

A MAY FOX AND MARCH HARES

By CLAUD SCHUSTER

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THAT skilful ruler of the feast, the Honorary Secretary, follows the scriptural precept. At the beginning of our Winter Season he produces his best wine, and afterwards that which is worse. So you have been regaled through the dark months with true tales of Alpine adventure. As Spring advances he has to do the best he can, and when he finds a victim willing to read a paper in May, his heart exults like that of a huntsman in the West Country as he hears hounds own the line of a May fox.

You can easily imagine the feelings of the fox; but he has at least the knowledge that 'them stinking vi'lets' may smother the scent, and that hounds and horses are feeling the effect of their long season. The May reader has his compensations also. If he makes but indifferent sport for his audience, he has a sense of conscious virtue, in that no one else was willing to perform. He is a chartered libertine, free to talk of what amuses him most, to be gay, if he can, to preach, if he finds himself unable to avoid it, to present, if possible with frivolity, that which he thinks sincerely. He may hope for tolerance if he is clumsy. He more than another may demand an effort from his hearers to understand and therefore to forgive.

I propose to take advantage of the privileges which I have claimed. I have read somewhere that he who lectures or preaches should divide his oration into three parts. First, he should set out what he intends to say. Then he should say it. Then he should repeat what it was he intended to say—the whole somewhat after the fashion of a proposition of Euclid. I find it difficult, for reasons which will become apparent later, wholly to follow this receipt. But, abiding by it as well as I can, I will substitute for the first stage a text. I take it from a paper read to this Club by another May fox a year ago. You will find it printed on p. 263 of the 47th volume of the ALPINE JOURNAL. It is: 'people should be left to do as they like so long as in doing so they do not interfere with the comfort of anyone else. When Franz and Toni Schmid climbed the northern face of the Matterhorn they were merely

expressing their own doxy. Why not let them? They did no harm to anybody else.'

The meaning of these observations is not wholly clear. There is no law against such adventures. There is no law against such undertakings on the same mountain as are described on pp. 339-44 of the same volume,¹ or such affairs as the attempt on the Eiger, also in the same volume on pp. 378-9. In the highly diverting but somewhat scandalous tale of the Wazir Nureddin, Hassan, when condemned to crucifixion for having failed to put enough pepper in the pomegranate conserve, observes to his captor, 'If you were not the supreme ass of all time you would not treat me so for the matter of a little pepper'; to which the Wazir of Egypt replies, 'I see no other way of ensuring that you do not do it again.' The sanctions in the case which we are considering against putting too much pepper into the adventure are those imposed by Nature. And no one proposes to apply force to restrain these very brave young men from such expeditions. But the question remains whether the public opinion of the Alpine world, and particularly the public opinion of British mountaineers, should approve them, or disapprove, or stand neutral, so that indeed there should be, so far as we are concerned, no public opinion on the matter.

It is by no means an easy question to answer. But before discussing it at length I should like to clear away one or two preliminaries. It is obvious that Mr. Poole's easy solution will not do. 'They did no harm to anybody else.' But, potentially, they did great harm to a great number of people. We are not theologians nor divines, and we need not concern ourselves here with the duty, if there be any, and whatever it may be, owed by any man to any being other than humanity. But 'no man liveth unto himself, and no man dieth unto himself.' It is difficult to believe that strong young men, with the brains to conceive such expeditions, and the courage and skill to carry them into effect, do not, when they fail, bring infinite misery to those whom they leave behind. Consider further the gloom engendered in a mountain valley by an Alpine accident. Consider the desperate risks entailed upon the rescue parties. Consider the false ideals, the false heroics, held up for the imitation of others. You must necessarily reach the conclusion that to say 'he is doing as he likes' will not do. In the first place, it smacks too much of Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd's reasoning: 'If a man can't forge his own will, whose will can he forge?' To which, as you remember, Sir Roderick replies, 'These arguments sound very well, but I

¹ 'The Disaster on the Matterhorn of August, 1934.'

can't help thinking that, if they were reduced to syllogistic form, they wouldn't hold water. . . . We are foggy, but we don't permit our fogginess to be presumed upon.'

