

THE RUNCIBLE CAT

By JOHN EMERY

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WITH apologies to Edward Lear I want to begin by quoting from 'The Pobble who had no toes'.

'The Pobble swam fast and well
And when boats or ships came near him
He tinkledy-binkledy-winkled a bell,
So that all the world could hear him.
And all the Sailors and Admirals cried,
When they saw him nearing the further side,—
"He has gone to fish, for his Aunt Jobiska's
"Runcible Cat with crimson whiskers!"
But before he touched the shore
The shore of the Bristol Channel,
A sea-green Porpoise carried away
His wrapper of scarlet flannel
And when he came to observe his feet,
Formerly garnished with toes so neat,
His face at once became forlorn
On perceiving that all his toes were gone!'

Most of you will know the hills north of Ullapool. The land there has a curiously primeval quality of age and youth, a timeless mood of 'as it was in the beginning': a flat wilderness of heather and gorse, merging almost with the sea, sweeps in from the coast to meet those extraordinary hills, thrusting up from the flat world like sleeping monsters. On a day last spring three of us were climbing on one of these hills, Stack Polly. The narrow western end of the mountain stands like the tower of a fortress, smooth and abrupt, looking out to the sea, but as we climbed it that day, edging up over the great blocks of sandstone which form its walls, I felt no response to the rush and leap of the rock. Instead I was at variance with the mountain, the old harmony had gone and I found only a dull and leaden unhappiness, a sort of puzzled frustration which had hung on me for several days. At about two-thirds height of the buttress, rounding a flake we came to a small incut corner, like a window embrasure on the face of the tower; at the back of the corner was a crack and this was evidently the only way up. The lower part of the crack was smooth and holdless so

I moved round onto the ledge which made a window-sill at the foot of the corner. I wedged my back into the corner and pressed my hands against its opening walls, then Michael Williams, who was leading, stepped up on to my shoulder. As he stood there a moment I stiffened to meet the surge and pressure of the rock about me, against my back, my shoulders, my hands and my feet. For a few moments I could put my strength against the mountain, and as I did so I could feel the wind eddying up the face below me, smell the dry rock beside me, and look across the world to the sea and the islands. Mike moved up but the moment did not pass for I had regained something from it which stayed with me during that day and has remained with me since. It was an end and a beginning, although I did not realise it then, a change in my attitude to mountains and I have described it because this is an entirely personal enquiry. So elusive a thing as a mountaineering philosophy is almost impossible to define for oneself; to attempt to do so for others would be presumptuous. What follows is simply one man's wanderings amongst all men's hills.

For many years before I began to climb, I had felt strongly attracted to mountains in a way which I could not explain for I had no yardstick of experience with which to define it. I tried walking in the hills but found it disappointing; always there was a hint in the tilting perspective, a catch of anticipation which would not reveal itself. Eventually, however, I came to climb and the hills fulfilled their promise. I had discovered an extension of experience that moved and excited me beyond description; it was as exhilarating as a moment many years before, in a dusty classroom, when I first read Shaw's 'Major Barbara', and suddenly realised that it was possible to think for oneself!

After that the world opened up like an oyster. There was always the next route to climb and a friend to climb it with; Wales gave way to the Lakes, Zermatt was round the corner and then Chamonix blinded me with its brilliance. It was an uncomplicated progress towards an ever widening horizon; always an adventure, a physical and mental adventure. Physically there was the climb, the struggle, the movement on the mountain with all that this entailed of rhythm and technique and muscular well-being; complementary to this was the mental attitude necessary for the climb itself, and beyond it were great beauty, friendship, and the mental results of the struggle. These three last were the important reasons for climbing, of that I was sure, but I have said that they were beyond the physical act of climbing and could only be reached through it. Because of this, the quality of the climb was important. Most of us would say that we get more kick out of a V.S. route than doing the Milestone Ordinary. I climbed to the limits of my ability because in so doing I could extend the limits of my experience. I could find out more about myself and about my friends

when the situation was sharpened by difficulty, while the beauty revealed was always intimately related to the total quality of the experience for I don't believe in art *dégagé* whether in looking at paintings or mountains; the concept of a sort of disembodied aesthetic makes me want to laugh.

