

THE ROAD TO ROUNDABOUT

BY J. L. LONGLAND

Read before the Alpine Club, June 3, 1941

ABSENCE may make the heart grow fonder, but I find personally that it very soon deprives me of the ability to describe either with passion or with accuracy the features of the beloved. When absence from the Alps is complicated by the preoccupations of wartime, and any escape to the mountains, even in thought, brings an involuntary feeling of guilt that adds to the weight of the luggage, it is still harder to give tongue. Even so this paper might somehow have emerged as it was intended, a modest little chronicle of peaks and failures, but for an unlucky accident coupled with a piece of stupidity. The accident, of course, was that John Jenkins got in first a month ago. An attempt to follow in the wake of the exuberance and conviction of his Alpine progress would have courted your ridicule—the prophet's mantle does not become less adequate shoulders, and besides, mantles of prophecy, as of other material, are quite rightly rationed in times like these. The stupidity was my own. When I was weak enough to agree to the Secretary's request to knock together something on some seasons of guideless climbing, I had forgotten that I'd said it all so much better nearly ten years ago in an ingenuous paper called *Some Guideless Climbs*,¹ and what is more I believed what I said in 1932. So it would have been rash to try to regild the lily, and still rasher to attempt to recapture those much too youthful tints on the snows of dawn.

This war, as no doubt the last also, brings on a climber's middle age more abruptly and at a much earlier stage than one liked to believe was normal. Plans for future seasons are almost as indecent as they are absurd, and the telescope must be squinted through wrong end foremost—whether towards the unbelievably remote images of things past, or towards the diminishing perspective of always smaller achievements in the future. The wise climber probably keeps quiet, and hugs his memories to himself. Accounts of climbs written while pride is still fresh and all the angles steepened, are listened to very patiently by the members of the Club. But is there much excuse for adding further to

¹ *A.J.* 44. 200 *sqq.*

mountain litter (especially if no claim is laid to any further syllables), when even in peace the serious young climber has to fight his way through such an accumulation of guidebooks and mountaineering articles on his way to win his birthright on what are still his own peaks? One well known climber believes this at least, in writing 'For several years now I have suffered from a disease which I have never dared to reveal to a fellow mountaineer. The disease is a growing antipathy to all forms of mountaineering literature.' He goes too far for most of us. The classics come down as kindly from the shelves in war as they did in peace. But most of us probably open our club journals with an anticipatory sigh: 'Whatever can he have found to pad it with in times like these?'

The paper I was so proud to read in 1932 begins to look like a climax in a musical score—an Alpine crescendo through the seasons up to that date, and a fairly steady, if not altogether realised diminuendo through the years that followed. Up till then success on bigger and better Alpine peaks was a yardstick to measure increasing competence as a mountaineer—and one asked nothing better than that each season should provide still more tapering, and always greasier and greasier poles upon which to skip. 1932 was a bad weather season, but it reinforced the same outlook, with our party's only genuine Alpine first ascents, on the Sirac and the S. Aiguille d'Arves, and a far too genuine first descent of a face on the Tour Ronde, when pride was pushed into committing more follies in four hurried evening hours than are usually circumvented in as many seasons. After that came a new perspective, with the opportunity of visits to the Himalaya and to the East Greenland ranges. The Alps did not become less good to revisit, and the same was true of the hills of the Lakes or of Wales, but they no longer seemed to offer such an obvious ladder of ambition and achievement. The zest for Alpine variations finds it hard to survive the hundred miles of unmapped mountain country lying N. of the Watkins Range, or the huge ring of sentinels round Mount Everest.

I do not know whether to be more annoyed or comforted by finding that most other climbers reach a similar stage in their Alpine progress. It is, of course, disheartening to find that the thoughts vaguely stirring in my mind since I first began to try to write this paper, have been given such admirable shape both in the famous 'Middle Age of a Mountaineer' and also in the President's wise heart-searchings in 'Should the Mountain come to Mahomet?' But I took some comfort in studying one of my own best possessions—a copy of Coolidge's *Guide to the Central*

