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CENTRISTS AND EXCENTRISTS.

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(The gist\* of a Paper read before the Alpine Club,  
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'At which open country of low undulation, far into blue,—gazing as at one of our own distances from Malvern of Worcestershire, or Dorking of Kent,—suddenly—behold—beyond,

'There was no thought in any of us for a moment of their being clouds. They were clear as crystal, sharp on the pure horizon sky, and already tinged with rose by the sinking sun. Infinitely beyond all that we had ever thought or dreamed,—the seen walls of lost Eden would not have been more beautiful to us; not more awful, round heaven, the walls of sacred Death.

'It is not possible to imagine, in any time of the world, a more blessed entrance into life, for a child of such a temperament as mine.'—RUSKIN'S *Præterita*.

I PROPOSE, on this occasion, to call the attention of members of the Alpine Club to 'their noble selves.' Surely a most interesting subject for contemplation!

In the first instance, we are all mountaineers—that is to say, men who love climbing mountains. But men may find pleasure in one and the same occupation for different reasons. All of us do not like climbing in the same way or for the same cause. The Alps are a centre of attraction to men of various caste, and character of mind and body. To this fact the prosperity of the Alpine Club and its pleasurable-ness as a point of union are largely due.

If mountaineers are to be divided into categories, the criterion must be the question, What do they climb for?

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\* The MS. of this paper was in large part destroyed; the author has, therefore, rewritten its substance in rather a different form.

In so far as a man can answer this question, he can determine for himself the category to which he belongs. Some men belong plainly to one group, some are not so easily classified, and some cannot be classified at all.

It is impossible, and would not be worth while if possible it were, to enumerate all the pleasures of mountaineering, by their several enjoyment of which mountaineers must be grouped. A few selected examples will suffice for present needs.

First in order and most rudimentary is the pleasure of looking from a high place over a larger area than you can survey from below. This is one of man's most rudimentary delights. The infant loves to be held aloft in its parent's arms; the schoolboy delights to get to the top of everything he can scramble to; grown people will pay money to be allowed to mount to the galleries of monuments. The desire is sufficiently widespread to make it commercially exploitable by Eiffel towers and the like. It probably results from a deep-seated instinct. Its root may consist in the sense of freedom derived from seeing over obstacles which usually shut one in. This would be especially true in hilly countries. A dweller in the plains soon comes to feel imprisoned in a deep valley. Hence mountain-climbers are usually men whose homes are not among very high mountain ranges.

A child or a dull person may love to get to a high point and see far afield without knowing or caring to know why; but a man will have a reasonable delight in anything he does. The reasonable delight in panoramic views may be of two broadly different kinds, to wit, scientific or artistic—the delight of acquiring knowledge or perceiving beauty. Of the latter delight it is not needful to say much. The capacity for appreciating beauty is very unequally developed amongst men of our day. Some almost lack it; in others, it is present in extraordinary force. It is a capacity capable of being fostered into strength wherever the germs of it exist, but the manner and surroundings of modern life tend rather to destroy than to foster it. When once a man is blind to beauty it is useless talking to him about it.

The scientific spirit, though not common, is nowadays much more common than the artistic, besides being more easily conveyed from man to man. It finds pleasure in panoramic views, in observing the geographical relations of mountains, valleys, and lakes, the position of glaciers, the forms and structure of ranges, the direction of water-sheds,

and, we may broadly say, in all the facts of form which make mountains and ranges individual. The geographer on a mountain-top melts into the geologist, and the geologist into the geographer. Both are appealed to by every detail of a wide-extending vista; both experience a thrill of delight in the acquirement of knowledge which a panoramic view enables them to attain.

But it is not merely upon summits that these two spirits of science and art are awakened and stimulated. The stimulus is extended to them during every hour of a climbing day, from the moment when the mountaineer emerges into the starlit night, amidst pallid glaciers and the infinite silences of the deserted world, till that when he lays down his tired limbs by the side of the rippling meadow fountain, and looks back at the rosy glories that deck the summit of the peak still sealed with the impress of his conquering foot.