My perception was conditioned by physical circumstance and the resulting mental awareness, and this awareness went beyond the mountain, with me when I stepped back through the looking glass again, to bring pleasure to the contrast of everyday things and a renewed sense of proportion to the values of everyday life. All this depended to a greater extent than I realised on the physical act of climbing and the uncomplicated enjoyment of the climb itself. Technique was never more than a means to an end. A passion for 30-ft. outcrops or stone railway bridges seemed dismally small-minded, but technique was a necessary touchstone: it led to the special freedom and through that to the particular vision which each route unlocked. Perhaps the strongest of these attitudes of mind, and the one which I looked for most often, was the overwhelming access of humility which came at the completion of a hard climb. Eckhart says that 'if the soul knows God in His creatures, that is only evening light'; nevertheless it was light, and strong enough to search for again and again. Mountains, then, were an obvious challenge, not to any element of conquest, for the idea of conquering mountains was ludicrous, nor to the Spirit of Man which could be left to Sir Francis Younghusband or anyone else who cared, but to a sort of restless curiosity about the total of mountain experience. The curiosity, however, was unrestrained; what was dangerous about it was the naïvety of the underlying assumption that the nature of mountain experience would only be revealed through the extremes of action on the mountain.

This headlong rush of eager enquiry was halted three years ago when circumstance, in the form of frostbitten fingers and toes, imposed a period of comparative inactivity upon me and administered what should have been an effective astringent to my thinking on the subject of mountains. The lesson, however, was learned slowly; others would have made the obvious change of attitude more quickly, or would have avoided the false position in the first place. I had no hesitation in wanting to climb again; I had always considered that anyone who stops climbing after a mountain accident, unless compelled to do so by physical incapacity, has no business to be climbing in the first place, because he has either failed initially to consider the full implications of mountaineering, or else has wilfully blinded himself to them. That I would be able to climb in some fashion I had no doubt either, because I had the splendid example of Robin Hodgkin in front of me. I would only be able to climb easy rock now and snow and ice were unknown

quantities depending on how much grip I would have for an axe or ice-hammer, but the important thing was that I would be able to climb somehow. So this future limitation in ability was not difficult to come to terms with, I could accept it quite early on. Of course I realised that it would be more painful when I actually returned to the hills and saw what I had once climbed, but the initial step of acceptance had been made. What I failed entirely to do, however, was to realise the effect that this would have upon my attitude to mountains, upon the ultimate enjoyment I drew from them. I did not see that my altered climbing ability would demand a fundamental change in my attitude if I was to continue to find happiness in the hills. So far from making this next, most important, step was I, however, that I simply thought of mountains with a sort of non-specific longing, an unreasoning belief that all would be well when I was back amongst them; to make sure that all would be well when I was back amongst them demanded a degree of insight and resilient thinking which I made no effort to find. I was taking refuge in an idealised fiction; climbing and mountains, when I thought of them, began to take on something of the unreality of climbing dreams, becoming a sort of poetic progression over limitless hills; how I arrived in these situations was just left conveniently unsolved. It was, in fact, a misty emotional abstraction, a sort of model which I had constructed. It had its uses but the danger was obvious as Professor Edgar Wint pointed out in a recent Reith Lecture when, dealing with the treatment of art as if it were pure, he said, 'There is no harm in moving among such abstractions as long as the model is not confused with the thing', and he went on to quote from the Circus Animals Desertion:

'Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.'

The first hill that I returned to was small, grassy, and had a large pylon on top; about as undramatic as it could possibly be. Nevertheless it was enough for me that day because I put on a pair of boots and walked uphill for the first time. That was simple but clear pleasure, just the movement upwards. Later, I returned to Wales. The first touch of November mist and the smell of my anorak as I pulled it on, eloquent of bog and slime and other men's socks, was enough to drive away the hospital fog of abstract mountains. We walked up Cwm Idwal; I was with Mike Mee again. Last time it had been the long slanting elegance of the West Buttress of Cloggy, today it would be the Ordinary Route on the Slabs, wet and tightly shrouded in mist. My mind was an odd jumble of hope and apprehension. In that familiar setting with the rope snaking up behind Mike, I really couldn't get rid of the feeling that anyone ought to be able to run up the Ordinary

with both hands tied behind his back; indeed it was all faintly comic but it would be a good problem. In fact, it took just five seconds on the rock to hammer out the pattern of things to come. The first hundred feet was a grotesque mockery of groping bewilderment; the looking-glass smashed to splintered pieces and the fragments ran down the streaming rock.

A hundred feet up there was a belay and a pause, time to look around and time to throw overboard the tattered shreds of the past and start right at the beginning again. There was a new discipline to be learned, an old one to be forgotten. Curbing the old, confident automatic movements was the difficulty. Now it was a fist, the palm or side of the hand, push not pull; I feel like a rather backward seal attempting to climb onto the ball at the circus. Mike waited patiently in the rain above while I pottered, swore, clutched and shoved. It was slow but it was working and as I moved up I began to find a secret pleasure in carefully and methodically breaking all the classic rules of rock climbing in one afternoon.

That was a day in isolation, but it was a beginning and the first hundred feet was a long way behind. Inevitably, however, it meant that when I returned again my first concern would be with technique; the bigger problem would be obscured for a time.

