C E Montague – Mountaineer and Writer

SCOTT RUSSELL

In the early 1930s Montague's *In Hanging Garden Gully*[1] was almost prescribed reading for us fledgling mountaineers. It is probably the best-known and the most enjoyable of his mountain stories. Writing in the first person, he describes meeting at Ogwen a botanist who had an injured knee which could not bend, no mountaineering skill and a passion to see the plant Lloydia in its native habitat. With a borrowed rope they set off for Hanging Garden Gully. The botanist was not a restful companion; catching sight of plants, he scrambled across almost holdless ground to admire them. But he eventually arrived safely at the top. Then, seeing a splendid patch of Lloydia a few yards away, he rushed joyously to admire it. He was still roped up, the rope tightened, he fell over and was fielded rolling down the slope.

Montague told the story so vividly that, at first, I thought that he had described a real event. But some years later I met a retired civil servant whose total lack of imagination or sense of humour made him seem a reliable witness. He told me that he had no interest in plants and, having a stiff leg, had previously made only one climb – being hoisted up and down Mont Blanc by two guides. By chance, at Ogwen, he met Montague who agreed to take him up Hanging Garden Gully. Montague's enthusiasm had amused him and he recalled, laughingly, how when he reached the top his leader had given a shout of pleasure and rushed to admire a carpet of Lloydia in full flower. Forgetting that he was still tied to the rope which tethered him, he fell over. Perhaps this is one reason why Montague never wrote 'straight' accounts of his climbs, wishing to keep to himself the incidents which inspired his stories. Beyond this, his modesty may have made him think that no one would be interested in his own doings. Unfortunately for us, he never contributed to the *Alpine Journal.*

Charles Edward Montague was born in Ealing on New Year's Day 1867; both his parents were Irish. His father had been a Roman Catholic priest but doctrinal doubts, including (it seems) opposition to celibacy, led him to renounce his calling. CEM was taught at home by his father until he was 12 years old and then went to the City of London School. At 18 he became an exhibitioner at Balliol; he narrowly failed to get a First in Greats. He played rugby, rowed for his college and enjoyed squash, tennis and swimming. One incident in Oxford, to which he never referred in later life, was the rescue of a drowning man in the Isis for which the Royal Humane Society gave him its

Bronze Medal. Politics attracted him and he became a rather left-wing liberal. He retained his interests in strenuous open-air activity and in politics throughout his life. An Oxford friend, R R Marett, later Rector of Exeter College, wrote thus of him:

> He was the best-tempered fellow in the world and always full of fun. Cheerful, sympathetic, humane, with a pretty wit and a tireless body, he was the friend and companion that it was the dream of one's youth to find in Oxford (quoted by Elton[2]).

CEM's ambition was to be a journalist and, in 1890, C P Scott gave him a post on the *Manchester Guardian*. In time he became the paper's chief leader-writer and acted as Scott's deputy in his absences. Apart from the period of the First World War, CEM remained with the *Guardian* until he retired in 1925. Elton[2] described his career in journalism.

CEM was anything but a militarist. He had been critical of British policy in the Boer War but in 1914 his attitude was very different. He wrote: 'Europe must either smash German Junkerdom or be smashed by it.' Even though he was a married man – he had married C P Scott's daughter – with seven children, he was determined to join up, dyeing his greying hair in a not very successful attempt to conceal his age. Eventually he became a private in the 24th (Sportsmen's) Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. The early part of his army life delighted him. In 1917 he wrote nostalgically in his diary:

> That old time seems like one's youth; it was merry and friendly and full of the vague thrill of greater experiences lying ahead. Most of us privates had gone back, as by a miracle, to the irresponsibility of childhood . . . we got up like children by order and, when the day's work was done, it was all rest and play. I remember, in May and June 1915, the half-hour before lights-out was blown on the bugle, the thirty men going to bed laughing, chaffing and singing together and telling stories and there were nightingales singing in the trees outside. It's all gone as childhood does.