Then, 'Unting,' said Mr. Jorrocks, 'is a thing wot admits of no diversity of opinion.' But mountaineering, considered ethically, is less simple. The most distinguished of His Majesty's Inspectors of Schools once approached nearer to the problem. 'Our prevalent notion is,' he wrote, 'that it is a most happy and important thing for a man merely to do as he likes. On what he is to do when he is thus free to do as he likes, we do not lay so much stress.' He thought that we could cure this state of things by what he called 'sweetness and light,' and so arriving at, or 'coming as near as we can to, the firm intelligible law of things.' But, as, unhappily, even when I was very young I never understood exactly what Mr. Matthew Arnold was driving at, I cannot offer him with confidence as a guide in this matter, except to this extent, that in mountaineering, as in other human activities, pure antinomianism fails, and that it will behove us, if we can, to evolve and hold fast some rule of faith.

But here again we must be on our guard against misunderstanding. Mechanical and rigid rules are useless. The mechanism of the sport changes continually and must continue to change. The old mountaineers do not seem to have been shocked as the ice axe in its modern form evolved from the hatchet and alpenstock, nor when the use of the rope was perfected and the manufacture of the rope was improved. I have heard Puritans complain of the excellence of the Swiss map and the multiplicity of *Climbers' Guides*. But these austere beings move my admiration rather than my applause. I have myself shed a tear at the construction of the railway to the Gorner Grat, and used it as soon as possible to reach the base of the Riffelhorn. I have cursed the hole in the hill which leads to the Jungfrauoch, and found it invaluable on the one hand to descend from the Jungfrau and on the other to reach the start to Concordia on skis. These are to be treated as the accidental circumstances of the sport. The spirit remains, by which we can still receive the promise 'I will give you the Morning Star.' If we can abide in that light, we shall have no pedantry about the use of crampons. We shall know for ourselves what to think of the fixed piton and the *Karabiner*.

And not only do the mechanical aids develop, but the standard of achievement rises. I do not believe that the giants of forty and fifty years ago could have accomplished such feats as that of the last Everest Expedition.² Physically and intellectually they

² 1933.

were capable of becoming capable. But their time was not yet come. The mere technical skill and the self-reliance gained on our own hills, though they cannot supply all that can be learnt under good guides, and though they sometimes lead to over-confidence and neglect of elementary cautions, develop other qualities, and, as they may be acquired in shorter holidays and with less expense, must potentially increase the supply of competent mountaineers and push the standard higher still. There are other factors. No doubt some mountains are easier the more they are climbed. Beyond that, the knowledge that a place is possible makes men not only eager but able, as in the case of the prisoner who, having been, as he supposed, locked up for fifty years, one day opened the prison door and walked out. But when every allowance is made, and however seldom there may arise among us—to name only the honoured dead—a Whymper, a Mummery or a Charles Pilkington—I do not doubt that there exist now more men fit to lead in safety over La Meije than at any previous time.

It follows that no body of doctrine forbidding, say, guideless climbing, or setting a fixed limit on human endurance, ought to prevail or can endure.

Why then, it may be said, bother about the thing? Let every man do as he likes. He will soon find his own level, and if he falls off, will trouble us no more. But it is for these very reasons that a sound rule of faith is necessary—a rule, be it observed, of faith, and not primarily of conduct. It will not consist of a number of maxims, forming together a code of the things which the mountaineer must do and must avoid. But it must embody the traditions of those who have gone before, modified to meet the altered times, so that a man in his mountaineering life will not so much refer a matter to some categorical series of affirmations as feel instinctively an impulse to do right and an aversion from doing wrong. For him there will be no danger in doing what he likes, for, the false motive being excluded, the right action will follow, not as a hit-or-miss chance between two whimsies, but of inevitable necessity. But to formulate such a rule is a task of stupendous difficulty.

If there be any duty in the matter it rests on us. We are banded together in the oldest existing association of mountaineers. We, by precept and example, encourage men and women to seek their pleasure in the hills. Whether we like it or no, this Club has a natural primacy. The tributes paid to it by speakers of younger institutions, when they extend their hospitality to us, may flow rather from the excellence of their manners, their wines

and their digestive apparatus, than from the warmth of their convictions. But this is not the whole truth. Other Clubs look to the Alpine Club as the repository of an old tradition and the guardian of the creed of a mountaineer.

