

MOUNTAINEERING AS A RELIGION.

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AT a meeting held in this room two years ago, a well-known member of the Club made some observations which struck me considerably at the time. In a speech, after one of our papers, he alluded (I am quoting from a note made at the time) to 'the religious aspect of our attitude towards the purity of the higher peaks and snows.' The remark, as I say, made an impression on me: it crystallised, as it were, certain ideas which had long been forming in my mind—namely, that, in the first place, mountaineering had in our day ceased to be a mere sport, an agreeable relaxation for jaded workers; and secondly, that our attitude towards it was marked with a fervour and an intensity of purpose characteristic of the genuine devotee. Moreover, it appeared to me—and subsequent reflection has only served to deepen the impression—that the fraternity of climbers possess certain distinctive views and qualities which may, I think, fairly be termed sectarian. I was timidly broaching these notions to one of our number after the May meeting (he is not a hundred miles from me at the present moment, but wild horses could not make me disclose his identity), and he said, 'Well, mountaineering is *my* religion—*my* only one.' Heartened by this very candid confession of faith, I prosecuted my researches with redoubled vigour. I turned up the word 'sect' in my dictionary, and I found that it meant 'a body of persons united by the same tenets, constituting a distinct party, by holding sentiments different from those of others.' Now it seems, clear to me that the writer must have had the Alpine Club in his mind when he penned that passage. The average climber is unquestionably 'a distinct party,' and his sentiments on a good many things are sharply differentiated from those of the outside world. The outside world, for instance, persists in regarding mountaineering simply as a pastime—a rather peculiar pastime indulged in by very peculiar people. To the true mountaineer it is much more than that: it is a joy, a passion, an inspiration—one might say 'a religion,' since it will hardly be questioned that our devotion to the mountains and mountaineering is tinged with a veneration that at times savours of worship. We regard the first as objects

of homage ; we pursue the second with a more than Teutonic seriousness that excites the wonder of our friends ; and in this seriousness and earnestness we seem to have the nucleus and the germ of a new faith or denomination. A denomination ought, of course, to furnish its votaries with tenets, dogmas, and a canon law of its own. How far the Alpine Club supplies us with these requisites it will be my task to inquire later on. It is usual, and in many ways desirable, that a church or sect should also have some outward and visible signs of its existence as a corporate entity, that its disciples should be able to point to certain emblems or insignia affording a means of recognition ; and in these things it may readily be admitted that our brotherhood is somewhat deficient. An excessive love of personal adornment was never a failing that could be imputed to Alpinists as a class. For symbols of our creed we possess, I am credibly informed, a tie and a button ; but I have only seen them with the eye of faith. Our high priest, as you will observe, wears no gaudy robe of office. Our bishops, or hierarchy, on the front bench there, are similarly inconspicuous. Our initiates, while performing their sacred rites on the mountains, appear clad in vestments that are sometimes the reverse of impressive. The mountain, as we know, is a glorious object : the mountaineer is apt to be a rather inglorious object.

It is evident, therefore, that we must probe below the surface if we would discover the decisive tokens of our Alpine confraternity : we must seek for some homogeneous and inward spiritual characteristics marking us off as a caste apart from other men. For myself, I find these characteristics in a certain mental predisposition, a distinct individual and moral bent, common to all mountaineers, but rarely found in those who are not addicted to mountain climbing. The true mountaineer is not a mere gymnast, but a man who worships the mountains. Like the Israelite of old, he looks to the hills as strongholds whence cometh our help, and to the mountains as consolations that bring peace unto the people. He loves the high places of the earth ; and, lover-like, he is apt to expand, with what outsiders may consider unnecessary prolixity, on the perfections of his adorable mistress. He is not content, like Ruskin, to worship the loftier mountains from afar : he demands closer contact with the objects of his passion ; but this passion is never otherwise than devout and reverential in its quality. To us the great ranges and the glaciers lying at their feet are sacred things. Our cathedrals are the massive white domes and slender rocky spires thrusting upwards into the blue

empyraean: our Holy of Holies lies ensconced somewhere in the recesses of the everlasting snows. Their invasion by unorthodox people, or in unorthodox ways, is to us a profanation of hallowed mysteries. To drive a tunnel through the bowels of our beloved Jungfrau, to set a restaurant or beer-house like an ugly pot-hat on the head of the majestic Matterhorn, is to perpetrate an unspeakable offence against everything we hold dear. We are zealots with an unwritten creed; for a faith to which no Pope has given definition we cheerfully undergo voluntary martyrdoms; and the fervour of our zeal is apt to lead us, as it leads other sectaries, into excesses which a times border on fanaticism. The climber elevates his opinions into dogmas, which he maintains fiercely against all comers: there are occasions when he shows traces of that bigotry, a spice of that persecuting spirit, without which no true religion would ever be complete. Uninitiated persons reproach us, not wholly without cause, with a certain lack of courtesy and sympathy towards the weaker brethren. When we meet the harmless necessary tourist on a glacier our glances and demeanour seem to say to him, 'Take thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground: none but the demigods of the axe and the rope may enter here.' The other day I was searching the Scriptures of one of our Major Prophets, and I read that 'the true mountaineer is undoubtedly the noblest work of God.' Sound doctrine, perhaps; and there is a fine dogmatic ring about that 'undoubtedly.' But the prophet then went on to 'slate' the unfortunate man, who is not a true mountaineer, as a miserable creature unfit to live, a sort of heretic to be scorched and shrivelled alive in the flames of some Alpine Inquisition's withering scorn. Here, I think, we have an intolerance of a distinctly ultramontane quality. The word 'ultramontane,' as you are aware, signifies a dweller beyond the mountains. Am I fanciful in suggesting that the Alps are here indicated as being in some sense a dividing-line between excess and moderation, between what is reasonable and the reverse of reasonable, and that we Alpine clubmen would do well to keep on the hither side?