This simple freedom was short-lived. Soon, promoted sergeant, he was injured in an accident while demonstrating the use of grenades. He blamed himself but did not receive the reprimand he expected. After a month in hospital he contrived to avoid a period of sick-leave so that he could go to France with his battalion. His injuries, not yet fully healed, caused trouble and with difficulty he persuaded a medical officer – who called him a fool – that he was fit to go to the trenches. Within two months he caught trench-fever and, when recovered, the doctors marked him 'permanent base'. The prospect of spending the rest of the war, safely, as a provo-sergeant was anathema to him and he managed to be transferred to the Intelligence Corps in which he was commissioned, becoming eventually a captain. In France he grasped every opportunity to be in the front-line, thus giving local colour to press releases which he wrote. Soon he had more important duties – censoring journalists'

dispatches and leading 'distinguished visitors' to the front – these included senior officers, politicians, newspaper proprietors and writers. One of CEM's charges, Bernard Shaw, wrote thus:

> Finding him [CEM] just the sort of man I like and get on with I was glad to learn that he was to be my bear-leader . . . The standard joke about Montague was his craze for being under fire, and his tendency to lead distinguished visitors, who did not necessarily share this taste (rare at the front), into warm corners. Like most standing jokes it was inaccurate but had something in it. War is fascinating even to those who, like Montague, have no illusions about it, and are not imposed on by its boasting, its bugaboo, its desperate attempts to make up for the shortage of capable officers by sticking tabs and brass hats on duffers . . . its holocaust of common men for nothing . . . its vermin and dirt and butchery and terror and foul-mouthed boredom . . . neither of us ever asked the other 'And what the devil are *you* doing in this galley?' . . . We had come to the theatre to see the play, not to enjoy the intervals between the acts, like fashionable people at the opera (quoted by Elton[2]).

CEM's rather free interpretation of the instruction that he should guide his charges 'within the limits of safety' became well known; Field Marshal Haig commented on it, when CEM called on him to deliver a dispatch.[2]

He was sometimes irked by what he regarded as his sheltered life on the staff, and made unsuccessful attempts to be returned, as a sergeant, to his battalion. In 1918 he wrote in his diary:

> Can all the daring of soldiers and men rescue the staff from the judgement they call down by their littleness, their spites and jealousies, their decoration hunting and their past idleness . . . Because I am 50 I must live among the *embusqué* (shirkers) and not with the friends I came to love and honour since I came to know the depth of their courage and patience in the trenches. It is cheap to murmur against this. It is like trying to combine my inglorious safety with a little aspiration after self sacrifice. But I do mean it.

At the end of the war CEM received a Military MBE as well as two mentions in dispatches. He was a little entertained to be made a Knight of the Order of the Crown of Romania (with swords) because he bear-led a Romanian General.

In 1922 he wrote of the war, largely from the viewpoint of other ranks, in his aptly titled *Disenchantment*.[3] Several years later he pilloried bellicose newspaper owners, who had irritated him during the war, in a novel, *Right off the Map*.[4] It contains a description of men making their way through very steep country, in nearly total darkness, which may awake memories for many mountaineers.

It seems that CEM's interest in mountains did not develop until after he

went to Manchester, but it soon grew rapidly. The Lake District, North Wales and, still more, the Pennines – to him the backbone of England – were close at hand. Regrettably, he left no detailed record of what he did, but from passing comments in his writings it is clear that he came to know these regions well and that his visits to the hills were strenuous. He developed a keen interest in topography and maps, writing:

> Unless you are a mountaineer, an engineer or a surveyor, the odds are that the great illumination will escape you, all your life; you may return to the grave without having ever known what it is like when the contour lines sing together like the biblical stars.[5]

Even a bicycle ride from Manchester to London was an exciting experience, and so was a walk on the top of the Pennines; your footsteps on the boggy moss could influence the drainage of water to east or west.

CEM first visited the Alps in 1891, starting in Chamonix, the Aiguille du Moine being his initial climb. In seven seasons up to 1906 he made 29 ascents, including some Chamonix Aiguilles, Mont Blanc, Monte Rosa, traverses of the Matterhorn and Zinalrothorn, the Rimpfischhorn, the Obergabelhorn, the Eiger, the Schalijoch and other passes. He was then elected to the Alpine Club and later served on its committee. He made six subsequent visits to the Alps and, except for the war years, it was rare for him to not be in either the Alps or the British hills at least once each year. All his alpine climbs were by standard routes. In his first seasons he had employed guides but later he dispensed with them, his wife being a frequent companion. We know nothing of his other companions in the Alps, but Geoffrey Winthrop Young and Albert Hopkinson enjoyed his company.

