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THE CONVENTIONS OF MOUNTAINEERING.

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(From a Paper read before the Club on May 30th, 1924.)

This subject, like a certain mountain which I will not name, has been sadly neglected. Even the exhaustive Mr. Winthrop Young would appear to have overlooked it. Take out your copy of *Mountain Craft*; look in the index under the heading *Con . . .*; and you will find that although that encyclopædic work treats of such diverse and recondite topics as *Confidence*, *Confusing effects of weather*, *Continuous going*, *Conjunctivitis*, and *Constipation*, of *Convention* there is never a word.

Possibly the average mountaineer regards himself as very unconventional. And so he is, to the extent that he disregards some of the conventions of ordinary life, such as those governing dress. He will roam cheerfully among the hills garbed in an odd collection of rags that would barely suffice in urban districts to keep him from the clutches of the police. The nailed boot is conventional of course, but that is part of one's equipment, and not of dress *per se*. The distinction is a real one. Consider the entirely different reasons for a cricketer's wearing spiked boots and wearing white boots, and you appreciate it immediately: the one is a sensible precaution which the climber emulates; the other an affectation to the like of which he is superior.

But let it not be supposed that all the climber's customs are just sweetly reasonable. On this very question of footgear you can find as much dogma and sheer prejudice as would

satisfy the most ardent Calvinist. There are men whom the mere smell of a rubber shoe will throw into a frenzy. To listen to them you would imagine that the primeval nailed boot arose out of some Swiss glacier—like Britain from out the azure main—at Heaven's express command. And even the more liberal minded brethren, attempting to infuse a spirit of rationalism into the faith of their fathers, may give the lover of wisdom serious pause. I remember listening to a well-known climber who objected to the ascent of the Eagle's Nest Direct in rubbers on a dry day. 'It does not,' he complained, 'give the rocks a chance.' This is a hard saying, and suggests a grim doctrine; but I think we may find in it the clue to what really lies at the bottom of mountaineering conventions, or at any rate those which are worth discussing. *They are the unwritten rules of the game.* Our Spartan friend was adopting precisely the attitude of those others, who, in their several spheres, object to batsmen defending the wicket with their legs, or golfers using ribbed clubs, or sportsmen shooting at sitting birds; all things which tend to make the job in hand too easy, which fail to give the pitch, the course, the bird, or whatever animate or inanimate opponent it may be, a chance.

Of course it may be urged that mountaineering is not a game. 'A sport, I grant you,' one may say, 'but with the competitive element entirely eliminated.' Do not believe it. The grosser forms of competition may not be tolerated in the best mountaineering circles, but the thing is there. Put your aims at their highest and purest, as they were put for you by Hugh Pope in that greatest of the Oxford mountaineering essays, and have been put again by Mr. Montague in later days, and mountain climbing resolves itself into a contest with nature; a man pitting his own simple strength and nerve and skill against the stubborn opposition of ice or rock. If that were all there would be little more to be said, and each might well be a law unto himself. But man is a social animal and craves the sympathy, if not the admiration, of his fellows. Moreover, if he is successful in the struggle, he may well desire, without being chargeable with vanity, to estimate the measure of his triumph; and how can he do

this so readily or with such comfort as by comparing his own with the performances of other men. I suppose the mere process of hooking and landing a thirty pound salmon towards the close of a lovely day would give a fisherman his fair share of joy absolute. But the return to camp with the laden creel, its weight unfelt; the dramatic discovery by his companions; their delighted shrieks, and the rain of questions; his own assumed nonchalance ineffectually veiling the burning glory within! Is a man a monster because these things, acknowledged or not, count for much in his relish of the sport? If he were the last angler in a world all gone mad and turned to climbing—would it be the same?

One can also imagine, though with more difficulty, that a man who climbs all the Lake mountains in four and twenty hours, or all the Swiss ones in about as many days, derives some pleasure from the actual doing of these things. But can it be denied that much of the savour would be lost if no other human being had ever engaged, or dreamed of engaging, in a comparable enterprise?

And, finally, when the climber returns to his hotel, drunk with the joy of accomplishing a fine course which he has not previously done; and when his friend Simpkins enquires with ill-concealed anxiety if he managed the difficult groove at the third pitch, and he is able to say 'Yes', and finds on cross-examination that Simpkins, the previous day, had been forced to take that easy alternative on the left,—how is the cup of pleasurable recollection sweetened; and how suddenly dashed again from his lips when further talk reveals that through ignorance he has left out the top and hardest pitch altogether.