There followed a long interval of impatient days. Another summer passed but I was not going back to the Alps or to British rock until hands and feet were finished: a light-hearted but abortive seasonal sally to Glencoe which ended in whisky and wheelchairs in Glasgow Infirmary on New Year's Day effectively convinced me of the futility of more active anticipation. Finally, however, last May, the time arrived, the tailoring and testing on pavement and corridor was over and we drove north to Scotland on a new day. Michael Williams stepped off the train at Bridge of Orchy, the Black Mount was behind us, and there was the Buachaille standing like a trumpet call across the moor; clouds wheeled up to the summit and I had bright new stubby brown boots winking at me on my feet. It was a good day, a day absorbed with the rock, for my wife also was learning to climb. How to do it was all-important and sufficient too on my favourite mountain with the warmth of old associations close about me. We moved on, and over the following days the permutations, doubts and hopes of this new climbing were worked out. It was a question of finding the right combination, just as it had been before, and while I was learning there wasn't time for other questions.

Before long, however, as I began to find my new limit, I noticed more and more strongly a sensation of what I can only describe as disharmony with the mountain. It started as an odd restlessness, a growing unhappiness which was present even when I was climbing and it became

stronger and stronger until I realised with a shock that I was losing the old feeling of well-being which came through merely being in the mountains and I had almost lost the joy of climbing itself. It was not the restlessness which I found when I first came to the hills and which ended when I began to climb; that had had a certainty of eventual solution, this, on the contrary, was a growing uncertainty. There was a finality about it like a new road that suddenly ends in the middle of a moor. There's a cluster of deserted huts on wheels and a jumble of dead machinery and that's all; you have to go back, but I couldn't go back.

I knew what the trouble was: over the last few days I had found how I would have to climb in future, my new limits were defined. I found no difficulty in accepting that, I had already accepted it three years before, but with these limitations I could now no longer achieve the relationship with mountains that I had found before. I had lost two things: first was the intense physical enjoyment of the climb, the touch of the rock itself, warm granite crinkling under my fingers, the splendid certainty of pulling up over the bulging rock or swinging out on the hand traverse. These were simple physical freedoms but with them had gone the ability to extend myself on the mountain. I now had to climb cautiously, there was little in reserve, and because of this the second, the important, loss had occurred. My discovery of myself, and those intense moments of happiness which were the unique gift of the mountain, which informed my harmony with mountains, had been founded on a creed of intense action. The latter was denied me so the former was lost. So my thoughts went round and round in a tight little circle as we left Glencoe and Nevis to drive north to the Sutherland hills. I could see the only answer, it required very little imagination to realise what it must be, but I could not believe in it. The act of acceptance eluded me, eluded, that is, until the day on Stack Polly which I described at the beginning.

I don't want to give the impression that I made a conscious act of will on that ledge of the tower. I did not say to myself 'I believe' nor did I cry 'Eureka' and spring to the summit. But when I took the weight of the man on my shoulders I was forced to strike hard against the mountain with all my strength and in that moment I found the physical conflict which I thought I had lost. To touch the mountain was grace, yes, but to take hold of it, to wrestle with it, to hear that shouting surge of the spirit which came in the moment of attack on storm slopes of ice or rock, this was what had been held from me. For a brief time I could engage the mountain with all my strength and when the moment passed I found that with the recognition of this hunger its pangs had abated. I had already arrived at an intellectual assessment of my situation, but I had not accepted it emotionally because I had

not completely explored my loss in terms of emotional need; now that I was confronted by it, however, I could define and accept it, and acceptance was softened by the realisation that this appetite could still be satisfied in unexpected ways.

For the rest of that day I was happy for I was moving in my own country once more; it was a springing happiness which I have continued to feel whenever I have been in the mountains since then, whatever I am doing, whether climbing an easy route or one which taxes my present ability, such as it is, to the limit. Now this simply used not to happen, for although I could find intense happiness in the hills, I was restless and felt vaguely cheated and disappointed if weather or other circumstance forced us to have an easy day. A change must have occurred, the old unrestrained curiosity had gone, and something less limited had taken its place. I don't mean by this that I simply wanted to walk in the valley. Climbing was still important and I wanted to climb as well as I could, but it was not necessary to take it to excess. The simple act of ascending was enough; I could draw my strength from the hills without a desperate beating on their sides. That this was so I proved to my own satisfaction when we returned to the Alps in July.

