

ON REACHING UPWARD

by MAYNARD M. MILLER

LATE IN THE SUMMER OF 1948, four mountaineers attempted to reach the summit of Mount Vancouver, a precipitous, ice-armed peak which rises to an elevation of 15,720 feet on the Alaska-Yukon border. With forethought of certain difficulties to be met, they approached the northwest flank of the mountain to begin the climb of a sinuous ridge which twists upwards for thousands of feet in a series of ice hummocks, rock buttresses, and knife-edges of wind-driven snow. On the third day of the ascent, one of the men, suffering severely from altitude sickness, was forced to remain behind in his sleeping bag at the highest camp. The three advancing men faced such steep and time-consuming portions of the ridge, that by mid-afternoon on the day set for the final summit attack, only the 13,500-foot level had been reached. The lateness of the hour, a penetrating cold wind, and storm clouds moving in ominously from the west made it imperative to retreat.

While descending to the advance camp dug into snow on the six-mile-long ridge, the climbers planned another attempt for two days later after supplies could be relayed by back-packing from below.

That evening, in the bivouac tent, it was discovered that another of the climbers was suffering from severely frost-bitten feet, and the man ill with mountain lassitude had not improved. Then, to make matters worse, a third member of the party complained of a pain in his side, soon diagnosed as a cracked rib suffered in the unexpected nosing-over of a ski-equipped airplane which had brought supplies to the base of the mountain a few days before. No longer was there any choice of action. The mountain, still unconquered, must be abandoned for another year.

The camp on the upper ridge was evacuated the following day, and roped together in pairs the climbers began to work their way slowly down. But there were no lasting regrets. The knowledge that a determined and worthy effort had been made against a most formidable adversary was satisfaction enough. Faced with frustration and defeat in their fight for the great mountain peak, these climbers nevertheless had found something profoundly worth while. While striving together on the ascent, the meaningful thing had been their spirit of motivation rather than their

MAYNARD M. MILLER is a graduate student in geology and glaciology whose accounts of his researches on Alaskan glaciers in *Appalachia* will be remembered by our readers. He is chairman of the American Alpine Club's Safety Committee and in this position has often had occasion to reflect upon the follies of the genus, *homo ascendens*.

hoped-for achievement; it had been not the winning but the trying itself.* Yet each mountaineer wanted to return at another time to pit his skill and energy against that unconquered height.

Why is it that man places himself in such extremely difficult situations, apparently to suffer great miseries, and after it is all over still wants to come back and try again? By closer analysis one must admit that the sense of challenge influences the mountaineer. He is of hardy stock and enjoys the difficulties of a climb. But the fundamental reasons most men climb are usually far more complete and more real and powerful than merely selfish motives. In fact, they are deeply rooted in the very forces which move man in all he does. He finds in the mountains satisfaction of mind, body, and spirit.

True, there are a few persons whose primary motivation to climb is for the thrill, or to be the first to reach the top. These are the climbers who feel rewarded only if the actual summit is attained. This attitude has been known to develop a regrettable spirit of competition in mountaineering, which undermines the more noble inspirations and realizations one may gain on a height. If combined with inexperience, such an outlook can be a dangerous one and may, sooner or later, result in a serious mountain accident.

Then, occasionally we find a technically skilled mountaineer who takes calculated risks for what he feels is personal gain, through an overemphasized sense of pride in his conquest, or (fortunately less often) through a secret though seldom expressed desire for publicity. The boastful conquest of a mountain may also be used to vindicate the "superman" theory, as was the case with certain German youth of the Hitler era, suicide climbers, whose intense nationalism drove them to extremes to prove they were the master race. In some individual cases, such fanatic activity may attempt to cover up what actually is an inner complex of inadequacy, or feeling of inferiority. If this kind of motivation can excite a well balanced confidence in oneself, it can be worth while, but if used either to produce an illusion of grandeur or as a means for deluding others, it would seem to be far less worthy. But such is found in every pursuit in life, so it is to be expected that mountains can bring out the worst as well as the best in men.

Fortunately the vast majority of climbers are more admirable human beings. To those who are true mountain lovers, the struggle upward is something far more real; it holds hope, it engenders faith, and it stimulates them to be masters of themselves. It allows a man to rediscover the simplicity and the

* This brings to mind the words of Robert Browning in his immortal poem *Saul*, "'tis not what man Does that exalts him, but what man Would do!"

beauty and the order of the natural world of which he is a part. It can make him sense, if only in a moment of higher vision, the best way for fitting his own life into that world. It teaches him teamwork and the satisfaction to be gained in working together with others toward a common goal, because no summit can be safely reached alone. A mountain climber learns to be alert and to watch continuously for what lies ahead. If experienced and wise in matters of climbing technique and safety, he climbs with confidence and sureness. He will know where he wants to go and how to get there. If conditions make it unwise to continue upward, he will turn back with a minimum of regret because he knows the adventure has been its own reward and the chain of difficulties already overcome has given him satisfaction. He draws the most out of his experience by realizing that success in an ascent does not always mean reaching the top, but rather that success lies in coping with the problem of a climb intelligently and safely; and of course, from that, his greatest inner satisfaction is derived.