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In most sports where men engage in contest face to face, the rules are written plain in black and white. It will not do in the actual heat of battle, when tempers are apt to be short, to rely too much on tacit understandings. Those are left for the finer shades of conduct—potting the white, running down the pitch, or talking while your opponent is taking his swing. In mountain climbing the competition is less naked

and direct : we are always playing against bogey, as it were. Still, even if the need for actual legislation be not felt, we must have some sort of standard. We want a rough idea of what bogey really is. Else what is to prevent some unscrupulous fellow from securing our plaudits by leading Walker's Gully, when all the time he has had a rope privily fixed, up which to swarm over the final chockstone ? Emotions are not to be trifled with like that. One cannot run the risk of squandering on such low cunning an admiration properly reserved for valour. It is true that he has not spoiled your own enjoyment of the climb. There is no need for you to copy his methods. You may eschew all such monkey tricks and succeed by the strength of your good right arm. But the ordinary man finds cold comfort in hugging to himself a private consciousness of virtue. And what is to distinguish your own achievement, when reported, from the performance of the shameless trickster, if once such things become common ? To particularise about the purity of your methods would be offensive : you want to be able to say with all due modesty that you have climbed Walker's Gully—and leave it at that. One cannot allow the whole conversational currency to be debased by the actions of such uncompunctious rogues.

It must be confessed that the conventional usages thus evolved assume at times strange forms, and are suggestive of that morality which decrees that one man may steal a horse while another must not look over a hedge. Thus an ice-axe may serve as an anchor where a piton would be taboo. One may not climb up a rope ; but to go down it is quite in the mode. Not a cubic inch of the living rock must be removed to facilitate progress ; but one may lash to the crags a quite substantial boulder, provided only it be made of flesh and blood.

The explanation of these anomalies lies in the fact that the conventions of mountaineering, as of all other arts and crafts, are subject to two opposing forces throughout their evolution. They do not always come in with the object of making climbing harder : in fact, many of them originate from a precisely opposite motive. Men work along accepted lines until there appear to be no more courses that can be conquered. Then

some daring innovator will introduce a new weapon of offence, rope, axe, ice-claw, ski, oxygen-cylinder—what you will. If the new idea has anything in it, it will fight its way against a stubborn resistance of the die-hards to a place in the sun, because it brings within the range of possible conquest whole tracts of territory hitherto held to be impregnable. From then onwards it will be subjected to a dual influence. First, there will be the men who by temperament take a delight in developing the possibilities of a new auxiliary. They will bring all their ingenuity to bear in increasing its utility and expanding its resources to the utmost limits. But there will be others who from the start will wage war against the invader. Theirs is not the mulish opposition of the die-hards, due to mere rigidity of ideas. They probably recognise the animating value of the change: at any rate, they do not propose to abandon the newly-won territory. But every instinct of their being prompts them to try if they cannot dispense with the new ally, and hold their ground by developing to a higher degree the more natural technique of their art. The ultimate issue of the conflict will depend on the intrinsic value of the innovation. It may be good enough to withstand all assaults and gain a permanent place in the body of climbing conventions. It may be no more than a passing stimulus to technical development, and disappear like snow in summer when its work is done. More often it will pass through the ordeal with many changes, shedding its dross and preserving its pure gold, to emerge in the end still recognisable, though sadly battered in the course of the long struggle to maintain its place.

The history of the rope in climbing illustrates many of these vicissitudes. At first it was introduced as a safeguard against falls into crevasses, and appears to have been often removed when once the glacier was crossed. After a time the advantages of the rope on rock became apparent, but it was employed in a tentative and experimental fashion. The first idea seems to have been to use it for climbing up or down at difficult points. Everyone knows of Whymper's arrangement with the grappling hook, which he flung up or hoisted with his alpenstock until it found some point of attachment. This died an early death,

more because of its obvious practical difficulties than on account of any moral objections. The opportunities for using it effectively were so few and far between, and its scope so limited, that it was far easier in the long run to surmount the obstacles by means of an improved technique.