There is now among certain schools of mountaineering, particularly in certain parts of Central Europe, a spirit, an impulse, an attitude—I cannot find the word exactly to express the conception—perhaps I should say a state of mind, which would have seemed strange to the pioneers. It is said that there is in Germany at the present time a great scarcity of butter and bacon. It may seem strange to associate an absence of animal fats with a state of mind. But it is not wholly fanciful to do so. Long-continued privation, long-continued thwarting of the natural impulse to joy and hope and achievement produce ferments in the mind. A man feels that he must break out somehow and somewhere, indeed that he must break something, even if it be himself. Such states of mind are dangerous in international affairs. They are also dangerous to the soul. Hence come desperate efforts for emotional excitement, for that type of expression of self which can only take shape in violent strife, and so in the expression of oneself not only to oneself, but to the world, as stronger or better or more heroic than another, and again to oneself as heroic, and as seeking through peril another vision. Take two sentences quoted in Mr. Irving's book. 'We lay and waited, as if for a mysterious revelation that never came'; and again, 'The violence of our desires drew a veil across our eyes.' And hence come the ideas, on which the Editor of *Sport* (quoted in the November JOURNAL³) commented, of the man who 'under the influence of his bodily and spiritual might abandons the laws of safety for the urge to heroism.' At the risk of being tedious, I lay stress on the word 'spiritual,' justly used by the Editor of *Sport*, for there lies the disease, and, if there were a remedy, if there be a prophylactic, it must have regard to spiritual things.

But, having made the diagnosis of the disease, the physician is only at the beginning of his work. What is the cure?

It is useless to meet such phenomena by sheer condemnation. We must in the first place be honest with ourselves. The pioneers took a high tone in the matter. Read the early numbers of the ALPINE JOURNAL, and particularly the papers on Alpine accidents written by C. E. Mathews, in his time the very embodiment of the spirit of the Alpine Club and one of the truest lovers of the mountains. All is simple and easy with him. 'This is the way. Walk ye in it.' Yet that great and steadfast man must often have disregarded his own precepts. I do not know how often he

³ *Loc. cit.*, 47. 379.

descended Mont Blanc on the French side. Every time he did so he affronted not only the peril of the avalanches, which fall on to the long gully below the Petit Plateau, but the stones which come whizzing from the Aiguille du Midi on to the path by the Pierre à l'Echelle. And which of us has a greater right than he to be complacent? Everyone has, in his time, wantonly encountered danger and found in it a sense of fear, horrible in previous contemplation, but pleasurable in retrospect. Let us freely admit that mountaineering involves an element of risk, and that each of us has on occasion incurred an added risk, as the Court of Appeal would say, has taken a chance, has acted, in fact, as the average man with ordinary appetite and ordinary will power naturally acts, when his blood is up and he has before him the object of his long-sought desire.

Then again many of us are old. The presumption that we are therefore unfit to hold or to express an opinion is not irrebuttable. Still, as one looks along the top of the table at the Alpine Club dinner, one cannot help saying to oneself, 'Some of us are out of breath, and all of us are fat.' (Let me hasten to add that this observation does not apply to the President, who is, *ex officio*, and in his own right, perennially young and slim, or to those members, such as Dr. Wilson, Sir William Ellis and Mr. Amery, whose exploits yearly belie the entries in the Registrar-General's books.) We others are foxes (May or otherwise) who have lost our tails. We shall not be heard if we merely appeal to our own pasts, or to the pasts of those mighty men from whom we drew our inspiration. The young still enjoy in performance and in expectation what to us are memories.

'They mount, how short a voyage brings
The wanderers back to their delight.
Chains tie us down by land and sea.'

Furthermore, and this perhaps is the root of the matter, a taste for adventure, a certain recklessness, even a certain swagger, are in themselves engaging. They are more than that. They are the spice of life, and not least of mountaineering life. And they do not lose their savour because into them there enters emulation and ambition. We know the copy-book maxims on the subject. 'By that sin fell the angels.' But he who wrote that aphorism, if it was indeed the master who wrote it, wrote also, 'If it be a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul alive.' We look pityingly on the 'poor boy

Who wanted to be Buonaparte
And have the Tuilleries for toy.'

But he who wrote that wrote also :

‘ What I aspired to be,
And am not comforts me.’

Another English poet has faced the issue squarely : ‘ Fame is the spur,’ and again in that mighty speech of the fallen Archangel in the First Book of *Paradise Lost*, which is said to have drawn from Lord Thurlow the exclamation : ‘ A damned fine fellow and I hope he’ll win.’

