived. He told me

that he had just traversed the Silvretta on his own and climbed several of the principal peaks. It was an ambitious tour for a solitary ski-er, and my first resentment at having my privacy invaded was soon replaced by admiration; he was so evidently a lover of the mountains. Presently he unpacked a bulky rucksack and took from it a number of clothing oddments which he suspended from a tree branch outside the hut to air. They were unlike any man's underclothes that I had ever seen, flimsy, frilly fragments that fluttered gaily in the breeze. It was not a man but a woman! There ought to have been a romance born out of that encounter.

Among the expeditions I made from the Konstanzer hut one in particular stands out, perhaps because of the weather and the snow, which were perfect.

I was away in the frosty dawn. Not a feather of wind touched the pine-tops as I slipped over marble-hard snow, and thin frosty mists hung over the valley stream where it had broken loose from its wintry bonds. What an amazing, what a marvellous thing it is to be young, fit and enthusiastic. I can go as far, and farther, now as I did then, but now I tread the solid earth, the cold snow; when I was twenty-two I strode along on air, supping the very elixir of the mountains. When I turned a corner and saw my peak rising before me with a gentle unbroken snow-field stretching up to its crest, I drew in a deep breath of sheer delight and in that breath seemed to imbibe

the power, the grandeur, the beauty, the adventure of the mountains.

The sun was well up and slanting warmly across the snowfield as I mounted in long zigzags. The snow here was the lightest powder, heaped millions of sparkling crystals; it was as though every jewel in heaven had fallen upon that place, and as I climbed my ski parted it with a dry sound, suggestive to my fancy of invisible fairies hastening off with swishing silken shirts.

Over silvery sunlit snow, through shrinking frosty shadows, I climbed to the summit, a very ordinary summit of scattered rocks and rippled, wind-patterned snow. There was no wind there, nothing breathed, nothing moved except the sun and I. Not a cloud showed. Already the rocks were warm. I found a comfortable spot, and with my back against a rock opened my rucksack and ate a meal. After the meal I lit my pipe; the smoke from it spiralled lazily into the blue.

And there for the next two or three hours I remained. Although I was on a minor mountain, not above 9,500 feet high, there was no sign of life to be seen save for the single thread of my ski-track twisting up out of the valley. I was alone with the sun and a hundred miles of snowy mountains. It needed but a few cold breaths of wind to send me hastening down, but those breaths never came. Always there was calm and silence.

I spent some time identifying by name peaks near and far, but presently I gave this up and surrendered myself to the prospect. I recollected something that Leslie Stephen had written in his queer, half-cynical, half-whimsical manner when describing the view at sunset from the summit of Mont Blanc. "Like Xerxes, we looked over the countless hosts sinking into rest, but with the rather different reflection, that a hundred years hence they would probably be doing much the same thing, whilst we should long have ceased to take any interest in the performance." He has passed, as we are all due to pass, yet it is impossible to think that these moments of beauty, these hours among the mountains, are mere transitory illusions to be engulfed for ever in death. That day I felt that the beauty on which I gazed, the shining vistas of peak and snowfield, were not something apart from me. Incongruous I might be, a vulgar intruder, yet physically at least I was a combination of the same forces and substances that raised the mountains, that had set the crystals glittering on the surface of the snowfield. In physical dissolution at least I should repair to the same place as all mankind, Nature. There was something ennobling in the thought. But there were other forces at work. The power that gave me eyes to gaze upon this beauty, the intellect to appreciate it: there was a different force at work here to the forces that fashioned the lifeless substances of snow and ice, something indestructible, something



that must for ever gather and assimilate experience, something that must seek beauty.

As a youth I was wont to wander alone over the hills of Wales and the Lake District. There is no better preparation for mountaineering, but the scrambler should be prepared to venture forth in any weather and to find his way through mist and storm by the intelligent use of map and compass. I have only once come near to losing my way, and that was due to trusting the wind. This artful element suddenly changed round to the opposite point of the compass, the result being that late on a winter afternoon of dense mist and blinding sleet I commenced descending into an unpopulated valley in which I should at the least have had a most uncomfortable night. Fortunately I discovered my mistake in time and was able to retrace my footsteps. There is no lonelier yet more stimulating experience than solitary walks over the British hills, and the heights of the Alps or Himalayas are no more impressive in this respect.

Ridge-walking is, of course, the best of all walking. The finest high-level scramble in Britain is the Coolin ridge, though it should be remembered that there are sections in it calling for expertness in rock-climbing. It has become fashionable of late to treat this course as a mountaineering Marathon, but to enjoy it you should do it in June, when it is possible to climb practically the whole night through and leave your

watch behind. One of my mountaineering regrets is that I did not do this but hurried along with a companion beneath a torrid July sun in the hope of bettering the "time" of those who had gone before. One day I shall return and enjoy, as it deserves to be enjoyed, this splendid backbone of rock with its constant views of peak and moorland, loch and ocean.

There are other fine ridge-walks in Scotland, for instance that along the hills south of Glen Nevis and over the ranges of Glencoe, to mention two well-known districts, but after the Coolin ridge, which is in a class of its own, my thoughts always revert to the Snowdon Horseshoe, that grand high-level route, deservedly popular as the best in Wales. It is true that the desecrated summit of Snowdon tends to come as an anti-climax, but the friendly edge of Crib Goch and the finish along the crest of Lliwedd more than compensate for this. The last occasion on which I was able to make the round was in January 1941, when I was able to snatch a few days away from the Blitz in the hills. The thermometer was reading but eight degrees above zero Fahrenheit when I started up from the Llanberis Pass, but the sky was blue like an Alpine sky and the sun shone brilliantly on a few inches of snow that had fallen a day or two before. There was little wind, but enough to keep me smartly on the move as I breasted the first indefinite slopes of Crib Goch. The beauties of the route are early apparent. With the first shoulder of the ridge

Snowdon comes into view and the gloomy pile of Lliwedd springs up beyond the sullen waters of Llyn Llydaw. It was some time since I had last seen Snowdon, and I noticed a subtle change. The summit was no longer truncated by a hideous mass of buildings, but stood up as an almost mathematical point. Then I remembered that in response to a public agitation the original hotel had been pulled down and another built at the terminus of the railway, some distance below it. I had taken part in the agitation, and I now looked on the mountain with a feeling of proprietary pride. For once good sense and good taste had triumphed over gross commercialism; though I suspect that the new hotel does better business than the old, as the train-borne tourist does not have to brave the few yards between the railway terminus and the summit through mist and rain, and may return to Llanberis happily conscious of having done Snowdon with no more exertion than hopping out of the train into the hotel, having a drink or a meal and hopping back again, which fact, if regarded in the right light, is in effect a merciful dispensation of Providence. Be this as it may, the net effect had been to transform Snowdon. It had reverted to its original status of mountain, so much so that, seen through the frosty air, it might have been not 3,560 feet high but an Alpine giant of 4,000 metres.

There was no ice on Crib Goch, and the few inches of powdery snow had done nothing to make the ridge

in the least difficult. The rocks are of the easiest nature and supplied with unlimited handholds and footholds, yet the climber is nevertheless conscious that he is traversing not a hill but a genuine mountain. Small that mountain may be and trodden annually by the feet of thousands, but, like Snowdon, it possesses the dignity of a far greater elevation. Strangely enough, the ascent reminds me, as does also the ordinary route up the Eiger in the Bernese Oberland, of the climbing on Everest above and below Camp Five. There is the same easy scrambling, the same broken rocks and the same assurance that if the climber was so careless as to slip and fall he might well go on falling, unable to stop himself. It is well-nigh impossible for the climber to imagine such a fall, but accidents have happened to the inexperienced and will happen again: I have myself helped to carry down an injured tourist who had cracked his skull.

There was a chilling wind on the way up, but on the summit there was none. I sat there contentedly in the sun, looking over a wealth of frozen hills marvellously serene beneath the unclouded sky, the well-remembered line of the Glyders with their clustered sharks' teeth of summit rocks, the great lump of Moel Siabod with its lofting moorlands, the distant uplands of Denbigh. Over all dwelt snow and cold; there was not a tree to be seen within miles. Had it not been for the rambling sheep-walls on the distant hillsides and the speck of a motor-car on the

road to Capel Curig, the scene might have been borrowed from the Tibetan plateau.

Nearer at hand were Lliwedd and Snowdon. Snow had done little to relieve the sombreness of either, but Snowdon was the more thickly plastered, not so much by snow as by hoarfrost and ice, which gave to the last five hundred feet of the mountain a positively ferocious appearance. The northern precipice rose opposite across the depths of the eastern Cwm, where every rivulet and stream was frozen, so that the Cwm, normally alive to the cheerful chatter of running water, was strangely silent. Good sport may be had in the gullies of the face when these are snow-filled, though the principal obstacles would appear to be objects jettisoned from the summit, which may include anything from a derelict perambulator to a discarded corset belt, whilst the principal danger is falling stones hurled down by thoughtless or homicidal tourists.

The summit edge of Crib Goch is satisfactorily sharp, and while the slope to the south-east is moderate in angle, the precipice to the north-west has afflicted many with an uneasy feeling in the pit of the stomach. The edge is broken by some formidable-looking pinnacles, but these, unhappily, are easily passed, and all too soon the scrambler finds himself on easier ground, with nothing but an uphill walk, broken here and there by easy crags, to the shallow neck between Crib Goch and Snowdon.

Light mists were forming as I passed the last of the pinnacles. At first mere diaphanous wisps, they thickened rapidly, so that by the time I approached Snowdon there was little to be seen but driving vapour. There was also a strong cold wind; very soon my clothing was hoary with frost and icicles had formed on my moustache.

On the summit of Snowdon I found a man and a boy, the only persons I saw that day, but they left soon after my arrival and I ate my sandwiches alone. The cold was intense, and such wind as there was soon drove the circulation from my finger-tips. View there was none, but the sun made valiant attempts to break through the frosty mist. However, I have never wanted to stop long on Snowdon's ugly summit, view or no view, and very soon I was descending the frozen screes towards Lliwedd. The rocks here were everywhere plastered in frost crystals laid in parallel dagger-like sheaves with their points towards the wind. Such formations are common on the British hills in winter, and the upper crags of Ben Nevis in particular are sometimes an amazing sight, but they are seldom seen in the drier airs of the Alps, and never, so far as my experience goes, in the Himalayas.

I was half-way down the slopes when of a sudden the icy mists were swept asunder and the sun blazed out. Through the window thus formed I saw Moel Siabod glowing in the sunlight and my shadow cast in a splendid Brocken spectre on the mists that seethed

in the east. I pulled my camera from my pocket, but before I could take a photograph the misty window closed. It was obvious that the mist was local, and by the time I reached the col between Snowdon and Lliwedd the sun was winning. The snow-plastered crags of Lliwedd appeared, and far below the dark icy sheet of Llyn Llydaw. Now at last I could manipulate my camera, and what scenes there were to delight a photographer! First and foremost there was Lliwedd, its east and west buttresses sharply separated by the mists that clung to the central gully between them. I have long regarded Lliwedd as the most sombre crag in Britain, and that day its snow- and ice-coated rocks, clean-cut as though sliced by a knife, with fragments of mist twining and twisting about them, seemed the very embodiment of mountain sombreness and melancholy. I remembered how as a youth I had enthusiastically, if rashly, assailed the west buttress and had succeeded, to my enormous delight, in climbing it. My climb, however, had been marred by the death of a sheep. It was browsing on a ledge and was so startled at my sudden appearance that it leapt for a lower ledge, slipped and fell. In memory I can still see the poor brute hurtling down in huge bounds, turning helplessly over and over in mid-air, finally disappearing, a mere speck, into the depths.

As I made my way up and along the edge of the precipice to the summit of the west peak the mists

melted away and the summit of Snowdon appeared. I had promised myself a sun-bathe somewhere on the circuit, and I had it on the top of the east peak. The cold had kept me on the move, and only three and a half hours had elapsed since I had left the Llanberis Pass, so that there was plenty of time in hand. I spent it luxuriating in the sun. Here, I reflected, was one advantage of solitary rambling: there was no companion eager for the "flesh-pots," thirsting for his tea or a pint of beer. I should have refused neither, but Lliwedd was too good to leave. Sun-bathes in mid-winter, unattended by the faintest breath of wind, are not often to be had on the British hills, and I made the best of mine. As I reclined, my back to a rock and my pipe wafting incense into the unclouded firmament, the west, where the sea shone like a polished shield, suddenly awoke to a prolonged clamour of guns. Perhaps it was merely artillery practice, or perhaps there was a spot of bother out in the Irish Sea. I had not heard so much as an aeroplane that day, and had forgotten war. Now I remembered, and the memory cut across my peaceful soliloquies like a saw-edged knife. Here was I dreaming on a hill-top, and below at my feet the greatest of all wars ravaged cities and countrysides. Up on the plateau of Tibet I used to view the world with dispassionate detachment, as though it were some ant-heap, but it was impossible to think thus on Lliwedd; it was too near, too instant, too vital. I



even allowed myself to dwell on the possibility of a Germanised Wales. There would be fixed ropes to assist the incompetent over Crib Goch, pitons desecrating the crags of Lliwedd, a raucous beer-garden on the top of Snowdon, together with hordes of fat Teutons and their stodgy Fraus. My experience of Germans has convinced me that they do not love Nature in the selfless manner of the Englishman. As in the case of their "New Order," they like a Nature that can be adapted to their needs, tamed and subservient. Then they can lavish sentiment on it: on the forests with their well-made paths, belvederes and beer-gardens; on the waterfall that meekly descends over its concreted drop; on the mountain that is shackled in ropes, steps and ladders. And when Nature refuses to be tamed, when Himalayan giants disdain their would-be conquerors, when plans and methods go by the board, the Teuton is hurt, angry and amazed. That any German should be so treated! Then he returns, waving his flags, full of patriotic zeal, determined to overcome and subdue the enemy for the honour of Führer and Fatherland.