The use of the rope on rocks for purpose of security developed slowly. In the early days of Lakeland climbing, we read of the pioneers smuggling their ropes out of the valleys well concealed from view. Arrived at their climb, they would often hang the rope down from the top and climb untied, with the idea of resorting to its aid only if they felt they could go no further without it, and in the hope that if they came off unawares they would be able to snatch at it and save themselves. Modern critics are apt to point the finger of scorn at these simple-minded precautions of an earlier day. Well, perhaps the delusion they cherished as to the efficacy of that safety rope gave nearly as much moral support as the modern waist-noose can afford; but, in any case, I cannot help regarding as rather fine the obvious reluctance of these old fellows to accept extraneous aid.

Once the first scruples against the use of the rope on rocks were overcome, its potentialities for widening the scope of rock-work soon made themselves apparent. In the first place, it practically lifted the achievement level of a party, as far as the covering of the ground was concerned, from that of the weakest to that of the strongest member. Followers on the rope were encouraged by the security conferred to go over ground they would never have attempted otherwise, thereby gaining familiarity and confidence which would enable them to lead in time. Thus, the general level of skill was raised, with corresponding effects on the bolder spirits. Moreover, the rope was directly instrumental in spurring leaders to greater efforts, for although its actual utility for them was negligible in most cases, they derived from it a stimulating, if deluded, assurance, like that afforded to their predecessors by the pathetic 'safety-rope'. Also, for obvious psychological reasons into which we need not enter, most men will do things in company which they would not attempt alone; and without the rope the best men could not get

the second best to accompany them in the most difficult adventures.

And so the rope established itself as part of the orthodox equipment of mountaineering, and thrived and blossomed into a score of uses all unsuspected by its original sponsors, until it became the trusty prop and stay of the climber as we know it to-day. Affording corporeal support and spiritual consolation at one and the same time, it serves on occasion as improvised hand or foothold, as packthread to tie him to the rocks, and as a means of hauling up or letting down such axes, rucksacks, or human bodies as he is unable or unwilling to convey on his own broad shoulders.

To a superficial glance, the existing stability of the rope-convention would seem unassailable ; but there are signs of counter currents. From time to time may be descried on the horizon slight clouds, no bigger than a man's hand, but yet significant. One of them appeared in 1912 when Herford and Sansom prefixed to several of their accounts of the climbs on Scafell Pinnacle the terse comment ' Best number, one '. An increasing number of experts are showing a liking for that slenderer form of support which climbing slang describes as ' string ', and of which it has been mordantly remarked by one authority that it ' serves to maintain the idea that man is a gregarious animal '. Perhaps it would be too much to expect that the wheel should come full circle, and probably the rope will remain as an adjunct of most difficult mountaineering expeditions for many years to come. But when one considers the tendencies I have cited, and adds to them the recollection that more than thirty years ago a Munich lad not out of his 'teens traversed the Zinal Rothorn single-handed, one cannot but feel that the rope is not destined in the future to hold all of its present sway.

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All progress, says Mr. Shaw (though not in so many words) arises from the challenging of accepted ideas and the upsetting of existing institutions. We have seen how this process operates in the evolution of mountaineering customs, and how it is subject throughout to a dual influence, tending on the

one hand to exploit new artificial aids, and on the other to refine these down to their bare essentials by augmenting the resources of a more natural method. But the pioneers in either direction are the enterprising few, and the rate of progress is largely determined by the attitude of the great and far from silent majority. The majority, of course, is always in favour of the settled thing and opposes to all change an unreasoning obstinacy. Not that arguments are lacking, but the arguments do not give the reasons, which are unknown to those whom they impel and would certainly be repudiated if they were pointed out to them. This is all quite natural, for surely it is of the very essence of convention to be above and beyond reason. *C'est convenu*; it is understood. And if these plaguey, turbulent spirits are to be allowed to play fast and loose with the established canons, what is to become of a man's peace of mind? Readjustments of long-settled methods may be called for. Nay, worse! Awkward problems of conscience may arise, nice points of ethics involving dolorous delvings into first principles, weighings, and balancings, and forming of judgments—all so disturbing to a placid and contented mind. And then the existence of a decent body of tradition is so helpful in other ways. The learning of it makes no great demands on one's bodily or mental powers, beyond the simple perseverance that most of us are able and willing to bring to the task. And, once mastered, it gives one a standing, not so exhilarating maybe, but how much more stable than one based on the capricious and arbitrary foundation of mere skill! What more convenient method, for example, of dealing with presumptuous and irritatingly competent youth than to crush it under the dead weight of authority! You know how ponderous back-benchers of long standing in the House of Commons will strive to abash a brilliant young member on the opposite side by loudly shouting 'Order!' when he gets up with his hat on—or off—whichever may be wrong. So a bare decade ago might elderly Alpine experts have been observed trying to head off the younger school of British cragsmen from extending the limits of empire laid down in the reign of Owen Glynn Jones, by observing with portentous gravity, and an utter disregard



J. F. Burton.

SUNRISE ON THE AIGUILLE VERTE.

of the most patent facts, that these things simply were not done.