Alps of the Dauphiny with C. E. Montague's autograph on the flyleaf, and a list of his climbs in the seasons 1891-1914 in his own writing among the blank pages at the back. As so often, the list gives more than a record of peaks, or of the competence, or even of the tastes of a mountaineer. For it shows—and how many hundreds of climbing diaries could give a parallel?—the stages in the interplay between man as mountaineer and man enmeshed in all his other interests, a balance of forces that changes in emphasis as long as the love of mountains persists in any given life. From C. E. Montague's bare list of names and dates, you can trace, without too much imagination or use of the crib (in the shape of Elton's biography), a progress that many will recall in their own experiences, though few are given to transfigure these experiences as Montague has done in his books. In 1891, the first season, there is the first breathless discovery, though tradition is loyally kept by taking a pair of guides and a pious ascent 'to a point on Mont Blanc between the Grand Plateau and the Bosses du Dromadaire,' and the exuberance that threw in (the guides no doubt protesting) the Petit Mont Cervin from the Breithorn Plateau as savoury after the dullish dish of the Breithorn from the S.W. Next season shows the novice putting on his spurs with a pair of more experienced guideless climbers, in Naismith and Wickham King, and traversing the Wellenkuppe-Obergabelhorn ridge, as well as crossing the Matterhorn with his guides. There follow the visits, in 1895 and 1896, to other districts to climb peaks no doubt seen from the Zermatt chain: the Grand Combin and the Eiger. After that the gaps between Alpine seasons become more obvious, and one fills them in—more exacting jobs, allowing no leisure for an Alpine season (the Jenkins kind had not been invented!)—marriage, family, more responsibility and, of course, ill health as well. The summers are not blank, but record the lesser snatched delights of a Lake District week, or a gritstone week end: climbs with wife or friend from the same city, and the Alps unvisited for five years. In 1906 Montague seems to return there with all the old desire, and with more confidence than the first seasons could give. Nearly a month was spared, and guideless climbs, the Dent Blanche among them, are found as well as big peaks with guides, and an obviously fascinating crossing of the Schallijoch, which Montague was to remember when he wrote *Action*. Succeeding seasons show, as one might expect, the disappearance of the names of some former climbing companions, and the record of some climbs done alone (some of them remarkable), offset by more climbs made with his wife. It is not difficult to trace, in the last

seven or eight years, not only the diminished opportunities which allowed only three short Alpine seasons among them, but a lessening of the ambition to keep Alpine spurs always bright and sharp—and a contentment with lesser peaks and littler discoveries.

But it is too tempting to let C. E. Montague fill this paper for me. In my own climbing 1932 marked a break in time, as well as perhaps in outlook, and I did not get back to the Alps till 1936, still with most of the old sackful of grandiose plans, but with fewer pestering ambitions than in the years before Tibet and Greenland. I remember being ruefully surprised to find that my pleasantest memories of that year were of perfectly normal tours in a district new to me, the Cogne valley, traverses of the Grivola and the Grand and Petit Paradis. This was to have been only the start of bigger things, but I think I am not falsifying my feelings of the time in remembering that it was rather a relief to think one had no ambitions in Cogne beyond the two splendid traverses, and that there was no need, in that season at least, to be searching for unnoticed faces or queer little variants. At Courmayeur the bigger plans miscarried, as in Courmayeur weather they so often do. Col Major and other Graham Browneries were postponed once more. And as if to rub the lesson in, the best day of the year was spent on almost the oldest classic of them all, Moore's Brenva route on Mont Blanc. It is true we looked across dutifully, several times that day, at the Red Sentinel and the icy Pear; but the satisfaction of the day and climb stood complete in itself, after 18½ hours had seen us round from the Torino hut, over Col de la Fourche, Col Moore, knife-edge, sérac wall, Mont Blanc itself, and then back along the great ridge Mont Maudit, Mont Blanc du Tacul, Col du Midi, and so into the Torino hut again. That the route belonged to the 1860's, and not to the desperate 1920's was no matter; an obvious enough point, but I think it marked one more stage in my conversion to Alpine normality.

