

## Moods of the Mountains and Climbers

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HAVE you ever asked yourself: What is in back of a climbing narrative that we read? "On such and such a day we left so and so, with so many horses and so many humans." Or: "On such and such a day, with the sun shining brightly, or the rain pouring, we left with one guide or two guides." The narrative proceeds: "In the afternoon of a hot July day we reached the top and all we could do was to sit down and eat." Or: "Step-cutting was endured for one hour under falling stones." Is that the essence of climbing?

Now, after reading any of hundreds of narratives, let us look upon our own selves, and read back from our memories or our notes. A siege of questions will swarm about us. Why do we climb? Why do we go to all that trouble? What do we expect of climbing, and what do we get? Do we seek health in climbing, or do we attempt suicide? Is it the sporting element that attracts us, or the contemplation of a new world? Are we explorers or artists in our climbs? Do we wish to get away from our fellow-beings, or from ourselves? Perhaps we shall never know the philosophical truth of these queries; perhaps it is better if we do not; but there are circumstances within and without ourselves that actually determine our state of mind, and give a definite tone to our climbing. Whether we view the mountains with the eyes of an artist, or with those of a sportsman, with the eyes of a

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In the text, *sensations* are considered purely in an objective fashion, that is: simple perceptions of an external object, without participation of personal criticism except for variations due to physiological conditions.

By *contemplation* I mean the perception of an external object, accompanied by a series of thoughts which, while excited by the actual sensation, may be partly independent from it. This is an objective as well as subjective process, and therefore the personal elements, both characteristic or permanent and physiological or transitory, have some bearing.

By *meditation* I mean a critical mental process based on memories of actions and sensations but independent from actual actions or sensations. This being a purely subjective process, the personal factors mentioned before play an essential rôle.

dreamer, or those of a poet; whether we have faith or we do not; whether we have a philosophical training or not; whether we are used to apply a strictly scientific criticism to the acts of our life, or take it just as it comes; whether we have had a good breakfast; whether it is sunny or rainy; whether the company suits us or we would rather see it ten miles away; whether we are in good training or not; whether our shoes fit us well—these will make all the difference in the world. They mean as much as joy or sorrow, excitement or depression; the uplifting of all our imaginative forces or their complete crushing under a heavy load of gloom.

The sum of impressions which one derives from intercourse with the mountain world is based essentially on two fundamental factors. The first one is the particular state of our mind at the moment, and the other is the condition of the mountain at the time of observation. These two elements are so closely interwoven that it would be impossible to consider them separately.

The form and shape, pure and simple, of a mountain, regardless of all other conditions, have the tendency to create a definite train of thoughts: a sharp, neatly outlined peak rising well above the neighboring mountains will always produce a peculiar sense of elevation; a sharp feeling of desire to rise. So appeared to Hainsworth and myself Mt. Sampson, across Maligne Lake. We had battled a storm coming down the great northern face of Mt. Charlton; we were tired and wet; the fog had kept our eyes glued to the broken ice surface for hours. The upward sweep of the peak acted as a spiritual lift, and our minds followed the eyes up the sharp ridges in an unbroken rise to the top with a keen sense of exhilaration. The same spiritual stimulation has made famous the Matterhorn as seen from the Riffel. The pleasure from its contemplation is not purely aesthetic, it involves a deeper sensation of possession which is not surpassed by the actual climbing of the peak. This effect, however, is obtained only when the mountain is viewed from a distance; at close quarters that same wall that looked so cheerful and inviting is still beautiful, but at the same time repellent. The new sensation is not due to a change in the mountain, but to our appreciation from a different viewpoint: the detail of the rock, the formation of the snow, reveal technical difficulties; the scale of the mountain appears at its true value, and we feel the element of doubt. Fear, Spinoza says, is unhappiness born of a past or future event of which we doubt. The fight during a climb is appar-

ently against the inanimate rock, actually against our subconscious fear; from overcoming that we derive the greatest satisfaction. Our relative height has a definite bearing on the effect that a peak will produce on us. From the Rifugio Luigi Amedeo, I contemplated with desire the great Dent d'Hérens for hours. From the summit of the Matterhorn I barely looked at it; for the moment being, it was no longer an object of desire: I was *above* it. Because of my position I was brought to think more of myself and less of the peak. It is seldom that we appreciate fully the beauty of a peak which we view from above. The flat line of an Alpine panorama from a high peak does not usually furnish the element of desire; it does not stimulate our appetite for possession. We would lose some of our admiration and respect for the great Matterhorn if we should habitually see it from 16,000 feet in the air.