One of the most striking features of this prejudiced opposition which the innovator must be ready to encounter is its fine impartiality. Whether the current movement is in the direction of nature or of art matters nothing to those to whom all change is equally abhorrent, and who are prepared to shift their argumentative ground to suit the exigencies of either turn, engagingly unconscious of any inconsistency. If crampons or rubber shoes are in question they must be tabooed, as making things too easy. If it is proposed to dispense with the ice-axe or the rope, once more the ban descends: mountaineering is dangerous enough as it is. They do not stop to ponder the curious fact, so disturbing to less robust minds, that men used crampons long before the ice-axe was perfected, and climbed alone before they climbed in parties; that in climbing, as in religion and all the arts, the unconventional of yesterday is the orthodoxy of to-day, and will probably become the heresy of to-morrow. Whether the tide of change be on the ebb or flow, our mountaineering Canutes are equally adamant, and bid the waves of enterprise stay their impious course. And from time to time, when the heathen wax strong, and isolated pontifical utterances seem to lack authority, they will meet in solemn conclave to declare with pathetically futile unanimity that guideless climbing, or solitary climbing, or any kind of climbing that is not the then accepted kind, but threatens to displace it, is wrong and wicked, and must be put a stop to. 'Against the best traditions of the sport' is the accepted formula—let us be conventional even in our phrases. To some of us this matter of deciding between better and worse among traditions is the most perplexing part of the whole business. How much simpler to arrange to be born with an orthodox mind, and thus be automatically provided with an infallible touchstone. The best traditions, of course, are those one finds to hand.

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In all this confusion and striving, where is an honest man to take his stand, assuming, of course, that his spirit cannot

seek peace and ensue it by following the primrose path of orthodoxy? He may elect to be a Gallio, and stand aside from the struggle, deriving such cynical amusement as he can from the swashing blows of the combatants. To most of us, however, though we can hardly avoid some measure of this attitude, it will seem a coward's part. Yet we cannot fly simply to another extreme: mere iconoclasm is as easy and as barren as mere conformity. Moreover, though we may set forth the issues as conflicts between a few broad, simple principles, the problems that actually arise are confoundingly complex. Climbers, no more than theologians, can be simply divided into vessels of grace and vessels of wrath. A man who is quite sound on the question of rubbers turns out to be absolutely pigheaded in the matter of solitary climbing. And the earnest warrior who is anxious to confound the powers of darkness, and ally himself with the forces of light, finds that in actual practice he is too often called upon to discriminate between provokingly similar degrees of twilight.

A few general principles may perhaps be laid down without undue dogmatism. In the first place, we must be prepared to look our conventions squarely in the face. Without adopting an attitude of permanent hostility and suspicion we should be prepared to call on any one of them at any time to justify its existence. And as an absolutely even balance is not easy to preserve, and an abundance of faith may always be counted upon, a slight leaning towards scepticism may not come amiss. An examination into the genealogy of a convention will often have a tonic effect on one's judgments. We must not be surprised to find that some believed of Norman blood are really the merest parvenus, while others branded as insolent upstarts are in point of fact the scions of some ancient house. And we must be prepared to find of many that, like the vermiform appendix in the human body, they are mere dead survivals from a bygone age that have long outlived their usefulness. In particular, we must avoid an attitude of insularity. It is fatally easy to import a universal significance to forms that are of local origin. Nothing is more common than to hear the British climber deriding his Continental brother for the armoury of pegs and hammers

that he carries about with him. How much saner is the attitude of Mr. Winthrop Young, when he says : ' A practice which is sanctioned by many fine cragsmen who have developed their methods to suit their own type of rock, and not ours, must be respected in their own territory '. If we can convince the climbers of the Eastern Alps, *by actual demonstration on their own ground*, that the same ends can be met by the resources of a superior natural technique, well and good. Until then a modest reticence is surely more becoming.