Next year, 1937, added a comic twist to the awakening. Never were the plans more grandiose, perhaps because they owed something in conception to Arctic sledging and Himalayan sieges. A ring of food dumps at picked high points on the Zermatt horseshoe—and then to go up, and stay up, until as much of the round from the Dom to the Weisshorn had been run as human frailty and the weather might allow. Even in making the plan, I knew it was not real. Still, plan-making was a habit, and it filled in odd moments before the holiday, and fostered the illusion that we were as young and stupid as ten years before. Two expensive food-dumps were duly installed, and the thought of that burial

ground of chocolate, foie gras, butter, oranges and lemons, makes me still crosser today than it did when we abandoned them. Then my companion crocked, and the weather took to snarling nastily; and after the briefest decent interval—into which the Breithorn E. ridge and the Matterhorn were sandwiched—we upped and fled to the car at Brig, and then through sunlit dawdling miles to the Côte d'Or. The Zermatt horseshoe receded further and further, overlaid with coq au Chambertin, fraises du bois, and the warmth of Corton Charlemagne. A shameful retreat—but which has stayed clearer in the memory? The red and smoky dawn on the Triftjoch, which was our first food-cache, or the croissants and coffee of our belated breakfasts on the sunlit pavement bordering the little square at Nuits-Saint-Georges?

This is of course to load the dice unfairly—to set an Alpine season of rather ignominious failure against the companionship and creature comforts that fall to a happy party in the French provinces. The obvious answer is that the one pleasure begets the other. Even the top of the Matterhorn is the better for the thought of the wonderful iced cakes down below at the Victoria: and the wine and cooking of Dijon would not have seemed so good, or been so long endured, but for the training and contrast given by even an incomplete Zermatt season.

But there is more to it than that. With Europe now shut off—and who knows how soon or in what conditions to be revisited—it is inevitable that we take stock of the use made of our travel opportunities. With that comes not only nostalgia, but perhaps regret that we did not make better use of them. Undergraduate vacations were so long that they could be quite loosely packed with many varieties of holiday, even if money was scarce—and besides there was the unquestioned Alpine pull that made the weeks of flatland seem little but waste. But now, with holidays that have grown less and the ties of other interests growing stronger, I find myself often asking whether the best balance was struck. Did I spend too much time and too much of myself on those express train Swiss visits, with their clock minute-counting, ambition-spurring ladder of cumulatively more exacting, and therefore more satisfying, climbs? Or should there have been more dawdling in vanished France, more pauses with friends and sunlight, and less time spent in wrestling with the solidest kind of matter? In the patchwork of memory, which comes out the brightest—the mountains or the days in the valleys? The single goal, or the more complicated attempts to learn something of the lives of other peoples? The thought of former climbing companions who seem no longer to need the stimulus of big climbing

stirs uneasily in mind, and one remembers that to more adult nations the Englishman's love of sport is a sign of prolonged adolescence. Is this the sourness of the grapes in vineyards we can no longer visit, or the necessary reflection to allow the recovery of a sense of proportion about things—and mountains?

But it is unfair, and would be horridly boring, to try to set mountaineering against the pull of other interests that must accumulate after those first seasons—to equate the passions and values of the mountain against one's work, or home, or just maturing years. Recovery of a sense of proportion will not mean the disappearance of Alpine seasons from future plans, but a different balance between mountains and the rest of life—and indeed a different balance in the climbing season itself. My only secure conclusion about that queer 1937 visit to Zermatt is that the most ordinary climbing day of the lot has proved more completely satisfying than any climb I remember, and certainly more so than those early half-terrified guideless quasi-first ascents. It should have been a day of almost caricatured ordinariness—tailing along as second guide (if you will allow the self-conceit) behind good little Felix Julen on the Hörnli ridge of the Matterhorn in August! The qualification came in the pleasure of introducing someone to the Matterhorn for the first time—and in the fact that it was my wife to whom the introduction was made. A good guide and a well known ridge made it easier to achieve that complete self-forgetfulness which the guideless climber can never attain, and which no doubt Marco Pallis would rate very highly among the virtues. And it left me freer to enjoy, as the guide with his preoccupation with human luggage cannot often enjoy, almost at first hand the pleasure and excitement of a companion who was on the Matterhorn for the first time. There were smaller accessory pleasures too: we went fast and well, and were proud of having disregarded chancey weather and an inch or two of fast-melting snow. But the main fact is that here was a mountain, a fine mountain, giving what it can give to someone who had not visited it before; and the corollary was that here was mountain climbing giving its best because I was not asking from it, or reading into it more than mountain climbing can legitimately offer—as a sport, with very special advantages of its own, but none the less a sport, and not a philosophy, or a religion, or a substitute for the disappointments of the rest of life.

Much of what I have said may seem the combined results of absence from the mountains, fading ambition, and approaching middle age. But perhaps it is one climber's 'Road to Roundabout,' and perhaps too it is a well travelled road, though, as on

other routes, each climber must discover it for himself. It is, besides, a road which I seem to have been following on several planes simultaneously.