A character in a work of fiction admonishes the hero as follows : ‘ Mind your own business. Don’t mind other people’s business. Have as many cold baths as you can manage, and as few hot as you can’t avoid. Don’t try for things that are out of your reach. And, so far as the frailty of our mortal nature allows, don’t fall in love with more than two women at once.’ But how dull and torpid is such a philosophy of life. The Hellenes inscribed on their Temple at Delphi the command ‘ Nothing in excess.’ And we are urged to take counsel by them. But they paid mere lip-service to the injunction. The bustling Athenian, hard-set to get a living, and at the same time to spell the riddle of the universe, and to express himself in deathless verse and in the images which he feigned to be those of his gods, was always in excess. He had learnt, as Dr. Glover says somewhere, that there are some things which are worth the price of pain. For great art is born of fierce pangs and long travail. And great achievements, whether of nations or of individuals, come from turmoil and distress and agony. We teach our children to desire ardently ; and if we teach them to pray for the power not to cry, we bid them couple it with the petition for power to strive. And we hold up to them as examples men who at the peril, and sometimes at the cost of their lives, have sought for prizes which were not remunerative in themselves, which did not lie in the obvious path of duty, and which were not obviously beneficial to the race. It is idle to deny that they have pursued these quests with vehemence and with inward passion. Such men among our own confraternity were Whympers and Mummery and Mallory, and, among others of the like temper, Robert Falcon Scott.

‘ Eternal honour is on them having past
Through splendid life and death desirable
To the clear seat and remote throne of souls.’

Is ambition too ugly a word to apply to part at least of the motive which drove them on ? There were, of course, other motives—the delightful exercise, the scenes of beauty and splendour in which they moved, the use of skill, dearly acquired and set by

them to tasks ever harder and harder, the inward joy of conquest, the charm and confidence of fellowship; beyond all, perhaps, the almost mystical sense of community with something beyond either vision or experience. But in each of these men there was something more. All of them were probably most unwilling to die. But each preferred death to the relinquishment of the goal on which his heart was set. Each had in him something of the very spirit which, in common with the Editor of *Sport*, we deplore.

What is it then which justifies us in praising these men and honouring their memory, while, in those who died on the Morgenhorn and the Eiger, we, taking note of their courage, find much to blame? Why is it that everyone shouldn't do just what he likes, and, if he likes to exalt himself into a frenzy for 'a revelation that never' comes, kill himself in the process?

The first differentiation is easy to state. These men embarked on their expeditions with every care, and brought to them the deepest knowledge and the greatest skill available at the time. We may be sure that, whatever enthusiasms impelled them, they were cool and calm both in contemplation and in execution. They faced their problems intellectually, and without the disturbance of emotion. Not one of them would have written, nor indeed thought, in the style of which Mr. Irving has collected many examples in his book.

Then next, and now passing to a more general comparison between the mountaineer who is sane and he who is, at least, less sane, I would claim, as an essential possession of the former, a sense of humour. I don't mean the kind of humour roused when poor Bill tumbles into a pool on the dry glacier, or Tom is spread-eagled on a rock unable to get up or down, or facetiousness about the flea and the porter in the style of the Rev. J. F. Hardy. I mean the sense which is struck irresistibly with the incongruity of things, and that particularly in a man's own self, so that, in his most heroic attitude, he is suddenly seized with laughter at his own absurdity, and in his finest period hears the faint tinkle of bathos. A man thus gifted, whatever he may be to others, will never be a hero to himself. Not deceiving himself, he will find it an effort to deceive others. He will supply the drop of lemon to the sweetest cocktail. For him, in a sense never intended by the poet,

'medio de fonte leporum
Surgit amari aliquid.'

This peculiar quality seems to be a national characteristic, whether by racial temperament, or, for we are not all of pure

Aryan descent, by training. It produces rather an Elizabeth than a Philip of Spain, rather a Marlborough than a Louis Quatorze, rather a Wellington than a Napoleon. It is the most admirable corrective against an excess of saccharin in the system. It may be heightened into cynicism, or lowered into accidia—the deadly sin of self-depreciation. Or, taken at its best, it may give that sharp and piercing vision with which, in the moment of action, a man ‘sees what he foresaw.’