In this connection, one cannot but touch upon a point of peculiar interest to British mountaineers—namely, the influence upon our sport of its foreign origin. With a few conspicuous exceptions, like polo and lacrosse, most of our pastimes are either native born or sufficiently long naturalised to have been stamped indelibly with the native imprint. But British mountaineering, it must not be forgotten, was born across the seas little more than half a century ago, a fact that has had a profounder effect on its development than is sometimes realised. We owe to the Alpine Club a debt that we shall not readily forget—or readily be allowed to forget. Yet the influence has not been wholly beneficial. Indeed, in many ways, the prestige and power of that great body have acted as a drag on our native climbing, much in the same way as the mighty Aristotle, by the mere weight of his authority and the tremendous veneration in which he was held, lay for centuries like a blight on the independent development of scientific thought in Western Europe.

The early Alpinists were not unnaturally disposed to regard the home hills as mere practice grounds, tolerable enough for the shorter holidays, but at best poor imitations of the real thing. They valued them precisely to the extent that they offered problems comparable to the Alpine problems, with the result that their own peculiar possibilities in the way of rockwork were for a long time imperfectly appreciated. Meanwhile, men who lacked either the means or the inclination for Alpine travel tended to be overborne by the weight of authority, and the natural development of a suitable native method was probably retarded by the hampering conventions of an alien technique. Some of the results were strange. We

find men going out armed with ice-axes to attack snow-free gullies, and using them cheerfully as footholds when they already felt qualms about accepting the shoulder that was surely nearer to nature. Nowadays things have changed. The number of men who have learned their rock-craft at home and used it later to enlarge the possibilities of Alpine climbing is steadily growing. In the give and take between the British and the Swiss training it is fully recognised that the credit is by no means all on one side.

Another effect of this historical accident was to give to British climbing a certain social bias. The mere cost of Alpine travel precluded the many from its enjoyment, and mountaineering at first fell mainly into the hands of those possessed of at least moderate means and leisure. They were men, moreover, who, by the existing conventions of their class, were disposed to accept professional assistance in their sports with a rather poor-spirited complacency. The comedy of the Admirable Crichton has probably had many more performances at Lords and Zermatt than ever it achieved on the boards of a London theatre. The atmosphere of the high hills themselves is not exactly conducive to snobbery; but the spirit which was responsible for separating our cricketers into 'Gentlemen' and 'Players'—surely the most delightfully candid of all classifications—and shepherding them carefully into different and exclusive pens, could not be expected to find any incongruity in such practices as giving the titular honour of a new climb to the man who first led it if he was an English amateur, but to the man who paid him to do it if he happened to be a Swiss peasant.

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But I am getting rather far from my immediate subject, which is a consideration of the right attitude to be adopted towards our traditions. Fortunately for this purpose, we have at the present moment a unique opportunity for the exercise of the critical faculty. We have seen that when we buckle on our armour to champion or assail an apparently fresh invader we are often fighting a battle that has already been fought and won, or lost and long forgotten; and we are