The climber's faith, like every other faith, has its ethical as well as its purely dogmatic aspects. We seek by mountaineering to improve our minds and morals as well as our muscles; and a likeness of muscular Christianity may be said to be the result. Physical prowess is a primary object of worship with us, as with other Britons. The first climber began climbing in order to stretch his legs; as he warmed to the work he found

that in the process he was expanding his mind. What first appealed to him as a mere exercise or amusement was seen on closer acquaintance to be also a school, a very severe school, of manners and personal courage and other desirable attributes. He found that it supplied him not only with recreation and bodily vigour, but with an education; and from that time forward he began to climb from a stern sense of duty and conviction. The mountains, Ruskin tells us, purify religious faith and stimulate religious enthusiasm; they also stimulate the poetical and inventive faculties. The works of Mr. Henry Savage Landor—to name only one writer—bear convincing witness to the truth of this latter proposition. As the mountaineer grew daily more and more impressed with the glories of the mountains, the contemplation of them enlarged his spiritual faculties and purified his soul. Pursuing pleasure, health, and beauty, he achieved in the quest moral and intellectual improvement; and, following the example of the ancient Greeks, he converted his aesthetic emotions into virtuous dispositions. Like Ibsen's Norwegian hero, out of the solitudes, among the mountain peaks, the climber learns the secret of living; through the mists on their flanks he discerns things seen but darkly before. Critics may object that I am overstating my case. They may say that I am claiming too much for our beloved pursuit; that I am crediting it with the educative and hygienic properties of a Sandow school of physical culture combined with the refining influences of a first-class seminary for young ladies. For all I know, they may be right, but I must be allowed to have my opinions; and for the faith that is truly in me, I can always fall back, as a last resort, on the patristic motto, *Credo quia absurdum*.

I have read that one chief end and result of all primitive religion is the consecration of life, the stimulation of the will to live and to do and to dare; and the faith of the mountaineer is essentially a combative one. His church is beyond all things a church militant. The medieval monk, shunning the world and its wicked ways, retired to some rocky fastness to combat with demons, to wrestle with principalities and powers of darkness. The climber feeds his will to do and to dare by tackling fearsome rock-chimneys and ice-slopes at an angle of 60°. The foes he grapples with are inanimate ones of crag and snow. In the course of his struggles he, no less than the monk, is beset at times with doubts and fears. The hermit has a dread lest his ghostly adversaries may prove too strong for the weakness of the flesh. Similarly, the climber, when contem-

plating some dangerous new route or other desperate expedition, hopes for the best ; but he is not over-sanguine of success, and bears it ever in mind that the thing, after all, may not 'go.' His attitude, then, towards the projected enterprise is precisely the attitude of the educated modern Japanese towards *his* religion—a 'posture of politeness towards possibilities.'

Our faith must, of course, have some philosophical basis on which to rest—as Newman said, 'We must begin with private judgment'—and the philosophy of any stable creed is always tinged with mysticism. Now mysticism is of all kinds—good and bad, elevated and degrading ; and I trust that ours is not of the worse order. What is the basis of our faith to be ? I should be inclined to found it mainly on an intense love of Nature and of natural beauty, a certain sentiment or inward experience, as theologians say—which experience, they also tell us, is the truest and surest groundwork of belief. And the faith that is in us now was not formed in a day, although the particular form of Nature-worship to which we are addicted—the veneration of mountains—is, as you know, a plant of comparatively recent growth. Jean Jacques Rousseau has been described as the first of the Nature-sentimentalists, the ancestor of modern romantic naturalism, which, in his case, was inflamed by the glorious vision of Mont Blanc from his native town of Geneva. I had myself always supposed, in common with many others, that he was the father in some sense of our modern worship of the mountains ; but Mr. Freshfield, in his interesting paper last month, gave us convincing arguments against the correctness of this view. I think, however, we may safely say that Rousseau's passion for Nature generally gave an impulse to those emotions which now find expression amid Alpine summits and glaciers. Of his fellow townsman, De Saussure, I had thought to say something ; but, after Mr. Freshfield's paper ; words of mine would be more than superfluous. After them came Ruskin, whose works are well known to you all. These last two men adored the snow-clad peaks : Ruskin at a distance, De Saussure on closer acquaintance. The pursuit of mountaineering as a craft or science was reserved for a later day. This latter form of devotion may sometimes, perhaps, be a trifle overdone ; but we may fairly claim that the large majority, even of gymnastic Alpinists, are not the mere greased-polers denounced so fiercely by Ruskin. The boldest crack-climber in our ranks may possess—often, in fact, does possess—a keen Nature-sense which tells him that Nature holds the key that alone can unlock many a secret treasure-house.