First, in the progress from guideless fumbings to more punctually run classics; from classic climbs to a romantic retreading of the steps of the heroes, Mer de Glace face of the Grépon, Pointe Isolée des Dames Anglaises, Klein Triftje rib. From these to diligently contrived, but sometimes unexpected, variants and first ascents in forgotten corners of the Alps. From these again, after the wider vistas given by new ranges and remoter countries, to the wish for travel in new mountain country instead of a wholehearted concentration on difficult climbing. And last the readjustment of attitude to mountain climbing and to the hills—any hills—whether the Buttermere rocks and fells at Christmas, the guided day among the Matterhorn crowds, or even the Malvern Hills with my small son, to bring the road full circle back to my own Worcestershire childhood.

Second, the road leads round certain well liked and familiar peaks themselves—the three Aiguilles d'Arves, the Grépon, the Breithorn. The first groping attempts on the ordinary routes, following those nervous reconnaissances so necessary to guideless parties. Then the half-glimpsed possibilities of variations or more seldom accomplished climbs: the patient revisiting until the harder ways were found: the winning of a knowledge of the peak as a whole, not so very inferior to that of a local guide: and then, when fortune smiled, the genuine new route, and that stage completed. And the full picture of that particular mountain remains there in the mind, and will bring its full pleasure with any new visit to the top by any of the many ways.

Last, the much slower discovery of what seemed mere mountain accessories—the hill people, their homes and lives, their virtues that long days in flatland bring so much more clearly to mind. Into that discovery fits the first Swiss visit to the little valleys and peaks of Canton Vaud, when mountains and even the outside three feet of a mountain path were forbidden to me, but thanks to which one remembered later that not all Swiss are guides, and that the mountaineering route may in the end lead back tardily to knowledge of a country and a people.

The Road to Roundabout twists very often, though the stages one has passed are of course more plainly seen than those which lie ahead. There are shorter roads, but the one which is made up of climbing ambition and a ladder of first ascents may leave the climber too early exhausted, and the mountains may be left unvisited when the specialised urge is gone. The Road to

Roundabout, for all its twists and turns and hesitations, may be the better graded way, and lead through Lakeland farms, or the Chilterns, or even the land of Burgundy, but its turns bring the climber back to the bigger hills, and keep them in the mind's landscape even during times like the present, when more tangible landscapes are hard to seek.

ROCK-CLIMBING IN NORTH WALES

By A. D. M. COX

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‘IT may well be thought a hopeless task to interest the members of this Club in such an everyday matter as the English Fells, or to invest with any sort of dignity a subject so exceedingly small of scale.’ The opening sentence of W. P. Haskett Smith’s paper¹ on *Climbing in Cumberland*, written nearly fifty years ago, gives distinguished evidence of that instinct to apologise which has generally been the first reaction of those attempting to write a paper for the ALPINE JOURNAL on some aspect of British rock-climbing. A man undertaking such a paper feels rather like a nervous trespasser, suspecting both that he ought not to be where he is, and that in any case the innocence of his motives may not be fully understood. On the one hand, there is a genuine doubt whether the British hills may properly be permitted to stand in the august company of the Alps, even in the judgement of those equally familiar with both; on the other, the feeling that sometimes, perhaps, British climbing may have suffered unjustly, through a contempt not always bred by familiarity. ‘There was a time,’ says Haskett Smith, ‘and that not so many years ago, when it was popularly supposed that there was only one climb in Lakeland, but that one climb of so utterly gruesome a character that no one could attempt it and yet preserve a reputation for sanity. Striding Edge is still there.’ Today for ‘Striding Edge’ one might almost emend ‘Twill Du.’

The serious charges that may be brought against the British hills are, I suppose, two: first, that their scale and character mean that, whatever the pleasure they give, it is not properly speaking the pleasure of the mountaineer, and secondly that the type of climbing practised on British crags has become so specialised that it has now lost anything it may once have had in common with the Alps. The first of these criticisms raises deep and possibly unprofitable issues, which I propose to evade. But it is perhaps worth noticing that, along with the tendency

¹ A.J. 16. 141. For general references, see *Alpine Journal Index*, vols. 1-15, p. 37, vols. 16-38, p. 84.