VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

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Once every three years the members of the Alpine Club are condemned to listen to a lecture without pictures, without adventure, without excitement, the apparent function of which is to enable the Club to feel what an old bore the retiring President is, and thereby to welcome all the more warmly his probably more exciting successor.

This time of ordeal (for you as well as for me) does, however, provide an opportunity for looking around at climbing in general, and at our Club in particular—its influence, its potentialities, its deficiencies, its needs, its hopes and its expectations. Let's begin at the beginning. Why climb ? And why a club ?

First, then, mountaineering in general. Why did we start climbing ? In early French writings Mont Blanc is mentioned in the fifteenth century as a giver of *weather*. Nobody thought of climbing it. The climbing of Mont Aiguille in 1492, done by royal command, was an isolated event that falls into no category—we had better stick to Mont Blanc. In 1741 Pococke and Wyndham made an expedition which, we are told, 'provoked the sensation nowadays aroused by major Himalayan ventures'. Their expedition was a walk up the more level parts of the Mer de Glace. The year before this glacier trip, de Saussure was born, and we know from his own pen that his desire to climb Mont Blanc was primarily scientific, but that he was at the same time a real mountain-lover. R. L. G. Irving in *The Romance of Mountaineering* quotes him as saying 'I simply live for a nearer view of the High Alps' and incidentally gives an interesting and well-balanced account of his, Paccard's, and Balmat's ascents of Mont Blanc. The mind of man, and not only of man, has always been curious, eager to find out why, what, where, and how long; and I suspect that that is what drew the first men to climb the first mountain. Saussure seems to have been that sort of person, at any rate. My old friend George Mallory's much-quoted remark about climbing Everest 'because it is there' has always given me a shiver down the spine. It doesn't smell of George Mallory one bit. I feel sure that he made it originally as a hurried answer to some boring questioner (after a lecture, perhaps). He probably meant, 'Don't ask silly questions'. Actually, of course, the reason why any of us want to climb a mountain is because *I* am there. Wilfrid Noyce caught this idea when he called

one of his books *Mountains and Men*, referring of course to Blake's 'Great things are done when men and mountains meet'.[1] Yes, great things are done; but before they are begun, the desire to climb begins; and the form which that desire takes varies from person to person. With myself it can only be described as a passion. When I was young, and for many years after, I could not see a mountain worth the name without passionately wanting to climb it; and even now, when age and decay so forcibly prevent major ascents, I seldom see a mountain, or even a moderate-sized rock face, without at once starting to work out possible routes up it. But many climbers I have spoken with have not this fierce, consuming passion. Some climb for exercise, to keep themselves fit. Some concentrate on the magnificence of the views that only a mountain climb can provide. Some are enslaved by the mountains as objects of, or means to, contemplation and feel more than others the Alpine Uplift, once so denigrated by Geoffrey Howard, and strenuously upheld by Arnold Lunn, a member of the very priesthood of the cult (to which I, and no doubt many others here, own our allegiance).

The only person, as far as I know, who ever composed an Alpine Symphony, was Richard Strauss. It is supposed to describe the climbing of a peak; it is not one of his most successful works, and I might suggest to his spirit in Elysium another mountain symphony, the subject being 'Why do we climb ?'.

The first movement would be labelled *allegro appassionata*. Nobody better than Strauss could write a musical description of passion; the thrill of seeing the mountains from somewhere near Bern, or from the northern shore of the Lake of Geneva, or from the little railway up to Darjeeling; the more immediate thrill of anticipation as one walks up to a hut. Some of those walks are physically wearisome, but the thought of a good climb next day gives the wings of Mercury to one's feet, and surely hardly any of us remember ever being bored by the walk to a hut. Our eagerness combines with the increasingly lovely views to give that walk all the glamour of the hunting of the beloved, the age-old pleasure of the chase. To save time and to get as much climbing as possible into a holiday, my usual climbing partner, our late friend Bentley Beetham, and I (of course), used to prefer a hut from which several mountains were available, and stay there until they were done. In place of our seniors' 'hut, peak, hut, hotel' we preferred 'hut, peak, hut, peak, hut, peak, hotel', or traverses from one hut to another with several peaks from each.

Fleshpots and a bed once a week are enough when one has the passion for the mountains, as I feel sure nearly all of us found in the days of our youth, and the lucky ones who are young are finding today.