Among British rock-climbers Siegfried Herford was his closest friend. They had met apparently when Herford was a schoolboy, 24 years younger than CEM. It seems that Herford's father, a professor in Manchester, had brought them together. Herford's climbing standard came to greatly exceed that of CEM but they remained close friends and, when war came, Herford followed him into the same company of the Royal Fusiliers and was killed in action. CEM presented to a chapel in Manchester a stained-glass memorial window which showed Herford climbing; it is now in the Outward Bound Centre in Eskdale. CEM also wrote a tribute to Herford for a Memorial Book arranged by the Fell and Rock Climbing Club. Herford comes through as a splendid climber and companion.

CEM's climbing stories give the impression of vivid authenticity, equally in the approach to a mountain and on the climb itself. His enthusiasm is infectious and the atmosphere he creates is as realistic as that which A E W Mason achieved in his account of an ascent of the Brenva ridge on Mont Blanc.[6] And Montague has a pleasant sense of humour, for example:

> The Swiss are inspired hotel-keepers. Some centuries since, when a stranger strayed into their valleys, their simple forefathers would kill him and share out the little money he might have about him.

> Now they know better. They keep him alive writing cheques. He has risen in economic value from the status of a hare or a wild pigeon to that of a milch cow or, at lowest, a good laying hen.[7]

Montague's most memorable climbing stories are *In Hanging Garden Gully*,[1] the ascent of the 'Dent Rouge' in *The Morning's War*[8] and *Action* which gives the title to the last volume of stories which he wrote.[9] They contrast much in mood. *Hanging Garden Gully* is pure pleasure and fun. The 'Dent Rouge' climb is based on an ascent of the NE ridge of Mont Collon which he had made. He describes a daunting expedition in very poor snow conditions. The author may have added to the height of the gendarmes but none the less gives an authentic impression of a severe expedition when the climber's only aids were an ice axe, nailed boots and a hemp rope.

Action is about an elderly climber whom Montague called Bell. He had just had a mild stroke. His wife was dead and his children had drifted away; the prospect of becoming immobile terrified him and he decided to make an end by attempting an ice climb, which he knew was beyond his powers but which he would make every effort to achieve. He chose the steepest slope on the Zinal side of the Schalijoch. When he felt about to collapse an ice axe shot past him and he heard a cry for help. This galvanized him into action: he shouted that he was coming and chipped steps up the ice bulge which rose before him. A woman was dangling, helpless, on a rope held by her husband from above. Bell held her while the husband cut a secure anchorage to bring them up. The wife fell asleep soon after they reached a hut. Her husband was a Harley Street specialist and he and Bell settled down to talk over the day's events. Unguardedly, Bell gave himself away by saying that there was no route on the face on which they had met. He confessed what he had planned to do and admitted that, when in action, the consequences of his stroke had not worried him. Their conversation ended with Bell saying that he was 'sticking on'. An almost melodramatic story, but it lived when I first read it. Montague died a few months after the story was published. Had he been pondering, at least part of him, how he would like to act if he knew that years of immobility would lie ahead? This seems perhaps more likely as Montague and his creation Bell had several characteristics in common.

The *In Memoriam* notice on Montague in this journal[10] suggested that with Leslie Stephen he was among the Club's eminent writers. You must read Montague to decide if you agree.

It is a pleasure to express my thanks for the help I have received from Montague's daughter, Mrs Rose Elton, and her niece Mrs Susan Adams; they answered many questions and permitted me to read and quote from Montague's war diary. I am grateful also to the archivists of the Alpine and Fell and Rock Climbing Clubs and to Outward Bound, Eskdale.

REFERENCES

1 C E Montague, 'In Hanging Garden Gully', in *Fiery Particles*. Chatto and Windus, 1923.

2 O Elton, *C E Montague, A Memoir*. Chatto and Windus, 1929.
3 C E Montague, *Disenchantment*. Chatto and Windus, 1922.
4 C E Montague, *Right off the Map*. Chatto and Windus, 1927.
5 C E Montague, 'When the Map is in Tune', in *The Right Place*. Chatto and Windus, 1924.
6 A E W Mason, *Running Water*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1907.
7 C E Montague, 'Up to the Alps', in *The Right Place*, Chatto and Windus, 1924.
8 C E Montague, *The Morning's War*. Methuen, 1913.
9 C E Montague, *Action*. Chatto and Windus, 1928.
10 *AJ* 40, 369–370, 1928.