But I preferred to forget the Hun and all his works on Lliwedd that sunny afternoon. There was little enough peace in the world, and here was the opportunity to enjoy the peace of the hills, to forget bombs, guns and every other foul contrivance. It was better to think of nothing, to allow an unheeding eye to wander across hill and valley in the tawny afternoon

light to the far-away glimmer of the sea, to absorb the warmth of the sun, to be a part of Nature's tranquillity.

The time came to descend. A few minutes later I was in the chill evening shadow of Cwm Dyli; from its frozen bogs Lliwedd appeared indescribably austere, whilst ice-covered Llyn Llydaw showed as cold and sullen as ever I have seen it. The evening was very silent as I strode down the stony track to Pen y Pass; night was gathering in the Llanberis Pass, but on high the golden sun still illumined the crest of the Glyders. A few minutes more and I was in my car, rolling down the moorland road towards Capel Curig.

So much for a wander in good weather along a route known to and beloved by many. The charms of solitary mountaineering are not so evident in bad weather, though there is nothing more satisfactory in mountaineering than finding your way alone over difficult or complicated ground. I have not often been caught out by really bad weather when climbing alone; I have always done my best to avoid such a contingency. Descending alone from Camp Six on Mount Everest in a blizzard was my worst experience. There was also an unpleasant descent from the Rotondo hut near the St. Gotthard Pass in a blizzard of such intensity that in order to see I was foolish enough to remove my goggles, as a result of which I suffered severely from snow-blindness. In case anyone who reads these lines may one day descend from

the Rotondo hut in a blizzard, let him be careful about following the telegraph line leading down the valley to the village of Realp. Just as it is advisable when motoring at night not to assume that the telegraph line necessarily follows the road, it is best to assume that a telegraph line in mountainous country reckes nothing of crags and cliffs. It was only by throwing myself down at the last moment that I avoided ski-ing over a cliff quite high enough to have broken my neck.

If, however, there is a quick and easy descent, or a route that cannot be missed in bad weather, it is a fine experience to watch by yourself the development of a storm in the high mountains. There is no companion to make needless remarks or be impatient to descend. The mountains and the sky are yours. Then you will understand and appreciate as never before the majesty and magnificence of the elements, the brightening darts of lightning, the increasing reverberations of thunder, the swirling storm-clouds, the lurid shafts of sun: or, if it be a blizzard, the stealthy advance of the snow-weighted mists, the pall of leaden snow spreading across the ranges, is more than interesting, indeed magnificent. The man who climbs alone soon becomes weather-conscious, and I can remember few climbs of any length or difficulty in which the elements did not occupy first place in my thoughts.

At the opposite pole to mountaineering in bad

weather is to climb rocks in dry, warm, sunny weather—not loose rocks, for these are an abomination at all times, but firm schists, gabbro and granite; in other words, if you go alone go where others have been before you and handholds and footholds are a known quantity. The first occasion on which I tackled difficult rocks by myself was in 1919 when, full of energy and enthusiasm, I found myself at the foot of the Napes on Great Gable. I had read about the Napes, for I devoured the literature of rock-climbing voraciously, but this was the first time I had seen its splendid rocks. Off I went up the Arrowhead Ridge, which I found very much to my liking. Then I did the Needle Ridge. But I was unable to rest there; between the two ridges I had climbed was another and much more formidable edge, a gigantic prow of rock that projected from the mountain-side like the bows of a battle-cruiser. This was the Eagle's Nest Ridge. Previously I had sworn a mighty oath that under no circumstances would I tackle any of those climbs relegated to the category of the "exceptionally severe" in my *British Mountain Climbs*, by George and Ashley Abraham, which I had come to regard as my climbing testament, but now my good resolutions went by the board. What were the Arrowhead and Needle ridges beside that defiant prow? I removed my boots, and in another moment was treading the first steep rocks that lead up from one side on to the crest of the ridge. It was steep,

steeper than I thought. I reached the point where it is necessary to pull up a vertical bit so as to gain the crest. Certainly it was more difficult than I had expected, the most difficult climb I had yet done, with or without a companion. I paused and looked down. There were some other climbers below, seated on the ledge known as the Grand Stand. They were regarding me intently; I dare say they were more than a trifle apprehensive as to the result of my antics. Youthful pride forbade retreat. Summoning up a show of resolution I advanced. The pull was made. In another moment I was on the crest of the ridge vowing that it had been perfectly easy. Now came the best part of the climb, a cat-like tread on stockinged feet from one small hold to the next on rough sun-warmed rock. It was the most exposed climb I had yet done, but I delighted in the situation. As for "nerves," they come with experience and responsibility; in those days I had none; I was just one of those irresponsible youths who are so often, and I fear so rightly, condemned by the elderly and experienced when they break their silly necks. I did not again pause until I was above all difficulties. Then with great satisfaction I looked down the way I had come—in other words, through nothing at all save sun-warmed air—to the quilted meadows of Wastdale and the shivering thread of its stream.

I was proud of my feat, but my pride was soon to receive a salutary lesson. I had left the Napes Needle

to the last, but when I tried to climb it, glowing as I was with my success on the Eagle's Nest Ridge, I boggled the top block hopelessly. I could not, would not, trust my foot on the polished hold it is necessary to tread before the crest of the Needle can be grasped. Finally, one of the occupants of the Grand Stand climbed up, passed me with the utmost of ease and let down the end of a rope. He would have been justified had he condemned me for my solitary climbing, but he was a man of few words; possibly he had done the same thing himself.

In solitary climbing the difficulties should never overstep the climber's margin of safety, else an ascent becomes not merely a rash adventure but a very disagreeable adventure into the bargain. In other words, solitary climbing should be undertaken for aesthetic rather than physical motives; then, and then only, will the climber enter into the spirit of the hills. Yet there are occasions when hard and exacting work blend subtly with a finer appreciation. In this connection the ascent of the Mana Peak in the Garhwal Himalayas is outstanding in my recollection. It is, of course, easy to write about an ascent as though you had enjoyed it, when at the time you were far too anxious and weary for enjoyment. It may be that I am falling into this trap, yet I seem to associate something much more than weariness or the mere joy of achievement with this ascent. It was certainly the most difficult solitary climb I have done, at least

in the Himalayas, and the struggle through soft monsoon snow near the summit taxed me to the uttermost, yet I remember also an exhilaration superior to all difficulty, anxiety and discomfort. Perhaps it was the sun, which smiled as I have never known it smile at such an altitude, warmly, benevolently and without a breath of wind. Perhaps it was the rocks, rough, firm, reddish slabs of granite. Perhaps it was the view, a marvellous panorama over a thousand great mountains, with tall pillars of glowing cloud standing out of the valleys. Perhaps it was everything. But I do remember as one of life's major experiences the complete calm and peace of my solitary vigil on the summit, and a silence unlike any silence I have ever known, which neither soothed nor appalled but was pregnant with the power and meaning of Eternity.

These are privileged and exceptional occasions. I prefer to end on a homelier note. Go out alone on the hills and listen. You will hear much. The winds will hold for you something more than sound; the voice of the stream will not be merely the babbling of hurrying water. The trees and flowers are not so separate from you as they are at other times, but very near; the same substances, the same rhythm, the same song binds you to them. Alone amidst Nature, a man learns to be one with all and all with One.

## CHAPTER XVI

### FEAR

FEAR plays its part in determining man's feeling towards mountains. The Greeks regarded Nature primarily from a utilitarian standpoint, and mountains to them were terrible places set aside for the gods whom it was necessary frequently to placate by prayer and sacrifice.

It is possible that Greek indifference to natural beauty coupled with the fear of mountain gods set the fashion in the detestation and fear of European mountains that persisted through the Middle Ages and indeed beyond them into the eighteenth century. The sombre drawings and paintings of the period depicting monstrous dragons and leering devils are symbolical of the fear felt for wild untamed Nature, the same fear of the unknown as that of the caveman for the primeval forest. This fear persists to-day, not only among uncultured natives, but among those who dread being alone in the dark and who when they have spilled salt seek unconsciously to propitiate some long-forgotten god or devil by throwing a pinch over their shoulder. All superstition has its roots in fear.

Education and knowledge can oust fear, and if we



are to understand how and why the fear of mountains came to be removed from Europe it is necessary to study contemporary social history. This reveals first and foremost that science was largely responsible. Dr. Paccard, who climbed Mont Blanc in 1786, was not perhaps a scientist as we mean the word to-day, but he had learned that inquiry and unprejudiced observation alone justified his profession. It was in this spirit of inquiry that he climbed Mont Blanc, and thereby finally disposed of the myths and monsters associated with that mountain.

Through many centuries the Christian Church quarrelled with science, and it was not to be expected that ancient fears and superstitions could be eliminated in a night. Scientists were not necessarily atheists, as the Doctrinaires of the Church believed. They were many of them devout Christians ahead of their time, who had learned to look farther than their noses, and those who were persecuted for their discoveries deserve to rank with martyred saints. There were many priests who must in their hearts have supported the spirit of inquiry, even when it seemed to conflict with orthodox religious doctrines. It is probable that Father Placidus à Spescha was one, for his many ascents testify to a spirit of inquiry as well as a genuine love of mountains and mountaineering. On the whole, it was the spirit of inquiry that led to mountains being climbed, and the subsequent development of mountaineering as a sport, while being a logical develop-

ment, was distinct from the original conception of mountain-climbing, which was as much a scientific development as Newton's investigations into the laws of Gravity.

Even as late as the 'sixties Edward Whymper records that the untrodden summit of the Matterhorn was regarded by the superstitious natives as the abode of demons and the spirits of the damned, in much the same way that the people of Lucerne once believed that the uneasy ghost of Pontius Pilate lurked on Mount Pilatus. Superstition, and with it fear, dies hard among primitive mountain peoples. Knowledge has freed the Alps of their demons and dragons, but gods and devils innumerable, to say nothing of Abominable Snowmen, are still active in the fastnesses of the Himalayas, and are likely to continue so for many generations to come.

I have seen these primitive fears in operation on more than one occasion in the Himalayas. The sight of footprints in the snow of a pass in Garhwal was sufficient to cow four hardy Tibetan porters who had already accompanied me on difficult mountain climbs with the utmost cheerfulness. The earlier Everest expeditions had similar difficulties with which to contend, and porters who crouched in their tents on the North Col, terrified because they imagined they heard the baying of the watch-dogs guarding the throne of Chamalung, could hardly be expected to put forward their best efforts. Example has gone far

to remove the terrors of Everest, yet no sensible leader of an expedition would omit the preliminary blessing of his men by the Abbot of the Rongbuk Monastery, a ceremony happily regarded as an adequate propitiation of the mountain gods.

It is interesting to speculate as to what extent superstitious fears animate the mountaineer of to-day. He will, of course, pooh-pooh the notion that he could be in the least affected. At the same time, such fears have been handed down through countless generations, and it is hardly to be expected that they are yet entirely eliminated. They linger on in the subconscious memory, and have much to do with our feelings for the mountains. Even the Alps still boast their ghosts. I remember reading a note in the visitors' book at the Baltschieder hut in the Bernese Oberland to the effect that a party spending a night there had been unable to sleep because of a ghost which persisted in perambulating the hut, an assertion which had considerable force lent to it when my companion and I, who had spent ten days there without seeing a soul, came upon some footmarks that began and ended nowhere. No doubt there was a perfectly logical explanation, but at the time it certainly seemed a trifle weird. Again, more than one mountaineering party have imagined the presence of an additional member. Professor Graham Brown and I had this feeling when climbing the Brenva face of Mont Blanc in 1927, and I experienced it with even greater force when climbing

alone on Everest in 1933, so much so that when I halted for a meal I carefully divided my food into two halves and turned round with one half in my hand meaning to offer it to my "companion." Nervous tension, fatigue and lack of oxygen probably explain this, and it is well known that under certain conditions a man may experience the phenomenon of dual personality. Thus, my impression during the only serious fall I have had was a detachment so complete that I seemed to stand aside from myself and watch my body falling, apparently to certain destruction, with no more emotion than if it had been a bundle of rags discharged into a dustbin. While imagination and the stress of the moment is in one sense an adequate explanation, it is equally logical to suppose that under certain conditions a man is sensitive to phenomena normally unfelt and unseen. Psychical research has established too many facts under rigorous scientific conditions for any man to dismiss phenomena physically inexplicable as imagination or nonsense.