There is another national characteristic which may be described by reference to its deficiency. The English—I hardly dare in this connection to use the more embracing name British—have an instinctive dislike of logic. That science, however excellent a training for the mind, is but a poor counsellor in action. When it intrudes where it has no place, it leads to a certain starkness and ruthlessness. ‘A deadly logic,’ says a character in Agatha Christie’s latest novel, ‘is one of the characteristics of acute mania.’ He who surrenders his judgment to its dictation sees too clearly, follows too closely what he supposes to be an ideal, to perceive how much of life lies beyond his calculation, and is at risk of giving all to prove a self-evident proposition.

‘To die for faction is a common evil,
But to be hanged for nonsense is the devil.’

As to ambition and the hope of glory, the idea may be illustrated by an example. Everyone remembers how the mother of Zebedee’s children came ‘desiring a certain thing.’ ‘Grant that my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, the other on the left, in thy Kingdom.’ The petition produced not a direct rebuff, but a question. ‘“Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”’ They say unto him, ‘“We are able.”’ Then came the reply, eloquent for all valiant hearts that, for the prize, will dare the pain. ‘Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give.’

Perhaps, however, I have attached too much importance in this analysis to the motive of ambition. It is the essence of that quality that it should seek some reward. However forlorn a hope may be, it is still a hope. And the martyr to a cause expects to hear the trumpets on the other side if not on this. The difficulty of our problem lies in the fact that these men seek to be disappointed. With them it is a way of escape which leads nowhere; ‘as if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him.’ In truth, if men desire to express themselves when they have nothing to

express and only care to do so loudly, all we can do is to adjure them to express themselves otherwise or to be silent.

This leads to no conclusion. It is intended indeed rather to stimulate questions than to provide answers ; and that is all the worse because it is now time for me to follow my own maxim and to sum up what I had to say. It is :

1. There is a dangerous tendency in modern mountaineering hard to define, but easy to recognize.

2. British mountaineers may with advantage consider it so that they may reach a sound doctrine.

3. Such a doctrine cannot be rigid. It must grow and develop with the times. But it is not enough to say ' Let every man do as he likes.'

4. In thinking of these matters we must remember that none of us is wholly guiltless, and that those who are most guilty have much to plead in mitigation.

A discussion then ensued, after which Sir Claud Schuster summed up as follows :

I must admit that my paper was in some respects impudent. I assumed that those who heard it had read Mr. Irving's book and the passages in the ALPINE JOURNAL which I cited, and that they had meditated upon them. I think from the discussion which has followed that my assumption was correct.

My object was to carry the consideration of these subjects a little further—not indeed to supply an answer to the questions which those writings provoked, but to put us in a slightly better position to address ourselves to the questions. This seemed to me to be all the more necessary at the present time because the public take more and more interest in this kind of thing, and I was anxious, for myself at least, when I came during the summer to read the paper at breakfast and see the progress of the Everest Expedition, that I should be able with greater assurance to answer the questions and to still the doubts of my relations, and particularly of my female relations, which are peculiarly disturbing at the breakfast table.

Now as to the criticisms which have been made. I acknowledge the justice of Mr. Amery's criticism. The thought of the paper, if it has any thought, runs, as he says, now up, now down and now along at a level, and then up and down again. This was what was intended, but, of course, that furnishes no excuse for it. Still, in that respect, it is not unlike a mountaineering expedition.

Then as to Mr. Somervell and Dr. Longstaff. Before them I necessarily incline my head in reverence. One of them is a surgeon

and the other a biologist, and in those capacities they no doubt know secrets which are denied to us. They are also extremely efficient and distinguished mountaineers. Now, Dr. Longstaff laid down two tests by which to try the question whether an expedition was justifiable or no. The first was the competence of the party. The second was the weather. I accept this. Both these tests are necessary tests. I am afraid that I took them for granted. The object of my paper was to suggest that there was another and overriding test, and that was the spirit in which the expedition was undertaken. Dr. Longstaff in effect admitted the necessity for this also, for he once more affirmed the eternal truth that really we climb because we like it. I was endeavouring to suggest that, granted reasonable adequacy for the particular adventure and reasonable care for the weather, any expedition was justifiable if it was undertaken because we liked to undertake it, and no expedition is justifiable, even if the first two tests were fulfilled, when it was undertaken, not because we liked it, but for self-advertisement or for the kind of motive described by Mr. Irving and by the Editor of *Sport*. Yet, I tried to indicate that ambition had entered in the past, and would enter in the future, among the motives, and that it was not so wholly unworthy as to taint the whole adventure.

All that remains for me now is to thank the Club for the extreme tolerance which they have shown towards me.