Ingrained with a strain of adventure and anxious to accept the challenge of far horizons, man has always wanted to explore. The last unknown coastline in the world was mapped a short time ago by an Antarctic expedition. Today's most challenging geographical frontiers reach upward where the mountain tops are hidden in clouds, up the rock-ridged, ice-covered sides of these most impressive of nature's creations, mountains. One must climb to explore this last frontier.

The desire to attain a geographic frontier, like the quest of life itself, may be inspired by a dream as quickly as by necessity. We drive onward through disappointments and vicissitudes. We may never reach our goal, but in the process we acquire values of which we have never been aware. Mountain climbing, if done with the proper attitude, gives strength and can act as an anti-toxin against the pettiness and the softness, which creeping into man, serves as a crumbling influence.

The ego in anyone is undeniably flattered by the realization that he has been physically able to combat the obstacles of a climb and literally "to come out on top." One feels somewhat like a child at a picnic; he has escaped from the restrictions and restraints of everyday existence to a realm where every flower belongs to him and every vista is his own treasure. But no one can rightly boast when he stands upon the top of a great mountain, even though filled with elation at his achievement. He can only look out over the awesome panorama below, across the endless sweep of mountain masses, and whisper, "How did I ever climb this!" The lesson in humility is memorable.

To experience the flushed rose to delicate pink sunset glow reflected from high alpine snows gives one a sense of tranquility and peace of mind, a refreshment of spirit which is indeed beyond

words. Then it is that the unimportant though sometimes prickling details in a man's life can be focused in their true perspective and a broader and more healthy vision ensue. At the end of such a day, one realizes the truth in the ancient Chinese saying, "Climb mountains, forget troubles."

Mountaineering is as much a philosophy as it is a sport. Dr. Noel Odell, veteran of Mt. Everest fame and member of the team which in 1936 climbed the highest summit yet reached by man, 25,660-foot Nanda Devi in the Garwhal Himalaya, recently said, "It is largely a pursuit which takes one away from the overcrowded haunts of men, to higher purer air, midst the grandest aspects of Nature's beauty, and in that pursuit provides one with health and recreation, apart from pitting one's skill and endurance oftentimes against all of the forces of the Universe. In this it must constitute a calling which virtually amounts to religion."

The late Frank Smythe, another well-known British alpinist and author, has said that the charm of mountaineering lies in the great range of emotions provoked by the physical experience of climbing. He wrote in one of his books that it is impossible "to look down from a hill and not ponder over the relative importance of things."

Today when humanity is beset with so many seemingly unsolvable problems, diplomatic, economic, and social, man can find a refreshing satisfaction in making a mountain climb. Here he faces fundamental problems he can see and understand and cope with. As James Ramsey Ullman has so aptly stated, "Man climbs mountains not to escape from reality but to escape to reality."

Seeing the tremendous and mighty cascade of a mountain avalanche may deepen the impression of personal insignificance in the vastness of nature's scheme, yet paradoxically it creates a feeling of oneness with nature's grandeur and a closeness to the very meaning of man's place in this cosmos. If one seeks inspiration from a mountain top, the limitlessness of the atmosphere can act as a veritable alchemy. It can bring contact with infinity, with the very essence of being. By such an experience, one can be lifted completely out of his former environment. The effect is often most stimulating and can produce, for a while at least, an objectivity of attitude much needed in dealing with everyday living. Often the full significance of this objectivity comes to a man when he returns from the mountains; to the sharp contrast with the hurried and demanding civilization of which he normally is a part.

Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, Professor of Applied Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, recently remarked that religion is more prevalent in rural districts than in crowded cities. He suggests that the reason may be that in the

country people are nearer to the earth from which they came. A true mountain lover can understand this well.

In the mountains, man is especially close to the earth. There, where the inner conflicts of his soul tend to resolve themselves, can he find aid in his search for truth. With this he senses even more emphatically his insecurity in the unfathomable depths of nature and perhaps as a result is more willing to look for strength and help beyond human consciousness. Perhaps this is why Christ's greatest visions and most powerful teachings were delivered on a mountain height. The poet of the Psalms long, long ago summed it all up, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help."