To what extent are mystical feelings towards mountains induced by ancient and inherited fears, and to what extent by a recognition of a Divine Power of which mountains are symbolic? Most would prefer to think that the latter is the prime mover in mountain mysticism and emotion, yet it is more than probable that the feelings of awe we experience in the presence of mountains have some of their roots in the primitive fears of the past. "'Surely the Gods live here,' said

Kim, beaten down by the silence and the appalling sweep and dispersal of the cloud shadows after rain. 'This is no place for men!'" In this passage Kipling expressed what many have felt in the presence of the Himalayas. Again, Mr. C. F. Meade wrote of these same mountains that ". . . their mystery is awful, and their thrill is sometimes a shudder." The elementary emotions still persist; all that man has done is to rationalise them, yet, as the atheist often turns to his Maker in his last hour, so do the most rational of men forget their self-imposed limitations when confronted with Nature at her most majestic and sublime.

The modern mountaineer seeks through knowledge and skill of his craft to rationalise fear, but fear is always there, lagging a step behind, ready instantly to come to the fore. And this fear is not always the fear of accident. There is something else. Latent in every precipice with its suggestion of static but titanic force, in the shadowed gorge with its booming torrent, in the appalling sweep of the ice-slope and the green depths of the crevasse, lurks some quality of fear.

Why should men expose themselves to fear when they might be safely ensconced in a comfortable hotel down in the valley? Is it because our mission in life is to gain the ingredients of experience to justify our destiny? Is one mission in life to seek out and conquer fear?

There are plenty of other ways of seeking and experiencing fear. War is universally popular; then there are such diversions as flying, motor-racing,

steeple-chasing and big-game hunting, together with numerous other pursuits such as Rugby football, cricket, boxing and polo, in which, if there is little possibility of death, fear of injury has at least to be met with and overcome. It would be a spineless and inert world where there were no fears to be overcome.

There are, then, two kinds of mountain fear: the indefinable fear of the mountain presence, compounded of superstition, strangeness, loneliness, legend and the hereditary fear of man for wild untamed Nature; and the more easily defined fear of falling down or coming to grief through avalanche, exhaustion, storm and cold. Knowledge and experience at least rationalise and eliminate for all practical purposes the first fear, sublimating it, as already suggested, to religious beliefs or a mystic pantheism. As regards the second fear, while it is an essential background of the sport, it is not one to be deliberately encouraged, for heroics are out of place in a pleasurable sport like mountain-climbing. Of recent years mountaineering has been going through an age of heroics fostered in part by philosophies out of keeping with sane, well-balanced, ethical principles. Nationalism and Nanga Parbat are uneasy bedfellows, whilst a type of "bravery" which finds its scope in the butchery of women and children in indiscriminate aerial bombardment has little in common with the north face of the Grandes Jorasses and the Eigerwand. In mountaineering heroics begin when fear begins, and both begin only

when the bounds of prudence, skill and good judgment are overstepped. Occasions may arise when these bounds are violated unwittingly, or through force of circumstance, but it is an altogether different matter deliberately to make climbs where the objective dangers are so great as to transform mountaineering into a paltry gamble with death.

Some will argue that the dangers of Mount Everest, together with the unpleasantness of life at high altitudes, are such as to vitiate my thesis that mountaineering should be a fearless pleasure rather than a fearful pain. I disagree. For one thing, the route up Everest is, under normal conditions, free from objective danger; for another, no national incentive has ever been present to push the climbers beyond the limits of their powers and common sense. The ascent was tackled as all true mountaineers would have it tackled, sanely and logically. It is true that climbing at high altitudes is an unpleasant business, and that an Everest expedition is an altogether different affair from a holiday in the Alps. Nevertheless, there is pleasure, born partly of a spirit of inquiry, partly of the magnificent scenery, and partly of achievement. I have been afraid on Everest more than once, but my fears were limited to the treacherous slopes of the North Col, where it is sometimes difficult to estimate the nature of the snow, and were not associated with the upper part of the mountain. I have known fear far more often in the Alps than on Everest. In most

cases fear was inspired by circumstance brought about by storm, faulty route-finding, pushing an ascent beyond safe limits, and extraneous matters such as falling stones and ice. I well remember grave doubts as to the wisdom of attempting the hitherto unclimbed Brenva face of Mont Blanc in 1927, but the climb proved free from the fears that dog the footsteps of climbers who make ascents unjustifiably exposed to the dangers of stone-fall and avalanche, and the fact that the route, together with the route made up the same face in 1928, has since been climbed safely on numerous occasions justifies the satisfaction I feel in having taken part in its invention. As against these routes, I well remember the fear I felt when climbing the Plan-Crocodile couloir, a terrific stone-swept rift between the Aiguille du Plan and the Dent du Crocodile in the range of Mont Blanc, which was scaled because the lower rocks of the east ridge of the Plan proved too icy to be practicable, and I sincerely trust that no one will be so foolish as to follow this most unpleasant variation of an otherwise perfectly sound route.

The only time I have experienced fears destructive of all pleasure was on Kangchenjunga in 1930. This was during an international expedition in which there was a preponderance of Germans. To begin with, everyone was issued with flags. Mine was for some subtle reason a red ensign made in Germany, with the stripes the wrong way round. Later in the



expedition I ran out of pocket-handkerchiefs and used it as a substitute—to the scandal of my companions, who probably believed me to be a Communist of the first water. Predictions in mountaineering are apt to be falsified, but it is safe to say that no sane mountaineer is likely to climb Kangchenjunga from the north-west under the prevailing ice-conditions. The route chosen outraged every mountaineering maxim. It lay under hanging glaciers of sufficient size to have blotted out the first two camps at any moment with the immense avalanches that from time to time fell upon them, then over a hanging glacier in rapid movement. I do not suppose that my German friends liked the route any more than I, but the leader had said *vorwärts*, and *vorwärts* it was. We feared as much for our flags as for ourselves, and no one liked to be the first to give in. So we went on, a mass attack in the face of the deadliest barrage. It was, as the leader said, not mountaineering but war, and the Germans, as everyone knows, enjoy war. I am now older, and I hope a little wiser. Were I confronted with a similar situation I should pack up my rucksack and trek for home, or at least make for a mountain that could be climbed with reasonable safety and enjoyment. As it was, I went on with the rest.

It was a nightmarish business. Now when I wake up and hear the rush of a falling bomb I am reminded of nights spent in camp beneath the hanging glaciers of Kangchenjunga, nights when I used to start up in

my sleeping-bag at the crash of an avalanche, and spend the next few moments in wondering whether or not the camp was about to be overwhelmed. The assault ended in disaster. It was sheer luck that the whole climbing party and its porters were not wiped out by the hanging glacier when it fell, the same ice up which we had been laboriously cutting steps for days. As it was, the best of the porters, "Satan" Chettan, a veteran of the 1924 Camp Six Everest party, was caught and killed by the cataract of blocks. Not until national fears and rivalries are relegated to the dustbin will this international type of expedition be a sound proposition for mountaineers.

Fear deliberately and continually incurred is destructive of those finer feelings for mountains which the true mountaineer values so highly. As with a drug, many doses, instead of stimulating, tend to deaden appreciation of mountaineering, until desperate climbs are engaged in not for pleasure or any other worth-while emotion, but solely to satisfy the instinct for competition and notoriety. I well remember the remark of a Zermatt guide. "I do not like climbing with Mr. —," he said. "He wants to climb only the new routes up the mountains." That guide had learned to dislike the perpetual search for new routes, in all probability because many of these routes did not appeal to his mountaineering judgment as being objectively safe and justifiable. He was expressing not only disgust but fear.

Fears accidentally incurred are an altogether different matter. Every mountaineer gets into scrapes at one time or another, for accident and mischance are inseparable from a sport with so many hazards. There is the stone that falls where by rights it ought not to fall, the artfully concealed crevasse, the unexpected slip, the storm that approaches with little warning. All are potentially deadly, and all are, therefore, to be feared. Why not avoid them altogether by keeping off the mountains? The answer is that the mountaineer accepts certain risks with their attendant fears; he accepts also his own capacity for making wrong and foolish decisions. What he does not accept, if he is a sensible fellow, is the quagmire on the other side of the fence separating the justifiable from the unjustifiable. If he trips over it he does not do so deliberately, and he is careful not to cross it of his own accord.

It is scarcely possible to tabularise the fears of mountaineering, and most of us have our own decided preferences in the matter. For my part, I know of nothing so thoroughly frightening as to be caught high up on a great mountain by a violent storm. It is not a sharp and sudden fright such as that occasioned by a falling stone or a slip on bad ground, but it loses little of its potency on that account. A thunderstorm is worst of all, for it is unpleasantly noisy, and carries with it unusual and startling phenomena, as well as a malevolence which seems to

be directed almost personally against the climber. Possibly I am prejudiced in the matter, having been already struck and stunned by lightning, but I have never ceased to feel nervous on a mountain when a thunderstorm is brewing, for of all Nature's phenomena it is the most incalculable and therefore the most to be feared. Yet, when the storm bursts and action is necessary to counter it, fear is relegated to a minor place in the proceedings, for the debunker of fear is invariably action. Similarly, it is a frightening experience to be caught high up on a great climb, many hours from easy ground and safety, by a blizzard, but here again the anticipation of ill to come is far worse than the struggle to worst that ill when it does come. Two instances of this are memorable in my own case. One was when my companion and I were tackling the Péteret ridge over the Aiguille Blanche de Péteret. A retreat from the Péteret ridge in bad weather is a long, difficult and dangerous business. We were on the summit ridge of the Aiguille Blanche when the weather went to pieces. It was my companion's first season in the Alps, and the decision as to the best thing to be done rested with me. It was not a case of simple advance or retreat. Obviously we had to retreat, but how? We had ascended by moonlight up a frozen couloir from the Fresnay Glacier to the col between the pinnacles known as the Dames Anglaises and the Aiguille Blanche. This couloir we knew was swept all day by stone-falls from a sore of

rotten rocks, and to retreat down it in bad weather would be dangerous in the extreme. There were two alternatives. One was to descend the east face of the Aiguille Blanche, but this again had a bad reputation, and it was here that Willy Richardet, a well-known Swiss climber, was killed by falling stones in similar circumstances. The other alternative was to continue over the crest of the mountain to the Col de Péteret, and descend the steep rock buttress known as the Gruber Felsen to the Fresnay Glacier. I knew little about this last, except that, many years before, Professor Balfour and his guide Johann Petrus had lost their lives on it in an attempt to reach the Col de Péteret, and I was not aware of any subsequent ascent. At the same time, I had seen the buttress from a distance and in photographs, and something told me that here if anywhere was to be found a safe line of retreat. That something was largely instinct, and it was not the first time, or the last, that I have trusted to that indefinable virtue, which can become so easily a definable vice. At all events it worked, or I should not now be writing this, and we arrived after dark at the Gamba hut in the midst of an appalling thunderstorm which developed later into a hurricane and blizzard of such ferocity that it is very unlikely that we could have survived a night out. This happened fourteen years ago, but even now I remember the anguish that preceded a decision on which our lives might depend, and the fears that inevitably accompany

such a decision in which safety and danger are weighed on a knife-edge balance.

The other occasion was during an attempt on the then unclimbed south face of Mont Maudit, a peak of the Mont Blanc massif. The party numbered three, Messrs. A. Harrison, C. Parry and myself, and we bivouacked about one quarter of the way up the formidable 3,500-foot wall. This was not a wise decision on my part (I was the instigator of the climb), and we would have done better to have bivouacked on the Brenva Glacier and attempted to carry through the climb in a day. Our bivouac was nothing more than a ledge cut out of a slope of ice and snow. The weather was perfect at sundown, and we settled ourselves down as well as we could in our chill and uncomfortable eyrie, full of hopes for the morrow. But 1929 was a bad season, and the weather lived up to its already well-established reputation for treachery. As we sat huddled together watching the clustered lights of Courmayeur thousands of feet beneath, the stars, at first bright and steady, began to shiver and wink suspiciously. Then they grew dim and one by one disappeared. The night became darker and darker, and although there was not a breath of wind, seemed charged with menace. Round about midnight I felt the cold touch of a snowflake on my cheek, then another and another. Soon it was snowing heavily, not the light powdery snow of low temperatures, but heavy blanketing flakes that soon accumulated to a

considerable depth. Our first reaction was disappointment, for the climb was a cherished ambition, and would, we had hoped, be not only a new one but also free from danger. There was no doubt now that we should have to retreat directly it was light enough to see.