A flat-topped peak may be beautiful, but it will never produce a distinct sense of elevation; in its make-up there is more majesty than grace, and the impression that one receives is more of a restful nature than of mental exhilaration.

The conditions of the foreground and background are other all-powerful elements in changing the impression that a mountain will produce. Low intervening valleys and ridges make the Meije Group, as seen from the Col Sestrières, a thing of great height. I shall never forget the impression received from my first view of the Ramparts across Amethyst Lake, whence seemingly the mountains sprang as if to cut the sky with their defiance. Thorington and I, in 1926, were returning to our high camp from a disastrous attempt on Lyell 3, that ended in the midst of a storm. Just before reaching camp it suddenly cleared, and there in front of us, its head piercing a cloud, stood Mt. Forbes, loftier than the sky itself. Fatigue and depression disappeared.

The condition of the sky may add to mountains or render them insignificant. The first time that I saw the beautiful head of Glacier Valley in the Northern Canadian Rockies was on a sunny day. The flat foreground with the brook running amongst borders of flowers, the glittering glacier framed by the stark spruces, and the sky immensely far and blue, lent prestige and glory to the background of peaks otherwise not impressive. Altogether the scene expressed a joyful mood. But a few days later, in the glowing evening sky, dark clouds gathered, and soon they were molded by the wind into a heavy canopy; the mountains were lost,

pinned under the rolling swell; their silhouette was simply the outline of the stormy sky. The impression was decidedly depressive.

A storm is always a depressing sight in the mountains, especially because of the loss of color and the realization of approaching or actual danger. On a clear summer day, By, in the upper Valpelline, at the foot of the Grand Combin, is an idyllic place; the huge green amphitheatre, with the scattered huts and the music of bells coming from afar, gives an indelible impression of rest, peace, contentment almost mystic. The background of mountains adds majesty and interest to the scene, but it does not change the main impression.

I returned there on a wintry, stormy day: the peaceful green was lost; the silence during the lulls of the storm was tragic, and the wind shattered even the memories of the place. I could not recognize it; the impression was one of utter desolation. If the climber, however, happens to be out of the storm, at the window of a comfortable hut, and if nearby a fire glows and crackles, as the aroma of good soup permeates around, then his Lucullian self-satisfaction will be enhanced by the sight of the outside misery a thousand-fold. That is one time when we will enjoy a storm.

Of course, if we achieve success against a stormy mountain, that will proportionately increase our satisfaction. A storm is almost invariably pleasing when it is viewed at a distance of time through pictures or memories. The unpleasant sensations, or better, their memory, will have faded away faster than the memory of the other sensations connected with the storm, the fast-changing colors, the immensity of the spectacle, the satisfaction from winning over the elements. In such condition, the storm will come to our mind clothed only in the pleasing elements, because the human mind, after all, desires to be fooled; its reactions to the good and the bad, while originally the same, in time will not remain balanced, and the memory of the pleasant will always finally completely obliterate the unpleasant.

But the greatest animators of the mountains, those that shape our thoughts and move us, are light and color. In the shadows of the night, mountains are supremely oppressive and overpowering. We look at them as primitive man must have viewed them, as animated giants, bent on death and destruction. As the first light breaks through the clouds over the cliff, our eyes remain glued to it; the peaks themselves, appearing barely as silhouettes, do not

