

## VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

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*(Read before the Alpine Club on December 4, 1961)*

LET us not delude ourselves; it is the Honorary Secretary who sees to it that your President keeps to the narrow crest and surmounts or steers round the occasional gendarme in the approved manner. So when, with a note of challenge in his voice, he asked if I intended to give the customary valedictory address, he had really left me with no choice, for by then I had learnt my lesson. I can only hope this will not prove to be the Honorary Secretary's first disservice to the Club.

It is indeed a privilege to address this, the Alpine Club, the first of the many associations of men drawn together by a love of mountains and mountaineering. How comes this? How find happiness in such lunacy as scrambling about on the most disturbed, inhospitable and dangerous surfaces of the earth's crust? How can men be such fools? These are but some of the questions which have from time to time been discussed before the Club by men who based their conclusions on first-hand experience, which alone can provide a firm stance and sure belay against falling into the dark abyss of speculative thought. As man's wealth of experience is for ever growing, the horizon of knowledge widens as we climb from belay to belay. It is with this in mind that I am tempted to try to add my trifle to the findings of our wise and experienced elders.

We can take the mountains for granted, so our primary concern is with man. Man is a peculiar assemblage of matter of which the most astonishing manifestation is the mind. Everything about the material body is, in the end, susceptible to measurement; but the mind defies the scientific yardstick. Nevertheless, we can to some extent analyse the mind in terms of comparative mental attributes. For example, some degree or other of a purposeful curiosity animates all minds, and associated with this is an ability to learn from experience, to relate cause and effect, to reason from the one to the other and so to clothe known facts with hypotheses which, no matter whether true or destined to be proved false, are the spurs to further experience and the discovery of new facts. In this lies the spirit of adventure, the active desire to know more and ever more about ourselves and about the universe

around us, to question Nature, to peep round the corner into hidden worlds.

I would remind you that the cover of our JOURNAL tells us it is a 'record of mountain adventure and scientific observation'.

You must not, however, ask foolish questions of Nature, or you are likely to find yourself climbing, not mountains, but the proverbial gum tree. Aristotle asked, 'Why does the arrow end its flight on the earth?', to which there is no final answer, and there never will be! If only Aristotle had started with, 'How does the arrow fly between bow and earth?', he would, I believe, with his powers of observation and towering intellect, have anticipated Galileo and Newton and thus have advanced, instead of retarded, the progress of man by some two thousand years.

Like all adventurers we mountaineers are rebels, for ever seeking to extend the frontiers of knowledge. But the search for new knowledge stagnates in isolation; it can flourish only where there is freedom to exchange experience and ideas. Thus we rebel against the growth of nationalism which, from seeds sown in Napoleonic times, has today become a terrifyingly exuberant weed. I like to hope that we are on the winning side, for I know of no association of mountaineers where nationality is a bar to membership. Nor are we bothered with a nationalistic competitive element for which the appropriate and highly effective weed-killer is ridicule.

The significance of information channelled through the senses has to be weighed by the mind before it can be appreciated and appropriate action taken. Leaving aside the reflex response which I would regard as short-circuiting the mind, the whole complex process may be over in a fraction of a second, as when the wrong end of a poker is grasped; or it may demand days, weeks or even years of cerebration, of close, concentrated thought. Even the weakest of minds can think, and some such may exhibit remarkable powers of concentration; alas, to little effect. Others, even though gifted beyond the average, achieve little because of sheer laziness. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the greatest wastage of intellect is to be ascribed to a widespread resistance to thinking. To this, television, professional football, the voice of authority and the modern equivalent of the most inane of yellowbacks are contributing handsomely.

To fix ideas, I should perhaps explain what is meant by concentration of mind. The mere memorising of whole passages of *Paradise Lost* is a process akin to tape-recording and, like so much schoolboy swotting, involves no appeal to reason. On the other hand, the deriving, for example, of the laws of fluctuation phenomena and probability from the simple gas laws involves a long chain of closely-reasoned thought; a process which, unlike memorising, is constructive and not just recording.

In climbing, the mind, receiving data through the senses, is, in effect, dealing, amazingly rapidly, with a series of mathematical equations the solutions of which enable the mind to direct the necessary co-ordination of eye, hand and foot to achieve a desired result.