But as the hours passed, disappointment was replaced by anxiety. It was no ordinary snowstorm. The snow fell and fell through the darkness thickly and persistently, inch by inch, out of a still and heavy void, hissing and crepitating softly on our sleeping-bags. Would dawn never come? I remember something worse than ordinary anxiety as I lay in my sleeping-bag trying vainly to pierce the gloom for the first hint of longed-for daylight. The climb was my suggestion and my responsibility. To reach our bivouac we had ascended some steep and difficult ground, then crossed an immense icy couloir which cleaves the mountain-face from top to bottom. In the middle of this couloir falling débris had worn out a groove in the ice some eight or ten feet deep and as many feet wide. We had crossed this when the evening shadow was on the mountain, and nothing had fallen. Now it would have to be recrossed, there was no alternative route, and we knew full well that it was the chute down which the mountain emptied its avalanches to the Brenva Glacier. What would it be like after a heavy snowfall?

Light filtered by imperceptible degrees into an atmosphere grey with snow. At least six inches had

fallen, and these were being added to every minute. Not a moment was to be lost if we were to regain the glacier. Imagination is the kinsman of fear, and as I lay in my sleeping-bag I pictured all too vividly the result of an avalanche in the couloir. But action, as usual, banished fear. Heaven knows the crossing was bad enough. A rush of snow swept down on Harrison when he was in the middle of the chute. By an immense effort of strength he managed to remain in his steps fighting the smother, but he was so exhausted by the struggle that he had to retire. I continued with the work. There was no time to be afraid; there was too much to do. I cut steps as hard as I could across the ice, and just managed to reach safety before the chute was swept by an avalanche greater than the first, which would undoubtedly have swept me away and probably suffocated me as I hung suspended on the rope. Presently we were all across this evil place, but we were not yet out of the wood. Rocks, and then a long steep ice-slope, had to be descended. For this last we used our rope. I remember as I slid down looking up and seeing through a swirling blankness, for the wind was rising, great crags looming through the murk, shadowless and dead-white with freshly fallen snow. We leapt the bergschrund and hurried out of range on to the broad snows of the Brenva Glacier. As we did so there came from above a harsh roar rising to thunder, then another roar. Through the snow-clouds the avalanches streamed, not mere



slides such as we had met with in the chute, but monsters plunging and cascading down the precipices like the discharges of artillery. Those were the avalanches of my fears, but we had cheated them, and destruction, by a few minutes.

There are other and more instant fears in mountaineering. The first occasion on which I knew the sharp heart-pang of sudden fear was during my first high climb, the ascent of the Tödi. On the ordinary route via the Biferten Glacier it is usual to ascend a gully by lantern light, then traverse some easy broken rocks known as the Gelb Wand in order to turn the ice-fall. The gully is liable to be swept by falling ice from a hanging glacier high up the mountain. My companion and I knew this and made haste to ascend it. We were in the middle when, of a sudden, the silence of the night was shattered by a terrible crash above us. My heart seemed to miss a beat and leap upwards into my throat. Then as one man we tore towards the sheltering rocks of the Gelb Wand. We reached them and paused panting for breath. The night was silent again, the stars serene. Nothing had fallen down the gully.

There was a somewhat similar occasion with an unexpected and amusing dénouement. It happened in a narrow ice-gully under the Moine ridge of the Aiguille Verte. I was in it when I heard a rushing noise, as I thought, of falling stones.

There was no time to gain shelter and I remained

where I was, hoping to dodge the stones if need be. The rushing noise increased in volume, then of a sudden an aeroplane swooped over the ridge above. Far from being thankful for a false alarm, my companion and I cursed it heartily.

Mr. Hilaire Belloc honestly concedes that he does not like climbing mountains for fear of slipping down. This, of course, is a fear fundamental in all climbing, and a regulator and limiter of mountain craft and technique. Some are less prone to it than others, and there are climbers who, it would appear, take a positive pride in the number and distance of their falls, even going so far as to aver that falling is a positively pleasant sensation. It seems that they are not susceptible to fear. If so, they are neither brave nor sensible, for bravery lies in overcoming fear, not in being unafraid, whilst to be sensible implies a respect for life. Fear, and the power to recognise and overcome it, are healthy correctives of a sport which, during the past few years, has exhibited unmistakable signs of fanaticism.

As regards a fall, it is probably true to say that in many cases fear is absent after the initial shock. In my only serious fall on rocks, the result of being pulled from my holds when some loose rocks fell beneath my companion, I only remember experiencing fear at the moment when the accident happened and I was jerked off by the rope. After that, although I was falling to apparently certain death, and was certain

that the rope had broken or slipped off the small belay round which it had been passed, my feeling was one of complete detachment. I cannot, however, agree with the fanatics already mentioned that there was anything markedly pleasurable about the fall. It struck me as distinctly unpleasant, if any adjective can do justice to such an experience.

Edward Whymper gave a detailed account of his impressions during a fall of two hundred feet on the Matterhorn, in the course of which he wrote that "this bounding through space did not feel disagreeable." Not disagreeable perhaps, but scarcely agreeable. What would appear to emerge from the various accounts of falls on mountains is that acute fear is limited to the moment preceding the fall, and that there is no room for any sharply definable emotion once the fall has commenced. It would also seem to be generally agreed that death by falling is a painless end, as all who have fallen are emphatic that they experienced no pain.

One of the worst moments in climbing is that when the body momentarily loses its balance. How and why this happens is not always clear. There would appear to be a temporary lack of co-ordination between mind and body, possibly an effect similar to the blackout known to airmen. At all events, I know of no moment of such concentrated fear as that when there is a struggle to regain lost balance. I can recollect only a few instances, and these were during comparatively easy rock climbs. In all cases this

going out of balance was completely unexpected and balance was regained in a fraction of a second, indeed so quickly that my companion had no inkling of anything untoward. But all were very bad moments.

One of the most fearful moments in climbing must be that when strength fails on difficult rocks and the climber falls. This is only likely to happen to a skilful climber when he is out of training, but there are rare occasions, usually on new or little-trodden routes, when zeal outruns discretion and the climber finds himself unable to climb higher and is faced with a long and strenuous descent over rocks that have already taxed his powers to the full. This fear of having to retreat is very real on new routes, and partly explains why those who first make a climb find it more difficult than those who follow after. A route that has been climbed has been robbed of most of its fears. Most mountaineers, and I am certainly no exception, have found themselves in positions whence retreat would have been very difficult, if not impossible. Providence alone decreed advance practicable. At the same time, it is remarkable what reserves of strength exist to be called upon to meet an emergency, and I have astonished myself on more than one occasion. An instance of a retreat from a critically difficult position is described elsewhere in this volume.<sup>1</sup> Another distinctly nasty retreat was that on the rocks

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 119-122.

of Nilkanta in the Garhwal Himalayas. Peter Oliver and I were prospecting the ascent of this still unclimbed peak, and were engaged in trying to force a formidable step in the ridge, a wall of smooth slabs which had defeated our best efforts. Oliver had no belay for the rope, and had braced himself as best he could on his holds. I was sixty feet from him, trying to discover a route. The climbing was extremely difficult, the holds being sloping and small. The worst passage was a nearly horizontal traverse round a corner where there were mere niches barely sufficient to support toes and fingers. I was telling myself that here if anywhere was a place fit only for rubber shoes, when the heavens opened in a torrential hailstorm. In a matter of seconds the slabs were streaming with slush and water. At the same time I realised that the route ended in impassable overhangs and that there was no alternative but to retreat. As I estimated the chances of getting back safely over those small slush-covered holds they did not at first seem at all rosy, and for a second or two I had that hopeless feeling which is worse than fear. Still, the job had to be done, and like other bad jobs on mountains it proved nothing like as bad as thinking about it.

Enough has been written to show that fear is a product of physical inaction, and that once inaction has been replaced by action there is small room for it. The soldier and civilian of to-day who are bombed from the air or shelled by long-range guns have far

more to endure than their prototypes of a century ago. The fact that they *can* endure it is proof that civilisation and economic security have not weakened the moral and physical fibre of man. Fear, like every other emotion, affects men in different ways. In a recent letter Mr. Arnold Lunn wrote :

“So far I have had bombs drop pretty close and the usual racket at night, but none of these experiences even begin to approach mild fear as experienced in the Alps. Again and again I’ve been horribly frightened in the mountains, e.g. leading on nasty sloping holds with verglas about, storm and night, etc., and I incline to think that anybody who has done any serious mountaineering, particularly without guides, has probably bumped into experiences as alarming as anything in ordinary warfare. Of course war has things much bloodier and more frightening than mountaineering, but even war would have to work hard to rival that North face Eiger show.”

My experience is the reverse of Mr. Lunn’s. As already described, I have been very frightened on numerous occasions when anticipating danger, but in the face of that danger I have usually experienced a curious feeling of impersonal detachment, and I have never once felt that the mountains were seeking to kill me. The prospect of being killed in a mountaineering accident is no worse than the prospect of dying from old age or disease; in fact it is a good deal less worse. To die in the heart of Nature seems to me

an eminently satisfactory death. The body, composed of the same substances as the mountains, the fields, the trees, the streams and the air, is resolved through the agency of the same forces that created it back into the same materials. There is something ennobling and infinitely comforting in this thought. On the other hand, to die at the hand of a fellow-man, through the agency of an explosive or machine, though the ultimate result is identical, fills me with horror and loathing. The drone of a bomber in the sky animates me with much the same feelings that the ancients must have had at the thought of spooks and devils. Granted we are put into this world to strive and to die, but war is a dismal kind of striving, and to die because of it a negation of that loving principle which alone makes life worth while on this planet.

Finally, whereas fear in war produces in its train a deadening of the finer instincts, leading finally to a brutal conception of life, a modicum of the same emotion in mountaineering quickens the appreciation of beauty, for such appreciation can never be based on a dead unemotional level but is dependent on the whole octave of sensibility. The charm of mountain-climbing lies not in the climbing, in success, nor in failure, but in the great range of emotions provoked through these physical experiences. The man who climbs is no single note struggling in an orchestra, rather is he a whole orchestra in himself, fully conscious of his strength, his power and the beauty of his score.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE STREAM

THE stream issues from an extensive and indefinite marshy area set in the uppermost limits of a wide hollow which derives its moisture in trickles from the surrounding hillsides and from slower but more constant seeping and percolating through the peat and moss.

The hollow is a wild and desolate place. No tree, not even a stunted ash or creeping juniper, breaks the uninterrupted sweep of the dark hillsides or the bold simplicity of the lofty skylines. It is a place of shadows, of grey sea-born mists, of golden lights and abysmal glooms.

Here is the birthplace of the stream. The heathery lifts, the broken out-jutting crags, the slopes of scree, all add their quota to the peaty marsh. But these are but intermediaries. First comes the rain. Often the hollow is dimmed with rain, not the rain that falls from aloof clouds on city roofs and streets, but rain that is a part of the atmosphere and of the sea, salty rain drooping gauzy veils, endless processions of rain, fine penetrating rain, heavy drenching rain. At such times when rain-weighted mists boil and seethe in the hollow



the scene is sombre and grand. There is no ending and beginning to mist and hillside, form merges into form, gloom piles on gloom.

The only definite objects are brooks hastening down the hillside into the hollow. Grey and angry they appear, writhing serpent-like out of the lowering mist, and the sound of them vies with the grumble of the wind on the ridges high above, so that the hollow is filled with rushings, moanings and mutterings. But their first brief career is ended in the peaty marsh, where they lose their individuality amid the coarse sedge grasses, filling the peat-hags, swelling the tufts and islands of turf into great saturated sponges.

Assured of its reservoir, the stream issues boldly from the marsh as though knowing it cannot fail in the driest season with such a store of sodden peat and turf to draw upon. And so from the start its note is confident and assured. Like a glacier-stream, it realises that it is no temporary ephemeral thing, but permanent like the great hills mothering it on its course.

True, it is small to begin with, especially in dry summers when the peat-hags cake and crack and a man may walk with impunity across the bog and scarcely damp his feet, and carves a tortuous passage through the peat and heather. There are places where it is scarcely visible, so narrow and overgrown is it, but presently, when it clears the marshy ground, it broadens gradually and proceeds in ever wider sweeps.

For the most part it is shallow, and where the hollow





is broad and nearly level it ripples over small clean-washed pebbles. The water on a bright spring day matches the atmosphere in brilliance and clarity. Liquid silver cannot vie in light and liveliness with a hill-stream.