At the back of every true mountaineer's mind there is, as it seems to me, something corresponding to the old Greek idea of *καλοκάγαθόν*—the harmony of the good with the grand and the beautiful: an idea which, whatever the philosophers may say, is deeply implanted in the human soul. Awe and reverence are among the chief essentials of worship, and of these Nature supplies a full inspiration. There is a spiritual, as well as a physical, romance in our journeyings among the snows. Our quest is not wholly on the material plane, and the mystery of our surroundings makes an appeal to us which few can resist. Orthodox or agnostic, we must all believe in Nature and in the miracles she works daily: in what are to us her noblest manifestations, the mountains, we descry the face of Deity.

The monkish belief to which I alluded just now—that the mountains are the natural abode of demons and other unpleasant creatures that shun the plain—suggests another subject for consideration. The worshipper of Nature is always a bit of a folklorist—that is to say, a man filled with the sense of wonder: one who observes, dimly perhaps but reverently, the mysterious processes of Nature, and strives to appreciate their significance. He sees, in the grand pageant she unfolds daily before his eyes, the symbols of invisible realities. He believes firmly in some sort of alliance between man's soul and the soul of Nature. In olden days, and among certain races of our time, the believers in folk-fancy and folk-legend freely personified these natural forces, and peopled the solitudes round them with beings appropriate to their spheres. It was the doctrine of the ancient Greeks and Romans, as it is of our modern Kelts and a good many ecclesiastics in various nations to-day, that every place, whether in Nature or constructed by man, has its guardian angel or presiding genius, and that angelic or other supernatural intelligences are at work everywhere. My wife heard an eloquent sermon preached on this subject in a London cathedral only the other day. Well, to take a single instance from our beloved Alps, I certainly think the Matterhorn ought to have a tutelary divinity of its own. I picture him as a rather grim, forbidding sort of personage—something of the Alexander Burgener type. Why not canonise Alexander Burgener as patron saint of the Matterhorn, and locate his shrine somewhere on the Zmutt arête?

Mysticism, as I have said, has various forms; and in this mystic undefined cult of the Virgin-Mother Nature, whose children we all are—cynics may call it fetishism born of a mood—modern Alpinists, especially those of an imaginative or highly strung type, appear to me in some measure to partici-

pate. We have in the Club poets who have obtained an alleviating discharge, as the Greeks put it, of their feelings about the mountains in verse that displays at times a distinctly creative quality. Others are content to express themselves—as I am trying to do now—in more pedestrian prose; and a much larger number probably feel these things without giving them any outward expression at all. Dr. Collie gave us last March a graphic picture of the wild, weird scenery of our native Highlands and islands; and in his bursts of Keltic Nature-reason, or unreason, and flow of soul, I seemed to detect certain sure tokens of the folk-lore imaginings of the Gael. The Irish Kelt, in the intervals he can spare from political agitation, is busy reconstructing the poetry, and perhaps the religion, of his forefathers, begotten of the wild Nature about him, which seems to have penetrated the very core and fibre of his being. The dull Saxons whom he detests, or professes to detest, are a more prosaic folk: yet in our celestial regions of the Alps, with their larger scale and more sublime magnificence, there are occasions when we seem to get on closer and more intimate terms with Nature: when she seems to speak to us as to a friend and soul-mate in whom she can safely confide her secrets. In moments of stress and danger the most commonplace person may get in touch, as it were, with the spirits of the cloud and the storm. He sees things he never saw before. The beetling crags and cliffs take on strangely human forms and faces; and airy phantoms haunt the wreathing mists. Brocken-spectres, such as Whymper saw from the shoulder of the Matterhorn—portents or omens of disaster—hover over the precipices; and the banshee's scream is heard above the moaning of the wintry winds.

We have, too, our seasons of repose when more tranquil, and perhaps deeper, emotions are in the ascendant. A midnight bivouac under the stars, beside some moonlit glacier amid high mountains, raises a host of august and indelible impressions. In the deep red flush of the evening Alpine glow we yield ourselves to Nature's witchery: bathed in the sensuous magic of the hour, our spirits are at peace. In the going forth of the morning in robes of saffron on the peaks, the pale glamour of dawn is as a faint reflection of a radiance not of this earth. At these and similar times the impression of a species of spiritual exaltation, some subtle kind of communion with the unseen world, may easily become an apprehension transcending that of the mere visionary's dream. One may say then—if in a somewhat different sense—as was said of old time on another mountain-top, 'It is good for us to be here.'