Some powers of concentration, even if only fitful, and concerned more with observation than with conscious reasoned thought, are inherent in us all. You only have to watch children at play or a football crowd to mark the ebb and flow of attention. But discovery, which is born of adventure, demands much more than that. If the threads spun by reason out of experience newly won are to reach out to wider horizons they must not be broken by a faltering concentration of mind. Fortunately, the ability to think closely and in a sustained manner can be cultivated to an astonishing degree, even in what at first sight might seem to be unpromising material. The awakening of curiosity, the hunger for adventure, the thrill of discovery and the vision beyond are the steps to Parnassus. And what better way to achieve these heights than mountaineering?

I should like to say here, very briefly, that bodily attributes such as stature, bone, muscle and general health are important only as instruments of the mind. Of what use is the frame of an Adonis to the mountaineer if the first panting breath, tiny discomfort or indeed any other protest by the body is not resisted by the mind? Nature's safety valve, triggered off by pain, is in general set far too low for even a stubborn mind to cause harm to the body.

My first climb was a pure accident and was followed by a few ineffectual gropings, though these did leave their impressions. Then came the winter's day when I first looked through the Zeiss telescope mounted in the garden of the old Eiger Hotel and saw the tiny figures of three climbers slowly moving, one by one, towards the summit of the Viescherhorn. Later, on swinging the telescope round to follow up the Mittellegi ridge, I saw something glint in the morning sun, just where the snow-ridge of the Eiger summit begins; finally, sweeping the ledges of the Mettenberg brought three chamois into view. Wild with excitement, I rushed off to tell Christian Jossi. He knew of the Viescherhorn party, there was nothing unusual about the chamois, and what I had seen near the Eiger summit was von Kuffner's ice-axe, left planted in the snow when he with Alexander Burgener and one of the Bieners had descended the Mittellegi ridge in 1885. (By the way, that axe was still there in 1908; I wonder where it is now?<sup>1</sup>)

Up to this time I had had no conception of the colossal scale of mountain architecture. But here, at last, was a yardstick with which to whet

<sup>1</sup> It was still there in 1921 on the occasion of the first ascent of the Mittellegi ridge. See *A.J.* 34. 167.—D.F.O.D.

my curiosity in this new world. Adventure, discovery, new horizons; everything followed after this, almost as a matter of course.

Let us now consider some of the demands made on the mind during an average climb. Leaving aside the quartermaster's perplexities, a climb begins with the exchange of smooth floors and paths for a steep, rough and stony track. No longer can feet be set down just anyhow and anywhere; stumbling soon emphasises the need for economy of effort. So the mind takes charge, looking ahead to ensure that each next step affords a good support and is neither too long nor too short. No doubt the mental effort is trivial; nevertheless, despite its monotony, it is constructive and may have to be sustained during many hours. Towards the end of a long day inattention can result in a twisted ankle or worse.

When the real climbing begins and the rope comes into use, an abrupt change occurs in the pressure and diversity of the mental demands made on all members of the party. Here, I need not go into detail, except to remark on the extraordinary relief of mental stress afforded by even a brief rest in a secure position. My brother and I found that the monotony of two hours' uninterrupted step-cutting up a steep, featureless slope was just about all we could endure without obvious signs of impatience and carelessness beginning to creep in. But given a safe and reasonably comfortable place to rest in, we would soon be ready, mentally braced and eager to carry on.

Another point I would like to make is that arrival on the summit is often followed by a sense of anticlimax, more especially if the descent is to be made by an easier route or by that of the ascent. Here, a long summit rest is a diversion which has its advantages; it has a steadying effect and leads to the recovery of full mental control. Sometimes, of course, conditions are such that the summit is anything but hospitable. Then the first reasonable opportunity to rest should be taken on the descent, for it does not do to let yourself be hounded off a mountain. Refreshed in body and mind, there is far less chance of unroping prematurely or of underestimating the potential dangers of the last 'easy' rocks and slopes. Well do I remember Christian Jossi's forceful warning never to glissade down a snow-slope unless you can overlook it from beginning to end. Two years later the warning sank in when, on settling down to bivouac on the rocks of the Schneehorn, Andreas Fischer remarked to me that 'Christian ist ein frecher Kerl und klettert wie eine Katze; aber er schlaft nie und ist kein Dummkopf.' Barely a month later I was protesting vehemently against a proposed glissade down the snowfield below the last easy rocks of the South-east ridge of the Rothorn. In the end, we resumed the rope and soberly made our way down on to the Rothorn glacier. That night in Zermatt we learnt how a party of three had once glissaded to its doom down that very

slope. Many years later my wife, who has a good eye for route finding, could hardly believe in the dangers of a light-hearted venture on to that innocent-looking surface. It is towards the end of a long day that eagerness to be off the mountain must be combated by a tightening up of mental effort. The body may tire but the mind must not.

