Mountaineering: A Solace to Sedate Old Age

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THERE are more mountaineers, actual and potential, scattered over the country than most of us realize. They are popping up continually. Most of these feel frustrated as they see youth vanishing —to them the only time for the realization of their longing. To these I may have something to say, as well as to those who, having climbed, begin to feel that they are superannuated.

But at the outset two things should be made clear. First, I want to conciliate the men of the medical profession. Certainly a man with one foot in the grave should not plant the other on the summit of the Dent Blanche or the Matterhorn. When I climbed those doughty peaks, I had both feet with me. I am not against common sense and all the laws of health. I sometimes have a cardiogram taken. In 1925, at the age of fifty-eight, I consulted a New York doctor of reputation, and was warned never to do an energetic thing—never to walk against a strong wind. Shortly after, I consulted a reputable physician in Switzerland, and he said, "You should climb the Wildstrubel"—pointing to the snow peak at the head of the valley above Adelboden. Now what does one do when the doctors disagree? One obeys the doctor whose advice one likes best. I did that, took up serious and systematic climbing, and soon became convinced that many people lay off mountains just when they ought to take them on. Of course one must have faith. One must follow the inner light. There is such a thing as divine guidance. Apart from that everything is dangerous.

A second thing I would make clear is that I advance no extravagant claims in favor of old-age climbing, as though it were abler, more exciting, or more rewarding than the climbing of the young and the strong, the foolish and the foolhardy. Unquestionably, the young have their ecstasies. I should like to know this minute just how it feels to be sixteen. All I contend for now is that climbing in mature life has not only its distinctive difficulties but also its distinctive rewards, and I venture to mention some of these.

What are the rewards of old-age climbing? I put at the top of

the list its *leisureliness*. You make haste slowly. Why rush? You can't. What price glory? Too great, too costly.

When I was young and inexperienced, I climbed a Swiss mountain on the run, drank of every cold spring to lower my temperature, broke every canon of sound mountaineering, nearly killed myself, and enjoyed it immensely. Since then it has been my habit to let the steady stream of youthful climbers pass me at the start, but only to leave many of them behind with their tongues hanging out before the climb is finished.

Guides are considerate when the client has one foot in the grave. At Saas Fee a guide chafed a bit at my leisureliness, but Kaspar Grass, of the Engadine, was more like a snail than a human being when we climbed the Piz Morteratsch and the Piz Bernina, charming me with his music and his conversation; and Antoine Georges, my guide for seven years, now in heaven, with whom I expect to climb many a beautiful peak in the next world, was the perfection of consideration.

Between sixty and seventy, one no longer specializes in "first ascents." There are no records to break, no fame to win, no summits to "conquer." We do not conquer the great peaks—we cultivate them. They are not enemies but friends, and not less so because they do not rush to kiss your feet the moment they catch sight of you.

In 1928 I happened to be in Zermatt when Toni Schmid and his brother Franz scaled the north wall of the Matterhorn. All night they hung on that terrific wall. Zermatt believed them lost; but they made the summit, slept off their weariness in the Solvay hut, and descended to be fêted by Mr. Seiler at a great dinner and followed round the streets whenever they appeared by all the small fry of Zermatt. No queue of youngsters ever followed me around like that. It is one of the glories one relinquishes for more substantial pleasures.

Next in the list of rewards for the mature climber I would put that *openness to impressions* which is the fruit of leisureliness. The mountains have something important to say to people who are not driven by athletic ambition or boiling over with superfluous energy.

The gladdest day I have ever known among the great peaks was the day of a solitary climb. One perfect morning at four I set out from Adelboden to climb the Bonderspitze. The haycocks were

phosphorescent in the purple darkness that filled the valley, and every peasant's house was asleep. I crossed the Engstligenbach, mounted the steep meadows beyond, and, plunging into a copse as quiet as a temple, paused to hear the note of some new alpine bird. Climbing higher, I reached the rude chalets and soon left the tinkling birds far behind. At 6800 feet by my aneroid the ground froze, and I stepped off upon snow so tracked up that I could almost see the chamois at their superterrestrial field-day sports. Still higher, sharp reports told of invisible hands playing tenpins with boulders among the echoing crags. Then the sun reached me, and diamonds flashed at my feet; and a yellow flower, with a circulation and heat that had melted the snow about it, lifted its head out of a tiny hole and said, "What on earth are you doing up here?" At last I gained the summit and, leaning on the rude cairn marking it, worshipped, like Jacob of old leaning on his staff.