For some, there is a constant exhilaration in the sight and sound of running water. Is there any more pleasurable experience in hill-walking than to spend an hour resting on the heather by a hill-brook? But you must be alone. Then the stream will talk to you: a simple talk about simple things, sunlight and pure air, hills, clouds, flowers and the scents of the earth. Take your troubles to running water and you will return refreshed.

So the stream passes on its journey to the sea. On either hand are the hills with their colonies of cloud-shadows. Tufts of cotton-grass nod on the banks, and there is a gleam of yellow buttercups and golden geums.

In places there are hoary lichen-covered boulders, remnants of once proud crags, and long-flattened rocks scored by the glacier that once filled the hollow. Between them the stream threads its way, breaking here and there into little collars of foam. It becomes steep and uneven, no longer flowing shallowly over a pebble-bed but alternating between tumultuous dashes and brief repose.

Steeper and steeper falls the ground. Of a sudden between the hills is a glimpse of the sea. The hollow

is wider here, and its uppermost recesses where the stream was born are already dim and remote.

The stream emerges from the hollow on to open slopes falling to gentler moorlands. It has carved for itself a deep and narrow channel; in its steeper portions the channel has been partially choked by accumulations of boulders, and over the pitches thus formed it pours in waterfalls. Most of these are small, but there is one where it leaps fully seventy feet into a deep pool. After days of torrential rain it is a fine sight to see the stream in spate, its peaty-brown water breaking into a yeasty foam. There is might and fury in it then, a weighty thunder of furious water that sends a dank spray billowing out from between the jaws of the gorge.

There are other times when drought reduces it to a mere brook trickling subdued along the floor of the gorge, and there are occasions when frost sets its grip on the falling water, nailing it to the pitches in sheets and columns of shining ice.

The stream emerges from the gorge. Slopes of moorland alone separate it from the sea. It has gained its full power. Even the boulders lying in its bed have been thrust thither by its surging waters.

In its passage across the moorland the stream receives the sun. It is filled with glimmering light, and its floor of sand and pebbles shivers unsubstantially through the pellucid water. This is the place for a man to linger in the afternoon on the way back from

climbing the hills. What better couch is there than heather, and what pleasanter companion than a stream? All streams are talkative, and a hill-stream is the greatest chatterer of all. It is never boring, yet always soothing. It is a thousand voices in one, and one voice in a thousand. Do not think as you lie beside it, but let it think for you. Then you will hear the voice and message of the hills, then you will be as one with the wheel of life, the constant round of birth and growth and death and birth, the interweaving, intertwining, indestructible processes of the universe. A man cannot be afraid who is not conscious of himself; destiny is too great to hold fear; and the voice of the stream speaks of destiny, the living thread that for ever traverses the endless countries of the spirit. This is the consolation of running water.

And so the stream passes on to the sea, in constant fulfilment of its own destiny, to its rebirth in the clouds about the hill-tops, to rain and whispering snowflakes, to the lilt once more of hurrying water.

On to the sea, the glimmering sea beyond the smoke-blue hills, now into quiet pools where the brown trout flicker, now in babbling ridges, now in smooth silvery cascades, now sedately through quiet channels fringed with buttercups and laced with rowans, flashing, sparkling, bubbling, whispering, talking, laughing, singing, the stream hurries onwards to the sea.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE CRAG<sup>1</sup>

THE south side of the hill, that facing the sea, slopes gently and is heather-clad, except for a few moss-covered boulders that have taken permanent root in the peaty soil, but the north side falls precipitously in a crag. It is as though some giant had taken a knife and slashed a great slice out of a monstrous pudding.

It is six hundred feet high, this crag, and a quarter of a mile in width. Two deeply cut gullies intersect it from base to summit, and between them the grey schistose rock bulges outwards in a supporting buttress. Beneath it, a slope of rock fragments, varying in size from a pebble to a fair-sized house, extends to a small tarn, a dark-green eye that records every wayward light and wandering wind. On the far side of the tarn, heathery slopes rise to a ridge, and beyond this ridge are other ridges, each bluer and more remote, fading into the opalescent hazes of the north.

It is a desolate scene. No tree, no field, no road, no human habitation break the tremendous monotony. There is no movement except for the wind in the

<sup>1</sup> This chapter was first published as a contribution to *The Queen's Book of the Red Cross*, 1939.

heather, the passage of clouds, and the shimmering of the tarn. Sunlight seldom falls on the crag; there is nothing kindly in its shadowed precipice. Water oozing from its cracks and ledges has left long dark stains on the rocks, and it is grimly silent except for thin trickles in its gullies, that fall with a subdued whispering sound over stones and boulders. Yet in May and June, when the sun edges into the north, the rocks dry and the crag glows warmly in the long luminous twilight. At such times the ledges are gay with star-like saxifrages and bilberries ripen on the terraces.

There are days of peace when the distant sea gleams like a silvered pavement, and only the ravens and wailing curlews intrude upon the boundless serenity of earth and atmosphere, and there are days when storms congregate in the west and the wind flings itself furiously from the foam-streaked Atlantic, lashing the hills with salty rain. Then the crag awakens from its slumber. It is magnificent and mysterious; new voices are roused; new vistas made visible. Roaring, whining, whistling, the wind searches every nook and cranny; it pours tempestuously into the gullies; it tramples the rakes and ledges; now approaching with a sound like that of an express train in a tunnel, now breaking like a thunderclap on the crest, now descending on the tarn in a tumult of fury, snatching up sheets of water with careless ease, and flinging them in violent deluges against the cliffs hundreds of feet higher, where



wild affrighted mists tear endlessly past, shredding out into twisting curtains of rain.

The crag seems almost to respond to these rude buffetings. Calmly it faces the charging mists like some seasoned warrior confident of his power, now apparently smothered beneath some onrush, then breaking free, hard-faced, stern, triumphant.

There are other times, when the wind veers to the north, and an Arctic breath whitens the fells. The tarn freezes; every drop and trickle of water is stilled, and icicles beard the chockstones in the gullies. Then out of a sky of cruel feline green comes the snow—and a great silence.

For many centuries after the ice had ground and scored the rocks, and hollowed out the bed of the tarn, the ravens had nested undisturbed on the crag, but one warm July day two men came over the opposite hill and descended the heather slopes to the tarn. They were dressed in tweeds, with caps and knee breeches, and they carried knapsacks on their backs. They seated themselves on a boulder by the tarn and gazed long and earnestly at the crag above them.

"A fine bit of rock," said one.

"The left-hand gully looks possible," said the other.

"Right," said the first, "we'll try it."

They rose to their feet and scrambled up the slope of scree to the mouth of the gully. There they halted, and one of them took a coil of rope from his shoulder, undid it, and tied one end to his waist, his companion

doing likewise with the other end. Then they paused and gazed upwards.

The gully was deeply cut and enclosed by two walls of great steepness. One wall was vertical, even overhanging in places, a smooth precipice offering scarce lodgment to a fly. The other wall was a little less steep. It was wet and slimy, and patches of grass, moss and heather clung to it; it was more broken than the other wall, but infinitely more treacherous to climb.

These things the men noticed. They saw also that the uppermost portion of the gully narrowed, forming a chimney narrow enough for a man to straddle, a fearsome rift with a strip of blue sky discernible through it and the silver-lipped edge of a slow-moving cloud.

Countless rains, frosts, and suns had choked the gully with débris, among it being several huge rocks which had jammed between the walls. In some places there was a clear gap between these chockstones and the silted-up bed of the gully, but in other places the gaps had been filled with fallen débris and it would be necessary to pass the obstacles on the outside.

The two climbers advanced to the attack. They trudged up some more scree, and presently stood beneath the first boulder in a shallow cave between it and the bed of the gully. It was a dismal place. One half of a small stream that poured down the gully found its way over the outside of the boulder, whilst

the remaining half seeped through the débris at the back of the boulder, so that the boulder and the walls on either hand were dripping wet and covered here and there with green slippery slime. The boulder overhung, and it was impossible to climb directly over it: the obstacle had to be passed by scaling one or other of the walls between which it was edged. That on the right was impossible; the smooth wet rock was destitute of holds for hand or foot, and the sole alternative lay to the left up the vegetation-masked rocks.

Leaving his companion standing in the dripping cave, one of the men began to climb. Reaching upwards, he pulled away slaty, insecure masses of rock until firmer material was exposed. The fragments crashed into the bed of the gully, then rolled to rest on the screes; soggy lumps of turf and moss followed.

Ten feet, twenty feet, thirty feet, the leader's progress was slow, but confident and sure.

To the second man standing in the cave this was a dull time. He could not see the leader, but he could hear him, the gritting of his boot-nails, an occasional exclamation, and the rattle and hum of dislodged fragments. The rope ran out slowly through his hands, foot by foot and yard by yard. He looked at it meditatively. It was useless to his companion should he fall, and useful to him only when his turn came to follow. And yet it was valuable to both. It was something more than a mechanical link; there was a

potency in it; it transmitted a flow of human force. He could feel his companion through it, his confidence and his strength, and his companion could feel him, his thoughts, whether he was half-hearted or worried, whether he had the "wind up," whether he was calm and assured. In any emergency the rope would serve as a common denominator of emotional force, of resolution, determination, hope, or fear.

Now and again, he glanced outwards away from the crag. The dark walls of the gully framed sunny hills and leisurely cloud shadows; he could see, also, a corner of the tarn, unruffled, and serenely still. Strange, and a little mad, it seemed to be climbing a chill, wet and possibly dangerous gully when he might be lounging at ease on a sun-warmed boulder. Why was man never satisfied with easy things? Why must he strive to tread where no foot had trodden before? Why must he exchange comfort for discomfort and safety for danger? Perhaps one answer lay in the crag. There was something about it, about a mountain, that brought out the best in you; it tested you and in some mysterious way helped you. Mountains were made for simple men, not knaves and fools. It was good to climb them, to feel mind and body working in perfect unison and accord, and to see beauty. There was health to be found, and a philosophy, a peacefulness of mind and a serenity of spirit. In mountaineering there was a strength of purpose that had its roots in no chase, blood-lust, or suffering, but in something

personal and intimate between man and Nature, and through Nature, God.

He was recalled from his thoughts by a sudden shout, "Come on!" The leader was up the first pitch.

He obeyed. His day-dreams were replaced by stern realities. There was nothing speculative or unreal about the slimy rocks or in his chilled finger-tips as they groped for holds.

He joined the leader, and together they progressed up the gully. There were many pitches, some easy, some difficult, some bordering on the impossible. Each problem called for a different solution and each solution took time. It was a longer climb than either had supposed, and the sun was well past its zenith when they came to the foot of the final chimney.

Seen from below, this chimney had looked both steep and difficult, and its appearance did not belie the original estimation. It seemed to overhang the placid waters of the tarn, now many hundreds of feet distant. To climb it meant hard and exacting work, and there was, in addition, a psychological problem to be faced—the fear of the unknown.

As they stood resting for a few moments and eyeing this culminating problem, a raven floated past uttering mocking croaks which echoed hollowly between the walls of the gully.

"I think it will 'go'!" said the leader resolutely.

"Looks all right," replied the second man. "I've

got you well held, anyway," he added, as he passed the rope round a spike of rock.

With his back against one wall, and his feet against the other, the leader began to climb the rift. It was hard work, and the second man, anxiously paying out the rope, heard the short, hard gasping of overtaxed lungs.

The chimney gradually splayed out, until the leader was wedged across it almost full length, supporting himself by the pressure of feet and shoulders. The second man seemed very far beneath him; he could see his face staring upwards out of the gloomy depths of the gully. Every muscle now was tuned, every nerve was taut to do battle with the crag's last defence.

Twenty feet alone remained to be climbed, but it was not possible to "chimney up" any longer, the rift was too wide. One or the other of the walls must be climbed. The right-hand wall was impossible, but there were hand-holds and foot-holds in the left-hand wall.

But before going farther he must assure himself that the climb was possible, gauge exactly the strength necessary to mount that twenty feet, and whether, should it prove impossible, he would have a sufficient margin of strength left on which to retreat safely.

Supposing, and the thought would keep recurring, that it *did* prove impossible? Would he be able to re-wedge himself across the chimney, and make his way down to his companion? The possibilities were

machinery. In an instant he was up, as lithe as a panther, up and on to the crest of the crag.

It was late in the afternoon as the two men sat together on the crag smoking their pipes. The hills were a deep dusky purple, and beyond them the sea was molten bronze. Not a breath of wind stirred the heather and bilberries, and even the old raven had ceased its croakings and had resettled itself on some inaccessible ledge.

It had taken six hours to climb the gully, and they might have walked to the point where they now sat in twenty minutes.

The afternoon lengthened, and shadows grew about the tarn. At last one of the men knocked out his pipe against a rock and rose to his feet.

"Time we were going," he said.