Mummery said, 'No other sport affords such an outlet for the stirring

[1] H. W. Tilman's *When men and mountains meet* is, of course, an even more direct reference to Blake.—EDITOR.

energies of youth'—we might add Herford's 'ecstasy that thrills and fires the blood.' Remember thou thy Creator, and His mountains, in the days of thy youth; not all of us can be Eustace Thomases and climb all the four-thousanders after the age of fifty-one.

To connect our *appassionata* first movement with the next, the slow movement, we may quote from Guido Lammer. 'Passionate involvement in the act of mountaineering, and the menace of danger, are the source of powerful moral or religious emotions, which may be of the deepest spirituality.' That seems to steer us on towards Alpine Uplift, so here we request Strauss' ghost to write up all that Alpine Uplift can inspire. Let us suggest a few quotations for him to put into this movement.

From J. A. Symonds: 'Sacred heights, which with the voice of very God are loud.'

From L. S. Amery: 'Serenity above all things one learns from nature, and not least from mountains.'

From Lionel Terray: 'The mountains are a magic kingdom, where by some spell I feel happier.'

From Horatius Bonar: 'These peaks are nearer heaven than earth below.
They lift us to the land where all is fair,
The land of which I dream.'

From J. C. Smuts: 'The mountain is the ladder of the soul.'

Slow movements are sometimes funeral marches. We must in our slow movement add to the uplift and its sheer joy a reference to the dangers of the mountains and to those who have become their victims. Mummery wrote: 'It is true the great ridges sometimes demand their sacrifice, but the mountaineer would hardly forego his worship though he knew himself to be the destined victim.' And from C. D. Robertson: 'The faith of a mountaineer is, and must be, that a life lost in the legitimate pursuit of our aims is not a life thrown away, but the forfeit of a stake set for an exceeding great reward, the rendering up of a soul to the hills that made it a worthy sacrifice.'

Although in George Mallory I lost a real friend, I never felt his life was thrown away. The last sentence of his biography by David Pye is: 'Those two black specks . . . moving up slowly, intelligently, into regions of unknown striving, remain for us a symbol of the invincibility of the human spirit.' If the dangers of the mountains are to drive us away from them, we take away with us that same invincible spirit of adventure which helped to make our nation great, and without which its future—and that of our Club—is doomed.

Now for the *scherzo*, a jolly movement, describing the enjoyment of the rocks and snow, and their problems, and the pleasure of companionship on the mountain which we are climbing with friends on the rope. Here we look around at the beauty of the view, but only for a few minutes, for

the immediate problem of climbing the next pitch is demanding all our attention. What sport offers anything more varied and more fascinating than ours ? It may be, for the leader, cutting steps in steep ice, or kicking them in easy snow; or for his follower climbing up those steps carefully and confidently. It may be leading safely up an exposed face of rock, or strenuously negotiating a stiff chimney or crack; for the follower doing the same and doing it as neatly, and therefore as safely as he can. The fascination of finding the way without a guide, especially on a new climb, or in the Dolomites where no nails have scarred the holds and made the route obvious, is one of the delights which I personally look back on with nostalgic enjoyment; for since 1911 I have only for one week climbed with a guide, though I have done many climbs with guideless parties containing amateurs, from whom I learned ice and snow. When once one has acquired a fair amount of mountain knowledge, it is much more fun climbing without guides, whether amateur or professional. Especially with a bank account that is usually in the red. There is of course the possibility of not getting to the top, or of having to make a bivouac. Among European peaks I think I have only once missed the top, and that was on the Delagoturm of the Vajolet towers, which I tried to go up direct, not knowing that the chimney is just round the corner. In the Himalaya it is a very different story. Time and again, beginning with Everest in 1922, have I failed to reach the summits of these great mountains. But the climb and the scenery and just being in these wonderful places have made ample compensation. But enough of myself; the Club bore seems to have taken charge of this movement, I suppose because its subject was the joy of companionship with its inevitable repercussion of reminiscences. Our *scherzo* must end with a musical description of pulling out the pitons, and putting them away, to the accompaniment of triangle and celesta. We are up-to-date in our methods, and this Club must never again repeat its ancient conservatism which once looked askance at crampons, pitons, or anything new. We must reserve these feelings for the higher funiculars and other extensions of the harmless and convenient *Sesselbahn*.