Corresponding, then, to these two kinds of pleasure among mountains, we have two types of mountaineers. I will call them the scientific and the artistic. Without delaying over them, I shall now introduce a third type to your notice, though it is one not to be distinguished from the scientific type by any hard and fast lines; I refer to the inquisitive climber. I take it that mere unscientific inquisitiveness is a large element in the attraction that draws most men to venture their first experiment in the climbing of snow mountains. They do not desire to make any original observations or to enlarge even the meanest and most special area of knowledge. They simply wish to know what it is like to stand upon the eternal snows, to scramble up arêtes of rock, to thread the labyrinth of crevasses, or to mount the glazed counterscarp of nature's fortresses. The desire to see round corners, to discover what is beyond and behind, not for any scientific reason, or to any rational end, but merely for the sake of satisfying curiosity and 'to be able to say'—(as though anyone else ever counterpartly 'cared to hear')—this is the force which, if I mistake not, recruits the bulk of our members. Inquisitiveness is a preliminary stage for most; some remain possessed by it for the whole length of their climbing existence. They want to exhaust a district, or a centre, or a particular kind of peak, and work to that end for the mere sake of satisfying some irrational inquisitiveness of disposition, which has never been developed or trained into a more wholesome and productive appetite.

It may safely be assumed that every climber experiences, at the close of a successful expedition, a grateful sensation of pleasure, resulting from the consciousness that he has accomplished somewhat; and I will go further, and admit that the more difficult and dangerous an expedition has been so much the more keen is this pleasure. To overcome a difficulty, or to escape from a danger, is always delightful. The best Alpine climber may be unsuccessful owing to changes of weather and a hundred other uncertainties. In this element of uncertainty there resides a real charm. If the expedition is long and difficult the charm, depending on the uncertainty, is greater. Moreover, when the difficulties of an ascent are considerable, and a party of men have as it were to measure their powers of attack against a mountain's passive or active resistance, a successful issue is a keen satisfaction to everyone concerned. This satisfaction will be greater on new expeditions than old ones, and to unguided than to guided climbers. A new expedition of extreme difficulty, which has been attempted without success by strong parties, and which is ultimately accomplished successfully by a party of climbers without guides (I am, of course, thinking of the fine ascent of the *Pic sans Nom*), will linger in the memory of the victors as a most charming and delightful experience. The victory over difficulty and danger is the chief element in this pleasure. It is so delightful that for some men it becomes the main element in their Alpine satisfaction. I apply the designation 'Alpine gymnast' to a man for whom the overcoming of physical obstacles by means of muscular exertion and skill is the chief pleasure of mountaineering. I do not call him an Alpine climber, because that title was invented and applied before Alpine gymnasts came into being; a new descriptive term must be used for a new type.

At the risk of being wearisome, I must guard myself from any seeming personality that might be imagined to hang about this definition, for, in my own mind, none such exists. A man who plans new expeditions after gathering a full knowledge of a locality, who has the generalship to strike out a new line of route, and the intelligence to understand a mountain, can be no mere gymnast. The gymnast, pure and simple, is incapable of any of these things. He is a mere ideal or imaginary type, whose lineaments I do indeed detect in many of my mountaineering friends, but only as a factor in a larger whole, which I by no means desire to criticise in any hostile sense. There is a danger, to my

thinking, in that the gymnastic and quasi-professional element tends to increase; and that tendency should now be combated. Alpine climbing is no mere gymnastic exercise like rowing, but a large and comprehensive sport, wherein the whole nature of man can find stimulus and play. It is not an exercise for the muscles and the nerves only, but for the reason and imagination as well.

There are other Alpine pleasures which give rise to types of mountaineers. There is the pleasure of human society and intercourse, which brings men together and makes 'centres' attractive to some, but which in its best and most memorable form only springs into existence upon the mountain side, to be shared by friends united by a single rope. The mere contrast, again, to the plaguey uniformity of modern town existence, 'living in houses and going to offices,' which a mountaineering holiday affords, is a sufficient reason with many men for the cultivation of climbing. Photography, botany, and other special interests may be motives in different individuals; such matters of detail the reader must fill up for himself.

We thus arrive at the conclusion that there are four main tastes which find satisfaction in mountaineering, to wit, the artistic or æsthetic, the scientific, the inquisitive, and the gymnastic, in which last I include the love of adventure and hazard. Now, just as a man is a better and finer creature in proportion as his sympathies and interests are large and numerous, so is mountaineering, or any other sport or occupation, of a high type in proportion as it gives play to the largest number of dignified human tastes, and awakens the largest number of fine human emotions. I propose, therefore, in conclusion, to discuss the question as to what kind of mountaineering is, according to this definition, the best.