Stretched out on the rock inclining toward the Kandersteg side, I heard the faint music of a distant waterfall and, looking up into crystal-clear air, saw clouds steam up out of nothingness and vanish into nothingness again; and far across the valley I saw the mountaineers, like specks of soot against the pure white, already descending the high snows of the Blümlisalp. Then, passing the crest, I plunged down a thousand feet into warmth and verdure, sat down on a sunny bank strewn with violets, primroses, forget-me-nots, bluebells and gentians, ate my lunch, and thought my heart would burst for joy!

A third reward vouchsafed the superannuated climber is the *effect of costly victory on general morale.* For it is beyond question that at sixty, one pays for a full-grown peak a price such as no youngster can pay, and it is an axiom that the fruits of conquest are in proportion to the difficulty surmounted.

I have sometimes seriously doubted that any mountaineer has striven and suffered as I have. On Mont Blanc I leaned hard on my early knowledge of arithmetic, saying to myself on those endless snow fields, "Since I have done those ten steps, I can do ten steps more." On the Dom, which I am happy I do not have to climb again, I put under contribution every passage of the Bible promising courage to the faint of heart and strength to the weak. Something happens inside one who measures his puny strength against those interminable pitches and those shattered cliffs. I never returned

home after a summer in Switzerland without feeling that some of that everlasting rock had been deposited inside me.

Then there are perquisites reserved for the septuagenarian mountaineer which men in the early decades of life might be too proud to ask or accept. For example, how many have ever had a guide to carry a violin for them over a high Alpine pass in a severe snowstorm?

We were at Fafleralp, near Ried, in the Lötschental, Antoine Georges and I, and were pointed toward the Lötschenlücke, the Concordia hut, and the Finsteraarhorn. When I explained that I had with me a violin which had either to be expressed elsewhere or lugged along, he promptly replied, "Je le prends." We started. Reaching the glacier, we had just begun the long ascent when a heavy snowstorm came on. It was an amusing sight—Antoine trudging along, white as Santa Claus, with coiled rope and ice-axe in one hand and a violin in the other. Putting up at the hut at the top of the pass for the night, we next morning crossed the Great Aletsch glacier to the Concordia, where the weather turned bad, detaining us for two whole days—leisure which I beguiled away with my violin. It may have been my indifferent technique that inspired a fellow-climber to protest: "When we come away to climb mountains, we leave the music at their foot, make our ascent, and then pick the music up again as we leave." But this only stirred Antoine to counterattack: "Monsieur," he explained, "has brought his violin with him to praise the good Lord for the gift of the mountains and for the power to climb them." After that broadside, Antoine told me, the specialist on mountains shut up tight as a clam.

The perquisites of aged mountaineers may prove even more substantial. It was that same year on the Finsteraarhorn. We had finished the interminable snow slope leading up to the spine of rock which in turn points the way to the summit, and had found the rock wet and icy. From almost constant contact with it, one of my hands had got so cold that I feared frostbite, which might have meant the end of my violining. Learning of it, Antoine halted, opened his coat, sweater and shirt, thrust my cold hand into his body-warmth, and held it there till pain announced returning circulation. Noble fellow! I wanted no higher honor than became mine one day when he called me his best friend.

Nor was that day without thrill. As we were descending and

SWISS SUMMIT OF THE MATTERHORN
Photo, Elizabeth S. Cowles

had reached the end of the long ridge of rock, we passed two Germans on their way up. I remember how tired the second man looked. Both had done the foolish thing and left their ice-axes down below, and the tired man was holding onto a looped rope attached to the other for support. But a little later—how soon I never knew—both slipped and fell, and never stopped falling till they dashed into the barrier of rock crossing the snow field at its base. Next day guides from the Concordia came to gather up their dead bodies.

But to return to substantial perquisites, I shall not soon forget the sharp pitch of rock just outside the Dent Blanche hut and at the beginning of the climb. Joseph Georges, "le Skieur," nephew of Antoine, was guiding my daughter and me that year, and had started up that pitch like a scared chamois, setting me to most vigorous and painful puffing. And what did Joseph, whom I immediately followed in the caravan, do? Turning, he stripped my pack from off me, thrust it into his already overloaded pack—and I never saw it again till we regained the hut, the climb accomplished!