directly interest us. In the early morning marches our thoughts are usually afar; for the sleepy mind still refuses contact with the unseen world. We seek refuge in the past; in memories. But the symphony of light is coming upon us, slowly displaying its eternal melodies. At first the depressive violet hues are still incapable of distracting our slowly awakening minds from the world of introspection. But the red and orange follow, and we are now again wondering at the world that is shaping itself about us. The melody grows and the voice of the morning breeze and the chattering falls slowly join in the gigantic crescendo. Then light creeps over the ridges and down the valleys, and this daily miracle almost surprises us; the glowing glory of the sky and peaks appears as an immensely far thing to us still in the dark, and we can hardly conceive that it will bring warmth. Now the light is upon us: we talk, we walk faster; we begin to look around with the intent of seeing and admiring rather than in suspense of the unexpected. The body is warm from a brisk walk on easy ground, the slow passing from obscurity to light, through a succession of colors from depressing bluish-violet shades to the more exciting red and yellow part of the spectrum, has brought us from deep slumber of the senses to full activity of life and sensations. Now, if at once we come to the beginning of a difficult rock climb, all of a sudden this ascending, uplifting series of sensations and thoughts stops. This occurred to me on the southeastern ridge of the Grand Combin. With crampons we had, favored by the early morning frost, frolicked up the snowy arête at a great clip. Then suddenly we came face to face with the cold, repellent rock. A most uncomfortable sensation was experienced because our muscles were not yet adjusted to the movements that a short time later afforded the greatest pleasure.

Another sudden change takes place when we begin a difficult climb: we are more or less contemplative in the morning; from this state of mind we have to pass abruptly to a dynamic exploit. This quick transition is just as agreeable as passing from a warm bed to an ice-cold shower. It may please some essentially athletic constitutions, but it does not, in the great majority of cases, give satisfaction. After we become accustomed to the climb, and begin to enjoy the acceleration of our movements, then our mind passes slowly from the contemplative to the purely sportive mood.

As the symphony grows to a solemn largo, and the world opens to our eyes, we expand from our little shell and lose ourselves in

the immensity of space and power. We are now used to motion and are fresh of strength; we rush to the rock and like its roughness, delight in the slow dragging of the body up its thin edges, and break from the embrace of a chimney with the fury of inspiration. What do we think in such moments? Not much. In fact, those moments of desperate struggle are mentally almost sterile. There is no meditation, only flashes of contemplation. The euphoria is that of a rhythmic body movement, with the satisfaction that comes from conquering. We think of the mountain as a living thing and we fight it. In reality we are winning over our reluctance and our fears: we are preparing ourselves, purifying our mind, melting our sensations for the mold of new thoughts. We perceive the greatness of the mountain only through the fight it gives us; and if we win we are brought to think more of ourselves. The long hours of toil through tottering séracs, the slow progress over and along trenches of green ice are, for all but the head of the rope, more meditative. Body and mind become sluggish in the long waits; we welcome the return to rocks, the warm, sunny friends where again we reduce our attention to a small circle; where we concentrate and intensify our mental activity to the technicality of holds and rope. This struggle is necessary; how otherwise could it form within us that exaltation, that sublime folly that will send our bodies over the last difficulty to that ephemeral triumph in which we idealize the victory over all oppositions of life? We cannot be successful in the search for universal knowledge, but here we win, over and against our weakness and against the power of nature.

In the days in which climbing occupied most of my life, but when the mind had not as yet seen much of the inner light of it, we chanced to tackle the great virgin north face of the Becca di Monciair, in the group of the Grand Paradis. Winter was selected because there was no hard ice, but we struck a stormy day. We were glued, three of us, to that terrific wall for twelve hours: over 1,500 feet of smooth ice and hard snow, that sweeps upward with an unbroken curve to a maximum of 60° in two approaches of the upper ridge. We cut over 1,000 steps, we had badly frost-bitten extremities; several eyelets of the crampons broke because of the intense cold when we struck rock near the summit; we could not take anything warm, as the wind was too high when we reached the top; the water was frozen in our canteens. All day long the storm

raged, and down that inexorable wall hard pellets of snow ran in a continuous cascade. On the descent one of us became blinded. At times we could not see each other; we could hardly communicate. There was no contemplation; no meditation; intense physical suffering; but we won, the greatest victory and the most intense sensation ever experienced in twenty years of climbing.