Mental relaxation is far less likely to occur when the route of the descent is more difficult than that of the ascent. Many examples spring to mind; I choose one climb which is probably familiar to most of you. Hans Mantel and I had climbed the Rothorn by the West ridge; then, having descended the South ridge to a point short of midway between the Rothorn and Trifhorn, we turned to the west and cut down the long steep slope above the glacier over which we eventually regained the morning's track, and so back to the Mountet hut. Once past the Gabel, the difficulties were of a very different order from those of the ascent, and remained so until we had crossed the bergschrund. The ice-slope was a long job; throughout we cut large, well-shaped steps, with a monumental double-berthed one at every half-rope's length. Nevertheless, I cannot recall any, even momentary, lapse of attention or urge to hurry on the part of either of us. That evening at dinner, Mantel remarked on the foolishness of not keeping to the remaining, easy section of the ridge leading towards the Trifhorn and its well-trodden track to the hut. I would have liked to remind him that it was he who had proposed dallying with ice!

Variety is the spice of life, so the even tenor of our days holds no charms for the adventurous. We appreciate the immeasurable in terms of contrast with the immeasurable, perhaps a more merciful though certainly more frustrating procedure than the use of the scientist's yardstick. To put it simply, we are conscious of a procession of ups and downs in life. The problem of having to dispose of two dinners, one horrible, the other Lucullic, both to be eaten at the same time, is hardly likely to arise. There must be a lapse of time between them, and they glide into the past to remain as separate memories. Normally, the painful, the ugly, the distressing memories fade; the beautiful, the happy, the good are stored, for ever fresh, in a treasury to which the mind alone holds the key. Should the bad still linger in the mind, it serves to heighten the appreciation of the good. How else could the trials and tribulations of the mountaineer be accepted? But perhaps I am being obscure; if so, a running commentary on the progress of a good average climb, even though of fifty years ago, may bring things into focus.

First comes that exasperating midnight struggle with boots and belongings; then a ghastly breakfast in the foul air of the packed hut; the first breath of fresh air outside; the scramble over a moraine alive with torment; the crisp crunch of snow crust; the loom of giants; the

rope, symbol of unity and trust; the first rocks; the rhythmic chip-chip of axe biting into the frozen crest; the first flush of dawn; the challenge of gendarmes; the steep rock ridge, rising like a ladder to the skies; the stepping out of cold, blue shadow into the sun; the change to unfavourable stratification, made worse by *verglas* on slabs; the hours of slow, careful, upward progress; another Jacob's ladder of warm, firm rock; the summit (an old friend) now in thick mist; glorious mugs of hot tea, brewed in our aluminium cooker, to wash down huge slices of plum pudding; the rope rearranged; the first man vanishing over the edge into the misty unknown; a faint call, and off goes number two, as merry as a cricket; the last man's turn; and so on down, down, down; now below the clouds, but still always down; off the rocks at dusk; the dim light of a candle; stumbling in heather; slippery grass; then at last, after over twenty hours, shelter, food and sleep. What a wonderful day of glorious action and grand companionship; something never to be forgotten!

Every day in the mountains is naturally full of variety. But why not sometimes introduce it deliberately? After a fine climb does not a noble summit deserve more than a cursory visit? Let us spend an hour in honouring it with a tin of peaches, drenched with condensed milk and chilled with a handful of snow; and why not sleep off the effects for yet another hour? It is true all this may have to be paid for by a forced bivouac, but what does that matter? The tribulations of a cold and sleepless night soon melt away in the rays of the morning sun.

Experience teaches, and the growth of knowledge never stands still. We must therefore expect techniques also to advance. I started climbing with an ice-axe nearly 5 ft. long. Oscar Eckenstein urged me to halve it and to try out crampons of his own design. I did, and the older generation disapproved. Later, my brother and I each stealthily pocketed a piton and concealed 200 ft. of line in a rucksack. Pitons and line got us out of some nasty holes and warded off an occasional forced bivouac. For this we were more than grateful; fifty years ago there was nothing funny about a forced bivouac, except perhaps in retrospect.