There is one more perquisite of the mature climber, the last I shall mention. Again I would not claim too much. It touches intimate knowledge of that remarkable personality, the Swiss guide. It looks into his heart. Age, of course, has no monopoly here. Though I have had some tests among the high peaks and known some dangers, there are, I realize with admiration, experts who number among their exploits feats of which I know next to nothing—breath-taking, nerve-racking, hair-raising mountaineering adventures which, for all I know to the contrary, may uncover to the hero, in the event that he survives, traits and powers in a guide to which I am practically a stranger. Yet I would appeal for a sort of acquaintance and understanding of this extraordinary species (*homo ducens in montibus*) which is vouchsafed when the climber is in his sixties, and his friends are shaking their heads and saying, "He's slipping!"

The Scottish friend who introduced me in 1925 to Antoine Georges, of La Forclaz, in the Valais, said, "You will find in Antoine three things: a perfect gentle knight, a mediaeval saint, and a tremendous man of the mountains." I found in him all three.

Antoine had been selected as one of the two guides to represent Switzerland at the Paris Exposition. But he disliked the flatness of the country and the noise of the city. He wanted to climb the

framework of the Eiffel Tower, and they would not let him. So he went home.

His humor was contagious. One day, having set out with a client to climb the Aiguille de la Za—not by the face but by the easy way via the Bertol—Antoine found the mountain infested with humanity. The center of the group was the Prince Consort of Holland, too corpulent at the time to be seen on a mountain. There were both guides and porters. The guides went before with the rope; and, when the porters had safely placed His Highness' feet, they called to the guides, "Tirez!" and the guides would haul His Highness to their safe anchorage up above. Then it was celebrated with champagne all around, and this was in process of accomplishment when Antoine and his client arrived. Surveying the mountain, Antoine perceived that there were obstacles in his way. "La montagne est occupée," he crisply observed, and took his client to climb elsewhere.

Antoine's heart was full of song. We sang on every peak after I had caught my breath and the warm hand of congratulation had been extended. "Là-haut sur la montagne"—how often the rare air of sunny summits reverberated with that lovely song! He trained me in the songs of his tiny French-speaking village.

A man with a heavenly mind, Antoine was given insights that few possess. Talking one day of the bad rocks of certain peaks that pile up difficulty for the climber, we asked him, "Antoine, what mountain do you dislike the most?" A cloud came over his face. "Ah," he replied, "never could I say that I disliked any mountain." He could call a course *mauvais,* or even *maudit,* but never a mountain!

One day just below the Concordia we found the ice of the glacier very bad. "C'est un traiteur! C'est un traiteur!" he exclaimed. "You fall in, and I may get you out. I fall in, and you cannot get me out." Yet as we left that same glacier for the path at the Märjelensee after the last climb of the season, he said wistfully, "Nous laissons les lieux célestes!"

Rare soul, sacrificed to the folly of two careless climbers, what insight God gave you in the secret of mountain beauty! Perhaps it is for that that I revere and love you the most.

For what is mountain beauty, and the imposing height of it we call sublimity? What is this tender, yet august thing, that sets

the heart throbbing and the spirit soaring? Has it *intention?* Has it a meaning to be deciphered, a message to be heeded and known?

Is mountain beauty their color, from the purple poured round their feet to the crimson and gold that smite their summits at sunrise? Is it their lights and shadows, the mists that wreathe them, the clouds that float like airships among their peaks, or rest at evening over them in benediction? Or is it all these and vastly more, fused into harmony as by a divine touch? Libraries have been written about beauty, yet the mountains have never surrendered their secret to the masters of analysis. Only the pure in heart like Antoine have known it.

We were climbing the Aiguilles Rouges, near Arolla, and had mounted in full moonlight to the higher pastures, soft under foot, which slant upward to the basal rocks on which that splendid mountain, rust-red, favorite of rock climbers, is founded. We had no lantern. We needed none. Ethereal light flooded everything from the turf under foot to the pale summits standing guard above our heads. Suddenly Antoine, who had been ahead, stopped, turned in his tracks, and said, "The moon is shining, the stars are glistening, all the world's asleep, and we walk in the light of God!"

Prepared spirit, strong of hand and of sure tread, reading the rocks at a glance, fertile in resource, overflowing with music, playful as a child, and ever in touch with the superterrestrial—he had seen into the heart of beauty as many a philosopher, many a book-maker, many a master of aesthetics has strangely failed to do; for he saw on the moonlit mountaintops the sheen of invisible garments, and heard in the silence of the summits the sound of inaudible feet!

"Ye are bound for the mountains—
Ah, with you let me go
Where your cold distant barrier,
The vast range of snow,
Through the loose clouds lifts dimly
Its white peaks in air—
How deep is their stillness!
Ah! would I were there!"