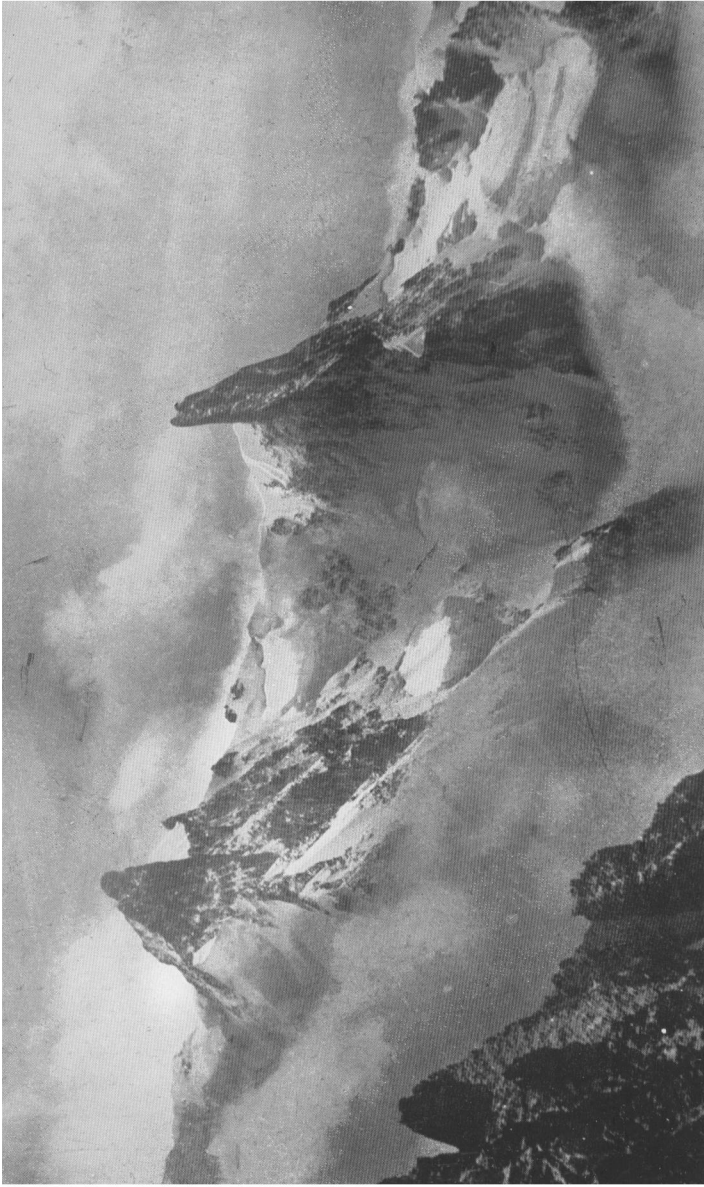
tempted to agree with the preacher, that there is no new thing under the sun. Well, it may be impudent to question the wisdom of Solomon, but I believe that we have to-day the chance of being in at the birth, or possibly the miscarriage, of a really brand-new convention. It is more than four centuries since the valiant Beaupré scaled Mont Aiguille by the aid of 'subtle means and engines', whose nature is teasingly unspecified. Climbers seem to have roped, and unroped, and then tied on again, through countless decades. But it seems beyond all reasonable doubt that it was not until the year 1922 that man hit on the idea of supplementing nature's niggardly supply of air at the high altitudes by the ingenious expedient of carrying his own atmosphere on his back. Here, obviously, we have a movement right in the central line of development, bringing us up sharply against the fundamental issues.

Much has been said on both sides, and I suppose that most of you are familiar with Captain Finch's vigorous assault on those who deprecated the use of oxygen. The gist of his argument is that mountaineers use already so many complex productions of science that to jib at a new one is absurdly inconsistent. I rather think he misses the main point. We can hardly be expected to take the view that the acceptance of certain aids precludes us from rejecting any others that offer themselves. It is highly probable, for instance, that if Everest were suddenly to become an object of prime military importance (in an Anglo-Russian war, say) it would fall within a twelvemonth to the attack of engineering science. After all, we, as mountaineers, are not concerned simply with the problem of reaching the highest summit by any means whatever; but rather of matching against it the resources of our special craft. At the same time, no one in his senses would grudge the climbers oxygen. If they feel they need it, that is a simple and sufficient justification for its use. There can hardly be any complaint that Everest does not get a chance. Should it be possible to climb it without artificial oxygen, so much the better. If not, better climb it with that aid than not at all. For the familiarity thus obtained will rob it of half its terrors, and succeeding climbers will probably in

course of time contrive to manage on their own lung-power. At any rate, if the feat be possible, it is just as likely as not to be hastened by the temporary concession to artifice.

And this, I would suggest, may be taken as a typical example of the broad-minded attitude towards these questions. On one point alone can we afford to be dogmatic. All changes of an indelible nature—fixed ropes, ladders, hawsers, funicular railways, and the like—are rightly to be resisted. The general public, of course, may have a say in these matters, and it is not always easy for the climber to reconcile his duty towards his sport with his duty towards his neighbour. But for the mountaineer *qua* mountaineer the choice is simple. The sufficient objection to all such innovations is that they settle the matter out of hand, leaving no room for further experiment.

This apart, an attitude of liberal conservatism will not be unbecoming. Let us be always a little sceptical alike of the old and the new; but let scepticism be combined with charity. Of course we are not dealing with any of life's major problems, as this somewhat ponderous analysis might suggest. Still, it is well, even in one's sport, to clear the mind of cant. And pleasure may easily become less pleasurable if we slip into a way of investing our traditions with a sort of holy sanction, with its inevitable accompaniment of bigotry and bannings, heresy hunts, interdictions, and such like squalid stupidities. It is up to us to see that the conventions of mountaineering form an intelligent and flexible embodiment of its accumulated experience, and not simply an organised system of blackmail levied by mediocrity upon genius.



Eustace Thomas.

DENT DU GEANT.