In 1913 a momentous step forward—I speak of course personally—was taken when Smith Barry and I drove in a piton to belay the crossing of a peculiarly vicious slab. And then blindness, total blindness overwhelmed me when, with just a touch of imagination, I might have learnt how to savour at least some of the glorious situations and fantastic exposures which the climber of today enjoys. It is true that I might have jibbed at carrying more than a pound or two of ironmongery and extra tackle; but even that could have afforded me lots of fun. And to think what the present generation enjoys: the full Peuterey ridge, the Walker spur and the Triolet North face, perhaps the grandest climbs in

the Alps. Blessed be the piton, the karabiner, the étrier, the nylon rope and the duvetted mountaineers they now serve so well. But I must not pursue this subject too far, even though my foil still lacks its button. Nevertheless, let us not overlook the fact that advanced techniques demand a correspondingly close attention to detail; there have been too many accidents in roping down and through relying on insecurely fixed pitons.

It is long since I first cried *peccavi* for once having said hard things about rock climbing in general and our homeland cragsmen in particular. But one lives and learns, and now I would fain break yet another lance on behalf of the British rock climber.

Last year I lay in blazing sunshine on a grassy ledge above Llyn Llydaw. The beauties around let loose a flood of memories. A mad dash round the Horseshoe led by the fleetest of the fleet in a blinding snowstorm; a rollicking day in cold shadow on the Girdle Traverse, its awesome exposures accentuated by far too short a rope; and a midnight rescue rush up that lovely mountain, Tryfan, when the last man hauled to safety was, to my surprise, an exalted Governor of the College in which I then served as the lowest of the low. Then my mind drifted back through more than half a century to the Lakes; to how Gaspard had taken me up Napes Needle, that monument of elegance and poise, and how, a few days later, I had sat on its top, all alone in the world and in a blue funk about getting down!

Since those days I have seen much more of our homeland climbers. Harsh views are sometimes expressed about their gymnastic approach to the mountains. Is this quite justified? Last spring while motoring in the Peak District I watched a gritstone party giving scale to strange, weird boulder shapes. I noted particularly the smooth, reasoned persistence of the leader, the fine co-ordination of mind, eye, hand and foot and sensed the enthusiasm and confidence he inspired. It is true these young people may talk of their experiences in terms of gymnastics and alpha-to-omega orders of difficulty; but I felt that, if one could break through their reserve, one would find the spirit of adventure to be their actuating force. On looking back to my own first ventures in the hills I see that the driving impulse was just that. It was only with growing experience that I gradually, very gradually, came to endow the mountains with something akin to personality. Ever since I first saw the Weisshorn I have regarded it as the loveliest of all mountains, and yet I have never climbed it. And why not? Somewhere I had read a description of its summit as consisting of three sharp white ridges meeting in a perfect point. I have always felt that, if I ever got to the top, it would only be to find this lovely picture trodden out by brutal feet and the mountain shamed and desecrated by the untidy leavings of previous climbers. Most of the mountains I have climbed have become

old friends, so much so that we have renewed our acquaintance many times. That very dear friend the Tödi, to me the King of the Little Mountains, with its jewel of a glacier nestling hard under the tremendous precipices of the Bifertenstock, has drawn me to its summit twenty-two times. On the last occasion—it now seems a farewell celebration—a large party of cheerful Swiss with curiously bulging rucksacks joined us on the top which was shrouded in dense mist. From their sacks they produced a squeeze box and sundry other musical instruments, and to their accompaniment we sang, for two happy hours, gay songs in praise of the mountains.

But to get to my point. Love of the mountains, a purely subjective thing, is not the outcome of a little chance acquaintance, but something that grows with increasing experience. I would like to see our youngsters helped to discover this for themselves. Some will fail but others will surely find.

A few weeks ago a strange thing happened to me, which may have a slant on what I have just said. I asked a young, very heavily laden climber if I could give him a lift. He wanted to go to the Milestone Buttress, about six miles up the road. On the way he did all the talking and told me he was learning to climb and, indeed, had all the gadgets plus a great deal of enthusiasm. In due course I helped him to get his belongings over the stile. I shouldered his rope and, thanks to his monstrous rucksack, walked up at a suitable pace to the starting point. I asked him if he was going to take his sack up the Buttress. No, he was going to leave it at the bottom; it would be quite safe, and, in any case, he was going to repeat the climb, he hoped, several times that morning. He then proceeded to tie himself on to one end of the rope ('it was more like real climbing that way') and, after a moment's hesitation, asked if I would like to come with him. I declined, saying I was too old for that sort of thing. To which he replied, 'Pity. It's great fun. You should try it.' Heart-warming advice that definitely made my day.