Now for the last movement, which should celebrate National Prowess, the last and perhaps the least important of all the incentives to mountaineering, though it seems to be fairly common still. We will be thinking during the coming year of Whymper's party on one side of the Matterhorn while Carrel on the other side is hoping to reach the summit first. We salute the spirit of the Germans who risked all on the North face of the Eiger for the glory of their Fatherland. We remember the Muztagh Tower with its two parties, French and British, on the two opposite ridges by pure coincidence, and the contemporary race we are all having from time to time for the permission of the Nepalese Government to climb the peak that happens to be our next objective, before the rats get

it—whoever those rats may happen to be at the time. Martial music must start off this movement, with a skilful medley of national anthems, leading up to an international salute to the glories of the mountains themselves, 'these magnificent creatures of God, striking one motionless with the awe of supernatural things' as Hilaire Belloc calls them. Our symphony is done; the ghost of Richard Strauss can rest once more in limbo, having celebrated the four great incentives to mountain climbing—passionate, uplifting, companionable, and patriotic.

And now, what of our Club ? It started as a dining club for companionship, reminiscences, and plans for next year, over a nice dinner and good wine. After a few years this gave rise to the Alpine Club, primarily for continuing this companionship in a more organised form than was possible around the dining table.

It was begun during the Golden Age of mountaineering, when first ascents of all the principal peaks in the Alps were being made by the great pioneers; it was customary to climb with guides; to do otherwise was exceptional, and frowned upon by some of the more reactionary members. But though called 'Alpine', the Club soon found outlets for its energy and enterprise on other ranges—the Caucasus in 1868; the Himalaya in 1883; the Karakorum in 1892; the Rockies, the New Zealand Alps, and the Andes. In quite recent times a harvest of first ascents has been and is being reaped in the Cordilleras, and in Patagonia. In some of the extra-Alpine ranges the first assaults and ascents were made by people who had nothing to do with the Alpine Club. But in a number of them the British were there first—often with Swiss or other Alpine guides, to whom a good share of the credit must be given. And by degrees more and more of our members have climbed in these groups of mountains; the list of our A.C. lectures in recent years makes one almost doubt whether we should still be even *called* the Alpine Club. Only on rare occasions do we seem to come home to the Alps in this room. But we *are* called the Alpine Club, and most of us consider it an honour to belong to it. I hope membership of it will never cease to be the ambition of all young mountaineers, as it used to be mine fifty years ago.

Those who framed our constitution wisely added as the objects of the Club the 'promotion of good fellowship among mountaineers, of mountain climbing and mountain exploration *throughout the world*, and of better knowledge of the mountains through literature, science, and art'. A hundred years ago our founders were already envisaging that the Alpine Club should be a centre of world-wide mountaineering, and such it has turned out to be. When last year I was privileged to attend the centenary functions of the Italian and Swiss Alpine Clubs I was proudly and gratefully conscious of the way in which throughout the proceedings our Club was tacitly and overtly acknowledged as the leader and pioneer of all the mountaineering clubs. This position of ours gives us a measure

of responsibility for doing what we can to keep up the British standard of climbing throughout the world. In this we are helped by the B.M.C. and the Mount Everest Foundation, in both of which we have a share. And those of us who are qualified to do so must always be ready to give advice and help to young and enterprising climbers who wish to climb further afield or to prepare themselves for doing so.

'Better knowledge of the mountains through literature and science and art.' Of making of many mountaineering books there is no end. I hope those written by our members will never be such that the study of them is a 'weariness to the flesh'. It is hard to be enthralling without ever laying it on too thick; but in some of the writings of our past members we have an excellent example. The death of Wilfrid Noyce has robbed mountaineering of one of our finest writers. There is no need to plead for science nowadays. So many young people are being trained in accuracy and thoroughness as well as in enthusiasm for truth. And art? This year we are certainly doing something about that. Many of our pictures are being sold, and we hope they will bring to their buyers 'better knowledge of the mountains' as they certainly brought a nostalgic reminder of them to the earlier members of the Club. Many of them are far too big for the Club's wall-space. How they will look in a small modern house or flat I don't know. I advise their purchasers to hang them on the wall by the staircase, so that while climbing the stairs, ice-axe in hand, they can recall their past victories or plan new conquests, eyes on their painted peak, hands perhaps on the rope they have rigged up on the banisters.

But, to be more serious, what of the future of our Club? These are the days of a multiplicity of small local climbing clubs; the climber of mountains outside this country, whether in the Alps or elsewhere, should be in his local club, *plus* the Alpine Club. That should be encouraged to be the normal thing, as it used to be when so many of us joined it. We do not want to raise the subscription, for we want to keep nobody out who is qualified to join. But we do want a lot more members especially from the younger generation of mountaineers, the ones who are really doing the stuff that counts. Finally, we must remember that the A.C. is YOU and ME. *I* must see what *I* can do to introduce others to the finest sport in the world, leading to the finest club in the world.