We spent three weeks in Zermatt; it was my fourth Alpine season and I can say without hesitation that I enjoyed it as much as any of the preceding ones. There was the old thrill of crampons biting into hard snow, the glacier before dawn, clouds racing up from Italy and the new thrill of being able to hold an ice-axe by the head with one hand; the old half-forgotten uncertainty on steep loose snow and icy rock of my first season, ending in the same rush of pleasure as confidence returned and the new uncertainty of climbing on steep ice. There was no hesitancy, nothing was blurred; the impressions were sharp and clear, changing with each route. These, however, were the initial quantities of the equation, through them the beauty was as intense, my friends had not changed, but what of the final result of all these factors, the special attitudes of mind which mountains confer?

Originally, the first of these I suppose, was the attraction of mountains when I first saw them. Tyndall attributed this to 'the forgotten associations of a far-gone ancestry'; I can only hiccup in astonishment. Any attempt to extend that argument would end in farce. No, I can only think that it was chiefly the impact of a new and infinitely challenging beauty. The challenge was the unknown in the mountain and myself, and it could only be resolved by climbing and continuing to climb; the beauty always remained. There was, however, another element in this first attraction: mountains have always been obvious and convenient natural symbols and certainly I realise now that they were symbolic for me when I first saw them, not in any definitely accepted religious sense but in a way which I shall return to in a moment.

When I had actually started to climb, the initial time was busy with the mechanics of the new world, with the exhilarating novelty of the beauty seen from a different angle, with the new friendships, and all this compounded the attraction of the hills at that period. Later, when I came to the harder routes, I found something else, a new state of mind which I have mentioned briefly already. This was a sudden and overwhelmingly powerful sensation of humility and gratitude, so real that I could only interpret it as being directed towards a creator. I had never been able to arrive at such a conviction through a process of reason, yet here I was forced to accept it, despite myself, through the very certainty and intensity of these emotions. There was no element of pantheism in my interpretation; my emotions strongly implied the personality and the transcendence of the Creator. I can only define such experience by using the word mystical; it is, I imagine, a manifestation of nature-mysticism: my particular relationship with the mountain, the natural order, had resulted in a profound apprehension of a transcendent order. It was the knowledge of God in his creatures, Eckhart's evening light. I would emphasise that the first time this experience was manifest I had made no conscious effort to achieve it; there was no act of contemplation. It just happened when I was coiling up the rope at the end of a climb; as prosaic as that. Afterwards, however, I sought it again and again, but my mistake, some might call it a heresy, was to approach it through difficulty because this had been the relationship with the natural object which had led to its first manifestation. I could only find it with certainty through longer, more exacting expeditions. This was the naïvety of approach which I spoke of earlier. Charles Meade has rightly condemned it when he says 'an intensification of technique is not a reliable means for sustaining a mystical reaction', and more severely: 'A sense of unity with nature is one of the principal characteristics in nature-mysticism, whereas the desire for adventure in its extreme form is the absorbing preoccupation, not of the nature-mystic but of the danger-mystic who takes to danger as a stimulant.' I must confess to having enjoyed the stimulant occasionally, and I don't suppose any member of this Club could honestly say that he had never done so, but its real importance for me was to arrive at what is the same purpose as the nature-mystic's. I was employing the wrong means for what I still consider to be the right end.

Nowadays I no longer need to sharpen sensibility on the whetstone of danger. When I see the hills I see them in their old beauty and I see my friends and myself upon them, as we are now and as we have been. When I walk and climb, awareness is present on the bye-days as on the days of endeavour. It is still evening light, but perhaps the light will grow stronger in time.

Having said this, and probably having firmly established in your

minds the picture of a monomaniac setting off intrepidly into the hills with his butterfly net in search of extra-sensory lepidoptera, I should like briefly to look at perhaps the oddest and oldest question of all: 'Why do I like going uphill?' Mummery said 'I am free to confess that I myself should still climb, even though there were no scenery to look at . . .'. I would take this perhaps beyond Mummery's meaning to assert that I would still climb even if there was no view and no technical difficulty, nothing except the simple movement upwards. To explain this feeling I have to go back to my earliest days. Throughout childhood, in the books, in the stories that one read, hills nearly always figured as symbols of a better life. The prince and his princess, the toy soldier and the match girl, they all went over the hill to happiness. My favourite line in Beatrix Potter was 'Over the hills and far away she danced with Pigling Bland'. Later, at school, the road to London went over the hill, and the summer holiday in Wales ended when we rounded the corner and the hills shut out the view, so that it was not surprising that hills must always have had lingering traces of a romantic affinity with the better life. It is these affinities which must partially explain this odd satisfaction in walking uphill, these and the accumulated experience of our mountain lives which does in fact prove that there is a better life to be found in hills. I see it, then, as an expression of a natural optimism which is both romantic and founded in reality. Optimism may come close to William James' definition of mysticism, but I prefer to leave it at that; anything more would put me perilously near emulating that splendid hero of J. B. Morton's who pushed a pebble with his nose all the way to the top of the mountain.