His companion assented, and languidly coiled the rope. Then they were gone, striding down the heathery side of the hill.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the sunlight was transmuted to gold, and the shadows of the hills grew and grew in the hollow where the tarn rested. In the soft luminescent light the crag lost its harsher features as a man does at death. It became vague, tremendous, unearthly.

As the sun set, the long twilight deepened over the hills and the northern sky was filled with colours, with gold and daffodil, with green and blue, with amethyst and opal. There was silence and a great peace.

Very slowly, very gently, night fell.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE BEAUTY OF FLOWERS

WHEN a climber is young and ardent he marches with his eyes fixed on the heights, but when he is a little older, and the first lambent flames of enthusiasm have been replaced by the steadier but no less intense glow of experience, his interest in mountains tends to broaden, and he seeks not only the larger difficulties, excitements and conquests, but the smaller details that go to make up the mountain scene. Among other things, he will observe the flowers that grow on the hills.

Precisely where or when this transformation took place in my own case it is impossible to say. I have always enjoyed the sight and scent of flowers, but I cannot say that I heeded them save in a remote detached way. At the same time, there is one outstanding experience in my memory which may have influenced me more than I realised at the time.

This happened in 1931. After three weeks at high altitudes, culminating in the successful ascent of Kamet, we descended for a day or two's rest, then set off to cross the Zaskar range to the Alaknanda Valley by way of the Bhyundar and Kanta Khal Passes.



The monsoon had broken several days previously, and we crossed the Bhyundar Pass in driving sleet and snow. Mist concealed the slopes on the far side, but we pressed hopefully downwards and presently exchanged sleet for drizzling rain. We halted in order to allow the laden porters to catch up with us, and as we sat about the rocks in our wet clothes we suddenly realised that we were already in the region of growing things, for we were surrounded by primulas. They were everywhere, in nooks and crannies of the rocks and on shelving ledges generously fed by the melting snows. In colour they were an indescribable purple, which combined the blue of sky and mountain and the opal of distance, and their mealy flowers were covered all over in minute water-drops which gave to them an ethereal beauty and purity.

These primulas were only an earnest of what was in store for us. It was still misty when we pitched our tents in the Bhyundar Valley, but the rain had ceased and presently gleams of light broke through the encircling vapour. They revealed slopes carpeted and ablaze with flowers. A few days before, we had been scorched by glacier suns and shrivelled by bitter winds; now, soft monsoon airs breathed life and growth, and that evening as we sat by a fire of crackling juniper all the scents of the earth were ours.

We spent two days in the Bhyundar Valley. Of all mountain valleys that I had seen this is the most prolific in flowers, so much so that when we came to





mention it afterwards we always referred to it as the Valley of Flowers. Sensible people would have camped there for some time and in between whiles climbed and explored the neighbouring peaks and glaciers, but we were ambitious and wanted to explore the sources of the Ganges. So we spent some time tramping about a singularly stony and desolate country, traversing uninteresting snowfields and climbing unexciting peaks when we might have been having the time of our lives.

In 1937 I returned alone to the Valley of Flowers. In the interim period I had become a gardener, and my twofold object was to climb mountains and collect plants. I arrived there early in June, and pitched my camp on an alp above the valley floor. Already the turf soddened and crushed by the winter snow was pulsing with life, and there was a host of flowers to welcome me. This is no place to particularise, but I cannot pass on without mention of a *nomocharis*, in colour between pale daffodil and the deepest cream, a blue *corydalis* which with its clusters of slender tubular blooms suggested the pipes of Pan, and the *meconopsis* or blue poppy whose blooms are imbued with the limpid glory of the Himalayan sky.

Unexpectedness and contrast are the keynotes of mountain flora. As the mountaineer climbs the barren crags, apparently far above the limit of vegetation, he will suddenly see a brilliant little flower peeping out from a crack or cranny. On one occasion

I was scrambling up some rocks on an apparently desolate mountain-side when out of the corner of my eye I saw a patch of blue, and came upon the delicate blooms of a beautiful little *paraquilegia* pendant on the face of the cliff. It was the only sign of life in a wilderness of rock and ice, far above the level of permanent snow in a frigid world that seldom experienced temperatures above freezing-point, and then only during the hottest part of the day. How had it established itself? How had it survived? What nourishment could it extract from the stony waste? Here indeed was contrast *in excelsis*: the silken petals of this little plant, as tender as an English harebell, and the stark savagery of its environment, blazing sun alternating with icy tempest.

Another instance I well remember was during a climb up the south face of the Ecrins in Dauphiny. My friend and I had missed the route, not an uncommon circumstance on this complicated rock-face, and had involved ourselves in considerable difficulties on rocks which, as it transpired, were anything but on the route. We were at a height of some 12,500 feet when I, who was exploring round a corner, came upon several cushions of the Alpine forget-me-not (*Eritrichium nanum*). We had seen the same plant at a lower elevation on the Col des Avalanches, but I scarcely expected to find it near the highest point of the Dauphiny Alps, in as bleak a spot as may well be imagined. Its mat of tightly compacted foliage was

almost completely concealed by nearly stemless flowers of brilliant sky-blue. Like many another gardener, I was tempted to uproot it and bring it home to England in the hope of establishing it in my rock-garden, but I knew that this Alpine beyond all others refuses to transfer its allegiance from the dry cold air of the heights to this moisture-charged clime and, at the best, becomes an attenuated sickly object, a shadow of its former glorious self. It was best to remember it serene and undisturbed on its wrinkle of the Ecrins wall, to leave it to its undisturbed cycle of growth, its comfortable sleep beneath the winter snow, its brief period of splendid bloom, its attempt to perpetuate its species when one perhaps out of a million seeds doomed to extinction on peak, glacier and snowfield might find a friendly crack in which to raise another host of blooms to delight some errant climber.

An almost equally dramatic occasion was the *eritrichium* seen during the 1936 Mount Everest expedition on a 16,000-feet pass west of the Kharta Valley in Tibet. This formed a cushion a foot or more in diameter, covered with little flowers of the same intense blue. I well remember the moment when we breasted the pass and saw this glorious plant among the boulders at our feet. I remember, too, how on that occasion I uprooted some specimens and with infinite care brought them back to England, only to see them moulder and die. It is astonishing how many

of the plants from the dry cold Tibetan ranges will condescend to establish themselves in our gardens, but it is too much to expect that the most beautiful of them all will preserve its beauties in the lower world; its place is beneath clear skies and in cold pure air, jewelling the heights of Himachal.

I have written of contrast. The greatest of all contrasts in mountaineering lies in the return from the heights to the level of vegetation. Even in the Alps, where the climber seldom remains above the permanent snowline longer than a few days, it is a fine experience to descend to alp, meadowland and forest. In the Himalayas, where he may be weeks amid snow and rock, the greatest of all his experiences is that moment when he descends the arid wastes of moraine to meet the first small flower among the grey glacier-borne boulders. High up on a Himalayan peak a man might suppose the world as dead and he an unconsidered insect striving to preserve its life amid an environment chaotic and utterly hostile. So must a wild bird feel, trapped in a cage with never a sight of tree, shrub or sky; and at high altitudes on Everest and Kangchenjunga the climber longs for a glimpse of growing things, for trees and grass and flowers, and those sounds and smells that make life pleasurable on this planet.

On Everest I used to think not so much of streets and cities, though on many occasions we planned gargantuan meals to eat when we returned to civilisa-

tion, but of fields and woodlands, cricket-pitches, luscious water-meadows, flowers and shady trees. The descent to the base camp from the high camps is not really a great change, and the average person transported to the Rongbuk Valley would consider it a bleak trench set between stony mountains, but to the climber returning from the desiccating airs, burning suns and blinding snows of high altitudes the contrast seems nothing short of miraculous. The cushion plants scattered about the moraine above Camp One with their star-like blooms were wonderful to behold, whilst the shelf between Camp One and the base camp with its little swards of green and plant-fringed pools was a paradisaic road.

An even finer contrast was that in 1938, when the expedition, after vainly attempting the mountain in the teeth of April winds and blizzards, crossed the Hlakpa La, a pass of 23,000 feet, and descended into the Kharta Valley for a rest and to recover from various ailments. This valley in the pre-monsoon season is subjected to dry north-west winds, though there are some pleasant alps, later carpeted with flowers, brushwood and quantities of juniper. The most striking contrast came when we reached the junction of the valley with the Arun Valley. The latter cuts through the Himalayas from the south and forms a channel for the warm moist airs from Lower Nepal and the distant Gangetic plain. The air flows up it through a series of gorges, but where the gorges



debouch on to the Tibetan plateau north of the Himalayan watershed they are sheered off, as though with a knife, by the dry north-west wind. The result is that in the space of a mile the traveller passes from an arid waste, fertile only during the monsoon season, into an Alpine country of permanent pastures and pine forest. In this gracious country, at the entrance of the gorge, we pitched our camp. There we had little to do but eat and sleep, wander about the countryside, recline on the turf, listening to the south wind in the pine-tops, and in the evening sit by a fire of pine-logs.

In such contrasts lies much of the charm of mountains and mountaineering. No true mountaineer can be happy for long without them. If he is penned in a fertile valley he will long to tread icy heights, and if he is many days on the heights he will sigh for flowers and trees.

For me, all I ask is to pitch my tent once more in a remote Himalayan valley with some peaks untrodden above me and around me woodlands and flowers. I want to see, and feel, and smell once more mornings when the air is still and cool, and the sun over the mountain-tops sets the dew afire on the opening blooms, transmuting the glacier-stream into a flow of purest silver. I want to take long deep breaths of all that is vital in earth and atmosphere, moist turf, flowers and forest. I want to set off to climb one of those peaks, to spend the night in a bivouac

camp on an alp 'twixt forest and glacier, and on the morrow, after a glorious scramble, to return to the valley knee-deep through flowers. I want to sit by a camp-fire in the evening and listen while the breeze dies down into a profound quietude. Then, when the shadows congregate and fill the valley, and the peaks shine out against the deepening sky, I shall hear, and feel, and see, the very Presence of Peace.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE TREE

THE tree stands on a slope of the Kuari Pass in the Central Himalayas. I first came upon it in 1931 during the march to Kamet. The expedition had camped for the night on the southernmost side of the pass, and we crossed the pass soon after sunrise next morning to enjoy a panorama of the Himalayas ranging from the Nanda Devi group in the east to the snows of Badrinath in the west.

It was the end of May and snow encumbered the pass, but we soon descended to grassy slopes and presently approached the tree-line. As we left the last of the seeping snowdrifts we saw a host of purple primulas lighting the brown sodden turf. Then we saw the tree. We halted for a rest near it, and one or two took photographs.

My photograph depicts a solitary pine tree standing apart from a forest falling some thousands of feet into a valley, a sentinel pine, inclined slightly from the vertical, with gnarled branches and rugged trunk. It was an ordinary member of its family, an old warrior that had long struggled to exist on the borderline of climatic tolerance and intolerance, and was now slowly



The Tree



succumbing to the stress of age and weather. There are similar veterans on every alp where forest and open mountain-side meet, and any would have served to write about.

But the scene was no ordinary scene even in a country of unexcelled beauty and grandeur. The pine served to lead the eye forwards to the adjacent forest; from this the gaze leapt the Dhaulī Valley to the mountains of the Zaskar range, the massif of Gauri Parbat and Hathi Parbat, the horse mountain and the elephant mountain. Here was a composition to delight the heart of any artist: the weather-beaten tree, compelling attention with its bold form and its tale of time and storm, then the necessary link of the forest, followed by the dim breadth of the valley, and, finally, the snows of high mountains brilliant in the morning sun. It is in such simple vistas that the beauty of the mountains is most apparent.

I am glad I took the photograph. It may convey little to anyone else, but to me it enshrines a precious memory. I have only to look at it to return to the slopes of the Kuari Pass. I am there now, seated in the sun amidst the purple primulas. I can hear a shepherd's flute, sweet and clear on the still morning air, and see a train of laden sheep and goats winding their way up the hillside towards the pass, driven by cheerful fellows whose ragged clothes are worth only the price of rags, but who have discovered the secrets of earth, air and happiness. And as I sit beneath the

tree I can hear the same secrets whispered to me by the mountain wind, murmured in my ear by the stream, borne to me from the snows of Badrinath and Nanda Devi. I cannot repeat them, for they are unrepeatable; I cannot write of them, for they are untranslatable; they are secrets incommunicable, discoverable only by those who search, and who, when they have searched, have eyes to see, ears to hear, and a peaceful heart.

Out of the past there comes to me at odd times and in queer unexpected places a vision of the tree; in the rowdiness of the city street, when the firmament is shuddering with war, I see it set darkly against shining mountains, splendid, alone, a symbol of endurance, beauty and peace.