But this is not always what happens when we reach the summit. Our bodies are usually tired, but our senses are still alert, and we admire. Those are great hours, not only because they are hours of victory, but because we are getting closer to the essence of the mountain. Through fatigue we have exhausted our sporting mood; the material conquest is consummated; now we admire and think. The subject of our contemplation, all other conditions remaining the same, is determined mainly by the degree of our fatigue. If we are completely without sense of muscular labor, we will be restless and less appreciative of the outer world. We may or may not be introspective. If we could be brought to the summit of a peak without fatigue, the sensations would be entirely different than on viewing the same subject after a climb. A prominent place is only a condition to enjoy contemplation; it is not contemplation itself. On the other hand, fatigue is not essential to contemplation or meditation; it simply modifies them, gives them a more heroic tone. When we are not fatigued we desire more worlds to conquer; we look at the higher things, desire that sharp ridge or that great wall. We plan for the future, and the present means little to us. But fatigue changes the response of our senses. If we are extremely tired, we will take in only the gross features of the surrounding panorama; our discomfort will make us susceptible to anything suggestive of a contrast to our physiological condition. If, from the top of a rocky peak, after a long march in snow, we gaze on the valley below, and we have no water to drink and nothing but rocks to lie on, our eyes will be fixed on the soft curve of fields with a silvery thread running through them, and the brown roofs of huts lost in the peace of the green. That sort of sight will attract, unconsciously, our eyes, and we will admire it more than the majesty of a neighboring peak. Were we less tired, we should look for something above us, something that promises a battle and not rest.

The sensation that we get after a fatiguing climb and the one that we get after a fatiguing but interesting climb are also alto-

gether different. The situation of having surmounted unusual difficulties produces an excessive appreciation of our own ego. Under these conditions we will not feel fatigue nearly so much as we would otherwise. The keen enjoyment felt at such times is not greatly modified by the sort of scenery which appears to our eyes from the top. We have grown superior to the external world; such thoughts as "I have succeeded in climbing something difficult, something that, perhaps, I did not expect to climb" form the "Leitmotif" of our mind. After victories of that sort we are, as a rule, more excited, but at the same time we are the least distracted by the surrounding scenery, except for the fact that we are looking from a height upon lowly things.

The simple cessation of muscular motion when we are fatigued naturally produces relaxation and, therefore, a pleasant sensation. In fact, whenever, for any reason, at the time when we expect to have reached the end of a fatiguing climb, we find that we are still far from the top, the disappointment is extremely keen. Every climber has felt that disappointment at one time or another; it is not at all due to something that we do not see, because the panorama may be perfectly beautiful. It is not due to lack of color; it is simply because the continued fatigue has depressed our sensibility, and the disappointment has made us just a trifle mad. Fatigue, *per se* undesirable, is a fertile ground for simple psychological observations. As our senses are tired with the rest of the body, contemplation is painful. We turn away from the present. We seek refuge in an introspective world. Memories usually come to us in a whirling fantasy; we absent ourselves from the oppressive actual experience and soar aloft.

With the fading light, if a climber is back to the place of rest or on easy ground where motion is mechanical, we have the stage set for the last movement: meditation. Again, meditation is not surely limited to this period of the climb: it simply occurs at this time almost constantly and with peculiar features. In contemplation, form and color are essential; for meditation we like the subdued light of the sunset, and the smoothing out of the sharp contrast of the full daylight. We want relaxation, and cannot tolerate distraction from trivial necessities. In fact, we seldom talk. We have feared the mountain, we have possessed the mountain, we have admired it, but we are not entirely within the great temple of understanding. We are now expanding at last; the

struggle is now bringing its effects; in the disregard of life, its necessities, its petty competitions, with purification of the body through fatigue, we have freed our mind of its cloak of vulgarity, opened our eyes to beauties beyond color and form. Our ears now understand the voice of nature as well as the silence of space.

So we complete our cycle of sensations.

Climbers are getting more philosophical as a whole; and this movement toward the better kind of climbing is accelerating. Climbers were first explorers, then sportsmen, then artists; now they are becoming philosophers. And so do we change in the span of our alpinistic lives. For whatever reason we begin to climb, seldom do we keep faith to our early ideals.

Unfortunately, thinking often goes along with sinking: just a process of physical maturity and decay. If we could only think more while we can still climb, we would come a step nearer the great secret of the mountains. For the more we understand, the more we appreciate, and appreciation of the beautiful is enjoyment. No matter whether a climb be a success or a failure, the study of the sensations and states of mind experienced through it will be an unending source of thoughts for those less fortunate days when the necessities of life will bar us from the eternal snow.