I have divided climbers into two broadly sundered groups—centrists and excentrists—and this division has met with general acceptance. Some men, either from domestic and other circumstances, or through 'the large red man's' inherited love of physical comfort, prefer to establish themselves at a modern and readily accessible hotel, whence they may start for their various expeditions, and whither they may daily return. Others prefer to move on from place to place at relatively short intervals. Now, both of these methods have advantages. The centrist may be conceived of as, and sometimes is, a man who wishes to make a careful study of a single district with a view of thereby attaining a better knowledge of mountains as a whole. Such an one

is a centrist merely for the time. The kind of knowledge he seeks being once acquired he will apply it to a larger area, and forthwith wander to that end. The eccentricist may be a superficial person, and his wandering may be merely the sign of a jaded appetite. Such exceptions, however, may be left out of the account.

Broadly speaking, I assert that the man who wanders amongst the Alps (or any other large range or set of ranges) is more easily able to keep his eye alert and his mind fresh for the appreciation of the various forms and kinds of beauty which mountain regions offer, than can a man who makes excursions around a centre. Few parts of the world are richer in beauty than a great mountain area, crowned with snow, draped in ice, buttressed by splintered rock, founded on the broad bosom of the earth, and framed in the emerald glories of verdant meadows and mysterious forests. Great is the educational value of mountains to the æsthetic sense; but he that would experience it must open his mind to all the pleasures of the hills. He must learn in repose as well as in action to know their whims and humours. He must not always be fighting them in their most dangerous strongholds. He must alternate between high and low, difficult and easy, between ice and woodland, meadow and rock, snowfield, valley, and lake. Nothing that the mountains offer must be taboo to him. He must become their brother, and must know and enjoy all their moods. The man who knows only one kind of mountain, only the surroundings of a few centres, does not know even the Alps. Every great district has its peculiarities. An exclusive attention to any one district is, therefore, not advisable. Most minds become dull to the beauty of familiar scenes. The Zermatt valley (between Visp and Zermatt), beautiful though it be, bores those who have passed oftenest along it; and it is well to avoid learning to be bored by beauty.

For the development of the geographic and other scientific tastes in a man, wandering with open eyes is certainly best. Of course, everyone should seek to know some centre well. That I have always asserted. But when once this educational stage has been passed through, it is the wanderer that adds most to his stock of knowledge and best develops his observational faculties. The view from Pollux means more to one who has climbed in the Oberland, Dauphiné, the Graians, the Maritimes, and the North Italian Alps than it can mean to a Zermatt centrist.

The inquisitive man is not an important type. He will often be a wanderer, and over him we need not linger.

There remains only to consider the gymnast pure and simple. For heaven's sake let him go to Zermatt by train and stay there! If the Alps are the playground of Europe, let Zermatt be set aside as its gymnasium. There are several unaccomplished gymnast routes up the Matterhorn (straight up the north face, for instance); there remains more to be done in that neighbourhood by our excellent and muscular friends. Moreover, about Zermatt and Saas dwell the gymnast guides; and there is the best gymnastic atmosphere. We shall soon no doubt hear of a man holding the 'record of the world' for the Matterhorn, and half a dozen betting agents will set up their summer abodes on the sites of the old wooden houses once so picturesque.

I conclude, therefore, that, except for the gymnast and the man who climbs merely for the sake of enjoying dangerous adventure (and who therefore cares only for the most difficult rocks, which nature kindly arranges in the immediate neighbourhood of a few centres), the excentrist's method of visiting mountain ranges is the best. The Alpine wanderer is more likely to profit by his expedition than the centrist, and I maintain that, in the present condition of affairs, wandering deserves to be practised and encouraged by members of the Alpine Club. Individual centrists may fully appreciate and enjoy all the glories of the Alps; I am not speaking of individuals but of the system.

I propose, therefore, that there be formed within the Alpine Club an excentric section—an entirely private and unadvertised affair.\* The members of this section should devote themselves, for a time at any rate, to the study of the Alps as a whole. A small group of wanderers would soon produce a wholesome effect upon the rapidly degenerating type of centrist guides, and their silent influence would presently be felt amongst the large body of mountaineers. Now that the Alps are riddled with passes in all directions, and that almost every peak can be traversed by known routes, the time for the Alpine wanderer has surely come. Let us hope that he will not in his turn harden into another unintelligent type, and come to aim merely at covering the largest possible area of ground in a given time, in order 'to be able to say——'

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\* I am willing to receive communications on this matter from members of the Club. [The Editor begs to point out that members of Mr. Conway's 'excentric section' will be able to render most useful assistance in the preparation of the new edition of Ball's *Guide*, and trusts that they will also communicate with him.]