## CHAPTER XXI

### BIRDSONG

MOUNTAINS and flowers are intimately associated in the minds of most hill-lovers; there is an affinity also between mountains and birds. Unhappily I am no ornithologist and, beyond a nodding acquaintanceship with the better-known species of birds, am unqualified to write on the subject. It is difficult to envisage a mountainous country without birds, just as the English countryside would seem a dismal affair without birdsong. On the frigid steeps of the Himalayas there are birds to welcome and accompany the climber. I have seen the ubiquitous chough at 25,700 feet on Mount Everest, and have photographed the same sturdy species at 23,000 feet on the North Col. Others have seen these birds at even greater elevations. It is probable that they normally exist at much lower heights, but follow climbers in search of scraps from among the débris of camps and alfresco meals eaten on the climb. Birdsong scarcely fits the sound emitted by the chough. In monotony it resembles the raven's croak, but whereas the latter is deep and sardonic, and how sardonic it can seem to the baffled climber on an impassable precipice, the chough has a lighter cry,



mocking and impudent indeed, but scarcely so throaty and intimate. I have seen them, sleek and effortless, careering through the thin cold air along the north side of Everest, while we less fortunate mortals were labouring uphill with gasping lungs and pumping hearts, acutely conscious of a lack of oxygen which apparently left our feathered companions unmoved.

It is evident, however, that some species are affected by altitude, and one of the strangest sights I ever saw was a flight of small birds crossing a pass of 21,000 feet. I do not know what birds they were, but they were little larger than wrens. They seemed wellnigh exhausted by the cold and altitude, and were flying in fits and starts, scarcely able to maintain themselves above the snow. It is probable that several perished, as did the swallows Sir Leslie Stephen saw near a pass over the range of Mont Blanc which he subsequently named the Col des Hirondelles.

Then there was a lark's nest discovered at a height of 18,000 feet, in a depression watered by melted snow-water between a mountain-side and the moraine of the Rongbuk Glacier. In the south, Everest rose cloud-wreathed above the westernmost bastions of the North Peak; and in the west, beyond a labyrinth of tapered ice-pinnacles, the West Rongbuk Glacier stretched its uneven floor into a wilderness of fluted ice-peaks. What had induced the birds to nest here, far from forest and meadowland, in a world given over to cold and blizzard for nine months of the year?

Beyond the Himalayan barrier in the south were the warm and fertile valleys of Nepal. Why had they not chosen one of these, with its plenitude of insect and vegetable life, for their home? It would almost seem that, in common with us slow toiling climbers, they rejoiced in the freedom of the heights. I heard their song. Very thin and tremulous it sounded in that remote place hard by the precipices of Everest, yet strong also, the challenge of a few ounces of flesh and blood to a majestic and terrible environment. I saw one as it wavered and trilled in the thin air against the intense blue of heaven, the sole evidence of life in a region where nothing else was to be heard except the cold gurglings of glacier waters, the splitting of ice, the dry rattling of stones, and the reverberating thunder of the avalanche. Here was a miracle no less great than Everest itself.

Those larks impressed us more than the lammergeyers that hover about the knees of the Himalayan peaks. Yet no account, however scanty, of Himalayan bird-life should neglect mention of these great birds that soar and float on effortless wings over the depths of the valleys, taking more account than the most skilful of glider pilots can ever hope to do of upward air currents. These birds are certainly appropriate to their surroundings. Their slow measured flight harmonises with the majestic character of the scenery. In the Central Himalayas there is seldom a moment when the traveller cannot see a pair of them wheeling

far above him, perhaps waiting for the death of some beast to provide them with carrion, perhaps preparing to drop like a thunderbolt on to some unwary hare or marmot.

It is to be expected that the largest birds should fly the highest, but such is by no means the case, and I cannot recollect having seen lammergeyers at altitudes much in excess of 16,000 feet. It is the smaller and weaker birds that are to be seen at the greatest elevations.

One charming and dramatic experience happened when I was climbing a difficult peak in the Garhwal Himalayas with my Tibetan Sirdar, Ondi Nurbu. In order to reach a rock-ridge, by which we hoped to complete the ascent, we had to mount a steep ice-slope thinly coated with snow. It was hard work, and when at length we reached the ridge we were scarcely in a condition to appreciate anything but a halt for rest and breath. Yet, as I, who was leading, pulled up over a slab on to the crest I heard a sudden burst of singing and twittering, and a few yards away saw a group of small brown birds perched on a flat boulder wedged athwart the ridge. They seemed oblivious of our presence and continued to sing lustily while we sat and rested. I have not before or since encountered so cheerful a company in such a remote and inhospitable spot, and long after we had resumed the climb along the steep crest of the ridge their song accompanied us on our way.

The raven is the boldest of mountain-birds, and sometimes makes disconcerting dives at the climber struggling with the intricacies of a precipice. He is found in Britain and the Alps, and I associate him with many difficult and exacting rock-climbs, where he invariably seemed to mock my laboured efforts, hurtling past with a sudden rush at the very moment when the struggle was most intense, then zooming up to perch on a near-by ledge and utter derisive croaks.

Birdsong always seems most tuneful and free in the early morning when the sun is just risen and the dew is wet on the ground. Go into a forest and hear it trilling through the sun-sprinkled aisles. These voices of field and forest, alpland and meadow, speed the mountaineer on his way. Sound has much to do with our appreciation of the hills. We may not listen consciously to birdsong, but we soon notice when it is absent. A forest is a sad brooding thing without it, but when birds sing it awakens to fun and laughter.

In the Valley of Flowers I lived for a time surrounded by three of the best things of life: mountains, flowers and birds. I used to awake in the morning with the sun, newly risen over the peaks, streaming in at my tent door, and hear a great chorus from the neighbouring birch forest. All day long the birds sang; through the still morning and in the light afternoon breezes. Not until the evening, when the breeze had died away and earth joined in the silence of heaven, did their song cease.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### CLOUDS

It is only necessary to compare the hills of the desert with those of moister climes to show that hill-beauty largely depends on clouds. It may be that I am prejudiced in this respect, for as an Englishman I come from a country whose beauty lies as much in the air as it does on the ground, whose vistas on the clearest days are imbued with atmospheric quality. The British hills cannot be dissociated from mist and rain, and if there is at times an overmuch of both, no Briton would wish to see them different from what they are. As a small boy clouds fascinated me. At first I thought that they were aloof objects that deigned not to approach the common earth, but I learned that they were as much creatures of the hills as they were lords of the sky. When I first saw clouds resting on a mountain I had a great desire to climb up into them. There was mystery there, and I have always liked mysteries. When the chance came, I was not disappointed as some might have been. I found it intriguing and exciting to be cut off from all sight of valley and plain, and the silence of a mist-enwrapped hillside held for me then, as it has always done since, a subtle enchantment. Even more exciting was the moment when the





Clouds

mists parted, revealing glimpses of hillside and forest, or perhaps a distant summit shining in the sun.

I also learned that thunder was not the result of a collision between two clouds, as had been taught me by an ignorant but well-meaning nurse, but in spite of this blow to a cherished belief, clouds never ceased to charm me.

In Britain a cloudy atmosphere confers on hills not only softness of tone and contour but an aloofness and dignity worthy of high mountains. The Ordnance map may refuse Snowdon an elevation in excess of 3,560 feet, but the fact remains that under certain conditions of atmosphere Snowdon becomes incalculably vast and mysterious, so much so that when a Swiss guide, whose mountain-craft was superior to his geography, was told by his employer that the party was about to start for the summit, he replied, "But surely only as far as the hut to-day?"

The lightest, most evanescent clouds are those that form in the early morning and late evening about a hillside. A morning in the British hills can be beautiful beyond imagining. He who rises early will imbibe the freshness of earth and sky, the scent of turf and heather, the purity of hill-air. He will hear the lambs crying from the hillsides and see mists, grey in the half-light, settled low and menacing on the hills. Then the sun comes, revealing a cloth of silvery dew. The mists dissolve into a sky of pure blue, and the hills, no longer dark formless masses, are imbued with



colour. Where the sun shines full on them they are a warm jade-green, but where they are shadowed they are blue, deepening with distance into purple. Here and there tumbling streams catch the bright sunlight, whilst slabs of wet rock glisten like silver plaques.

Silver and blue is the predominant motif of morning in the British hills, the silver of mist, water and dewy pasture, the blue of shadow, distance and sky.

As the sun increases in power the mists shift upwards, slowly shredding out as they do so. Now a rocky buttress appears jutting out of the swirling vapour, now a shadowy chasm shows in dark contrast with the sunlit vapour. Elusive shadows appear and fade like figments of a dream, fragmentary sunlight steals in pools and patches over the hillsides, on high, remote crests loom softly against the serene blue of heaven.

Now the mists are gone, save for a few fugitives clinging to shadowy gullies and hollows. The earth is radiant in the sun; the air, the hills, the sky are charged with vitality; song comes from the bird in the copse, from the herd, from the stream, from the crag.

There are other days, days of storm, when dun-grey clouds pass in endless masses, when wind-tattered mists droop earthwards in skirts of drenching rain, when squalls lift deluging clouds of water from the surface of the tarn and the mountain-ashes bend like whiplashes in the tread of jackbooted winds. These are days to be up and doing for those who enjoy a

hill-walk, who care nothing for wet clothing, and revel in the rude buffets of salty rain. Up in the scudding mist you will see nothing but nearer objects, grey lichen-splashed boulders and soaked grass; you will hear nothing but the hissing marsh, the spating stream and the wind-churned crags. Yet it is good to be alive, to press onwards through the volleying rain, with cheeks aglow to the smack of the wind. For this is British hill-weather; these rough winds and fleeing mists are as much a part of Britain as the grey seas that lap the feet of the western hills.

There are other days, when the winds rest and the mists hang sullen and brooding on the hills. Everything is hushed, and earth and sky unite in a sombre monotone. In these mists is silence and a great loneliness. Traverse the hills on such a day, and you will know a solitude such as you have never known before. It is not the solitude of a town, nor the solitude of a desert, but a solitude which has in it a message infinitely peaceful, the solitude of the hills.

Yet it is given to man ever to seek the sun, and there come unbidden to memory scenes of sunny days when tall clouds were piled on blue hills and languid shadows paced dreaming along the dales. It was good then to lie on a couch of wiry heather and let fancy weave its fantasies amidst the pillared halls of cloudland.

Then there are days when veils of rain quickly come and go, and a radiant sun parcels out the showers. Never do the hills look more beautiful than they do on

days like these. The Scottish Highlands lend themselves in particular to this kind of weather. Stand, for instance, amidst the heathery wastes of Rannoch Moor and watch the fleeting showers, the glowing domes and overlapping edges of mist, and beneath, blue rain joined to bluer hills. On this vast stage are dim shapes and dimmer shadows, lights that come and go, the gleam of water, the tread of errant winds, and always, in between, invariably emerging from the cloudy caravans of heaven, the eternal loom of the hills.

If there is one hill hour more beautiful than any other it is the sunset hour. This is the hour of spiritual beauty, peace and understanding. If you would understand my meaning, climb a hill of the Western Isles and remain there during a midsummer sundown. Beyond the twilit moors you will see the glimmer of the sea, uniting in splendour with the north-west sky. You will see clouds, fine-drawn tendrils, infused with glory and in between depths and channels of emerald, saffron and blue. You will see beauty, the beauty of hills and dreaming seas, the beauty of lights that live the night through, and as you peer over the silent moors into the still greater silences of the ocean you will know a peace derived from the soul of all creation.

We Britons partake in generous measure of the beauty of our island atmosphere. We have far to go to appreciate our heritage, to guard it from spoliations and vulgarities, yet we have preserved, and ever

striven to preserve, the peace that illumines our misty land. This peace is ever before our eyes, in woodland and hedgerow, in field and flower, in hill and sea. Whatever our beliefs, there is one focal point of agreement: our islands, the hills on them, the seas about them, are beautiful. The atmosphere pervading them, cloaking them with mystery, subtly enchanting us with its infinite tones and qualities, is the atmosphere not only of the present but of the past. It has been breathed by saints and heroes, it is enriched with ancient power, wisdom and tradition. It is charged with happiness and vitality, with song and dance. Through all that we see of Britain, all that we hear of her, all that we think and feel of her, runs the golden thread of beauty. We live in a beautiful land. What Englishman would exchange the heathery lift of a Lakeland fellside for the mightiest crag in Himalaya? What Scotsman would offer the haunted shores of Skye for the gems of Southern seas? What Welshman would barter Snowdon's windy crown for all the riches of Cathay?

If clouds are a part and parcel of British hillsapes, the same is, of course, true of the Alps and other mountain ranges, but there they are not so intimately blended and associated with hills as they are in the moister airs of Britain. It is easier to dissociate Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn from clouds than it is to remember Skiddaw or Carnedd Llewelyn without remembering also the seaborne mists that cumber

their grassy flanks. At the same time, clouds are as essential to the beauty of the high mountains as they are to fells and moorlands. The moisture that cloaks the British hills in heather, and swells the bilberries with luscious flesh, crystallises and solidifies in accumulations of snow and ice, builds tall pine forests and paints alps bright with flowers. Yet, notwithstanding this, the mountaineer feels that clouds are incidental to the main theme of the Alps, which is the beauty and grandeur of meadow, forest, rock, snow and ice. At the same time, none would venture to deny that clouds add immeasurably to the dignity of high mountains, and that without them mountains become lifeless things, mere sun-scorched hulks without mystery.

The distinctness with which clouds are separated from high mountains is due to the clarity of the atmosphere and denser cloud-forms. This distinctness possesses its own particular beauties. One of the pleasantest occupations I know is to spend an afternoon at ease on the turf of an alp watching the convolutions of clouds about a peak or ridge. Often these cumulus clouds appear as dense and as massive as the peak to which they cling. They are built up fold on fold and layer on layer in chaotic instability seemingly immeasurable in depth and substance. Yet such clouds are no less temporary than the winds, creatures at the beck and call of every atmospheric whim, apparently solid and immovable in the afternoon, but in the evening shredding out into an empty sky.

I am never tired of watching such clouds. They signify something more than a passing beauty, and spell out in misty letters the message of enduring things. It is for the vignettes they afford us that we are most grateful to clouds. Such glimpses remain fixed in the memory long after extensive vistas are forgotten: the sudden glimpse of a valley-stream, thousands of feet beneath, trembling in the sun, a scimitar-like snow-edge shining through a window, an unsuspected pinnacle standing regally from a mountain-side. And glimpses of little things, relatively unimportant, have a curious knack of committing themselves to memory: rocks, trees, out-jutting crags, a piece of hillside revealed perhaps for fleeting moments. In this way memory behaves as it behaves in every walk of life; when the great and noisy processions have passed and are forgotten it is the small things that are remembered, the gesture, the glance, the smile.

Mist to a mountain is like a conductor to an orchestra; it gives the scene rhythm and tempo, it can make it cheerful or sad, peaceful or angry, gentle or boisterous; a mountain without mist is like a human being without emotion, a dull monotonous thing. There are no dull days on the hills. There are grey days when sullen cloud-roofs sink deep in the valleys and locks of mist twine about the pine-tops. Then there is a sadness and a solemnity about the hills, but scarcely dullness. There are similar days in winter when slate-coloured mists overspread the sky

and snowflakes drift out of a grey void. Wind is inappropriate at such times, and Nature is hushed, quiescent, breathless as though awaiting a revelation.

Angry clouds are another matter. Never do clouds appear angrier than they do in conjunction with mountains. There is something ominous and sinister about the gathering of the storm clans, when earth and atmosphere unite titanic energies. It has been my fortune and misfortune to have been caught by storms on several occasions when undertaking long and difficult climbs—my fortune because it is a privilege to witness the oncoming of a storm at a great elevation, my misfortune because the experience was sometimes unpleasant and even dangerous.

He is a wise mountaineer who studies the heavens. It is not enough to have a smattering of meteorology or a rule-of-thumb knowledge, even if supported by technical qualifications. There must be instinct based on experience. The mountaineer must climb with his finger on the pulse of the weather. He must note not only the speed and direction of the wind and the upper cloud-formations, not only the arrangement of cloud-strata and the temperature of the air, but be sensible of every variation, however slight; like an experienced seaman he must be able to smell bad weather before it comes.

Greater skill in this would have saved me and my companions from some awkward situations. For instance, I well recollect a sunset seen from the



Moonlight in the High Mountains





Stahlegg hut in the Bernese Oberland. The sky was aflame with gorgeous colourings; parallel lines of cloud glowed like red-hot firebars, and between the sky was a brilliant green. It was the kind of sunset more often seen in tropic latitudes, gaudy, yet magnificent when viewed in association with high mountains. I have seen other Alpine sunsets of similar character, but none more vivid in colouring. I know them now for what they are, a signal not of continued calm but of forthcoming rage. So it proved on that occasion. Next day we set off to climb the Schreckhorn. The weather was quiet as we ascended the glacier, but sunrise was ushered in by a curious fluorescent green tinge that permeated the atmosphere and was reflected from rock and snow with an unearthly tinge. This was another warning, but unfortunately it was neglected. We were not far from the summit of the mountain when we heard thunder and saw a storm advancing from the north-west. The clouds were among the most extraordinary that I have seen. They advanced as a dark wall across a clear sky, flaming with lightning and bellowing with thunder. We saw them flood over the neighbouring peak of the Eiger, then they were upon us. It was an inferno that storm, and we were lucky to escape from it alive.

Of a somewhat similar type was the storm that overtook me when I was descending alone from Camp Six on Mount Everest in 1933. How much of the cloud was mist and how much wind-driven snow I do

not know, but it came at me unexpectedly out of the north-west, quicker even than the Schreckhorn storm. It was a calm morning, just as it was on the Schreckhorn, when, chancing to glance across the mountain, I saw the cloud of mist and snow racing towards me. I had scarcely time to realise what it might portend when it was upon me. I could not have escaped being frozen to death had I not managed to find shelter from the hurricane under the lee of a ridge.

It is usually wise to assume that where there are two or three cloud-strata high and low the weather is likely to deteriorate, and if, in addition, the uppermost stratum includes long smooth cigar-shaped clouds, the mountaineer bound for a long and difficult climb will do well to retire. In particular, I associate these clouds with a storm which overtook my companion and myself on the Péteret ridge of Mont Blanc, the longest and most formidable of all Alpine ridges.

To be enveloped in thundercloud is often a terrifying experience. Dense mist enwraps the climber. The air is sultry and charged with an indefinable menace. Then, out of a still and silent void come strange rushing sounds, the metal heads of ice-axes begin to sizzle and sing, and the face feels as though it were covered in cobwebs. It is as unpleasant as it is uncanny. The atmosphere is charged with tension, and so also is the climber, who feels that at any moment the fury of the elements are about to be loosed on him. These are Nature's danger signals,

and he is a fool who disregards them and continues needlessly to climb over exposed ground.

The mountaineer, like the aeronaut, is often above the clouds. Sometimes he looks over a lake of mist extending as far as the eye can see, with the mountain-tops standing out above it. In this respect, the views from the high camps on Mount Everest are outstanding in my memory, and the masses of sunlit vapour thousands of feet beneath conferred an extraordinary sense of elevation and isolation. I shall never forget views where the eye passed over a hundred miles or more of pillared cumulus glowing the sunlight or else tinged with pink in the hasty gleams of sunset, with the higher peaks standing out like islands.

Of a different character was a scene on Kamet. We were at our highest camp, 23,300 feet, preparatory to an attempt on the summit. It was night and the cold was intense, fifty or more degrees of frost. As I lay sleepless the walls of the tent glimmered with lightning. Much depended on the weather, so, raising myself in my sleeping-bag, I parted the frozen tent flaps and peered outside. I remained thus for only a few seconds, but what I saw I shall never forget. The monsoon had already broken on the foothills of the Himalayas, and the sky was choked with masses of dense cloud, ranged across the whole width of the southern sky. These clouds were ceaselessly illumined by lightning that burst and throbbed, glared and flickered amidst their folds, darting like fiery serpents

or bursting upwards in fountains of mauve fire, revealing every detail of the clouds, their turrets and columns, their enormous bastions and cavernous folds. A tremendous thunderstorm was raging, but so distant was it that not the faintest rumble disturbed the icy silence of the high snows.

So much for wrathful clouds. I prefer to think of clouds as peaceful objects designed to perfect the beauty of the hills. When I camped in the Bhyundar Valley, or the Valley of Flowers as I prefer to remember it, a curious little phenomenon took place practically every evening. At sundown a light mist crept up the valley, poured through the jaws of a gorge a little below my camp, and spread a grey shawl of vapour along the valley pastures. It was quite harmless, and occurred only during settled weather; indeed, I came to regard it as a sure precursor of a fine day. It flooded past my camp, which was perched on a shelf above the valley floor, and I could look over it at the peaks opposite glowing in the declining sun. It twined itself about the forests, or lay in soft swathes across the flower-clad hillsides. It was probably due to a change of temperature, and when the sun sank and a frosty chill came to the air it swirled upwards and melted away. I suppose that a great many people would have forgotten so trivial a thing, but when so much in the mountaineer's life is big and eventful it is pleasant to allow the mind to wander back to the small peaceful details of the hills,

and always I return in spirit to the Valley of Flowers for a glimpse of the evening mist that flowed and dissolved near my solitary camp. There was something about that mist I cannot describe; it was Nature's benediction at the end of a perfect day.

Looking back on the days spent on the hills, the mountaineer will admit that clouds as much as the hills contributed to the aesthetic pleasure. A thousand visions will flash through his mind. He will remember the lurid piling up and dark onrush of the storm, the silvery mist of morning lofting up the sun-warmed precipice, moonlit vistas, when the hills shone through softly lit vapour. For me there is one oft-recurring vision which epitomises the beauty and grandeur of mountain and cloud. It is a view from the foothills of the Himalayas, looking northwards to the snows. In the foreground stand tall oaks and conifers, with between them the blue of far-off hills. And above the hills great clouds pass in slow endless procession from west to east across the whole breadth of the northern sky. And between the clouds, above the valleys, above the forests, above the blue ranges of hills, above all ordinary things, shine out the eternal snows. And as I gaze in silence and at peace I am conscious of an all-pervading Presence and there come to me the splendid words of John Ruskin: "Out from between the cloudy pillars as they pass emerge for ever the great battlements of the memorable and perpetual hills."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### STARRY NIGHTS

TRUTH compels me to admit that I know next to nothing about stars, and that beyond being able to recognise the major constellations I am an ignoramus. Yet any account of the mountains would be incomplete without mention of the beauty of the night sky.

At night a mountain is not so much a form as a presence. It can be heard in the voices of running water, the rumbling of avalanches, the clattering of stones and the grinding of glaciers; it can be sensed in the keen cold air. For the rest, it is a shape outlined against the stars.

The night sky is beautiful at any latitude and at any altitude, but it is never more beautiful than when it is viewed from a hill. I well remember my first night-walk over the hills, made twenty years ago in an attempt to traverse Penyghent, Ingleborough and Whernside. Seated on the summit of Penyghent I watched the sunset colours die over the moors and the sky fill gradually with stars. Then I began to walk towards Whernside.

If you would know the meaning of peace you should walk over these Yorkshire hills one starry night. But you had better have the moon, else you are likely to sprain an ankle and lose your temper and yourself. I had omitted the moon from my calculations and, while avoiding the first calamity, suffered from the

other two—incidentally, nearly tumbling into a pot-hole. I never reached Whernside, and spent part of a cold night on the slopes of Ingleborough. It was an uncomfortable experience, yet I remember it with pleasure, for I had never before been on the hills at night and alone.

Since then I have bivouacked in the open on various occasions. These bivouacs were mostly uncomfortable, or at best only moderately comfortable, yet, now that they are over, I am glad to have experienced them. It is through such vigils that the beauty of the sky is best discerned. Star-gazing, unless you are an astronomer, is essentially an aesthetic pleasure. Never does the body seem less significant and the spirit more significant. At the time the complaints of the former sometimes predominate to the exclusion of any appreciation of the scene by the latter, but memory happily reverses this and enables the mountaineer to understand a little of what he has experienced.

Yet there are other and more comfortable times when the beauty of the stars may be fully enjoyed. It is good to lie snugly in a sleeping-bag and watch the passage of the planets along the mountain-tops, and stars glinting steely like numberless rivets above a floor of pallid snow.

Stars often seem to reflect the moods of the mountaineer. When he is setting off yawning and drowsy for his climb in the hours before dawn, they seem careless and unheeding of his going, or else, if the night be warm and the atmosphere hazy, they appear, like



himself, dull-eyed and sleepy. They can wink also, most intimately, and this is a warning to be heeded by those setting out on a long and difficult expedition. But usually they are friendly and encouraging, especially when the clouds part, disclosing their well-remembered pattern.

The glory of heaven is largely dependent on the density of the atmosphere. It is logical, then, to suppose that the higher the climber climbs the grander will be the starry vista. From Himalayan heights the traveller sees a sky ablaze with glittering points of electric blue that seem to stand out stereoscopically, whilst the Milky Way is not the vague tenuous veil we see in England but resembles a great river of light winding between the innumerable watch-fires of an encamped army. I well remember peering out of the tent at Camp Six on Mount Everest at a sky almost appallingly glorious. I was too wretchedly cold and tired then to realise what I was seeing, or even of appreciating that I was spending the night alone at a height greater than any previously slept at, a unique privilege, but often since there has come into my mind a vision not of sky and stars, but of the boundless abysses of space and the infinite wonders of this universe in which man so extemporaneously but wonderfully dwells.





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