THE COMPLEAT MOUNTAINEER

"Thid" Discourses On Climbing In The Modern Manner

FROM one point of view, it is easy in New Zealand to become a mountaineer. I mean, there are plenty of mountains; and mountains, as most will admit, are the first essential in this sport. There are people who cry out their *Perge et Perage* upon the steeples of tall buildings, but I am assured that this is not orthodox mountaineering. Therefore, when I decided to become a mountaineer, I decided that it would be the mountains on which I should climb.

I have been climbing now for a long time, but it was not enough to be a climber: I wanted to be a mountaineer, and, what is more, a compleat mountaineer. The spelling of the adjective is not arbitrary. It is possible to become, simply, a complete mountaineer. But "compleat" suggests some tradition, and, besides, rhymes with "bleat," which is not a bad thing for my purpose.

However, the compleat mountaineer needs more than mountains if he would exercise his craft properly. He needs equipment, and good advice, and a knowledge of what equipment is essential and which piece of advice superfluous. Under these headings I propose to tell you how to become a compleat mountaineer.

How to Stay Alive

In New Zealand itself there are various properly constituted organisations which will give a large amount of advice about equipment. In fact they are generous. They will also advise you how to avoid becoming one of those "Mountain Tragedy" headlines in the newspaper, and if you do become one they will be glad to attend your inquest and tell the coroner exactly what *they* would have done in similar circumstances, with this egotism cleverly disguised in the form of a statement to the coroner about what *you* should have done.

In these circumstances, you will see that it does not pay to die upon your mountain. Your enemies will love you at the last, which is not a good thing, and your friends will hate you.

However, in spite of this combatant interest in your death, your fellow mountaineers also show some interest in your remaining alive, and they will tell you, if you ask them, and sometimes without your asking them at all, by what means this admirable end may be achieved.

Your Equipment

First you must have good equipment. Now, when I was just a climber, I thought it necessary only to make sure that I had with me my boots, my ice axe, perhaps my crampons, my goggles, my rope, and some clothing suited to the double purpose of climbing up the mountain and sliding down again. This is wrong. Much more is needed for complete safety.

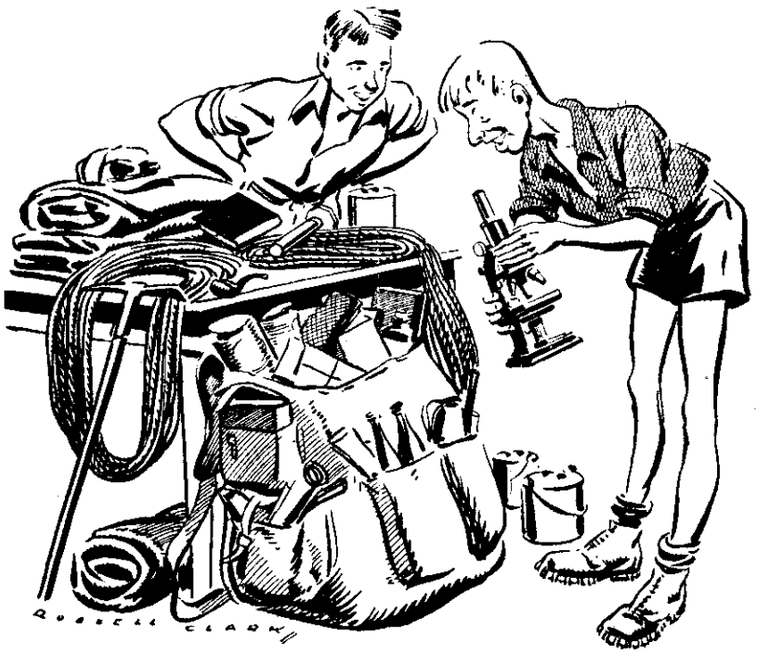
You may not have heard about these theories, but they are true. They were invented only a few years ago, and already they have saved countless lives. If you analyse them properly you will see that their humanitarian value lies not so much in saving your life on the mountain as in saving your life before you get to the mountain. I mean by this that they ensure, before you go, that you have so much equipment you cannot start. There is some physical theory about initial effort, or impetus, or torque, or inertia. Whatever it is, it is very effective.

Revolutionary Discoveries

These revolutionary discoveries were made about the time climbers were leaving the mountains and migrating into the committee room. Here, with more leisure, they were able to review the whole sport thoroughly. It seemed to them that greater safety in the mountains was necessary.

This is how they went about it:

In addition to rope, axe, boots, crampons, goggles, lantern, pack, food, sleeping bag, and matches-in-a-waterproof-container, they decided that the compleat mountaineer needed: a quantity of coloured cloth for signalling to aeroplanes by day, a supply of flares for signalling to them by night, one large bottle of Condy's Crystals for making tracks in the snow to show the way home in a mist, a compass for finding the Condy's Crystals, an aneroid barometer for telling what the weather has been and how high up it would be if the barometer were left at sea-level, a shortwave radio for asking the folks at home how much baking-powder to put in the sponge cake, large quantities of extra rope for crossing rivers and falling into crevasses, more large quantities of rope for leaving behind on the mountain, a map for the purpose of pointing out on return that the Lands and Survey Department is a waste of the taxpayer's money under a Labour Government, a shaving outfit so that the musterers met by the wayside shall not be frightened, a box in which to collect geological and botanical samples, a microscope with which to study snow crystals, a snow shovel and prodding stick for digging fellow climbers out of avalanches, a long piece of coloured ribbon for trailing behind as a guide to searchers when overwhelmed by an avalanche, a thermometer for showing the temperature and thus finding out when the avalanches will fall, a supply of visiting cards and empty pineapple tins for leaving records on summits, the collected works of F. S. Smythe, and several other books of reference.



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My list, of course, is not complete. There are several other articles to be remembered, large and small. However, if you take all these, stuff them into a pack, ram down on top of them your sleeping bag, tent, cooker, crampons, goggles, snowburn cream, change of underwear, alarm clock, spare bootlaces, bottle opener, and food to give 4000 calories per day for fourteen days with a daily ration of 500c.c. of Vitamin C in tablet form, then you will understand that the rate of fatality on the mountains is falling steadily.

And Then You Go to School

And that is not all. One discovery has followed another. In the old days, when we all used to go out with our life insurance policies left in the arms of weeping relatives, it was commonly believed that the best way to learn how to get up a mountain was to get somewhere near and have a look. All wrong. Quite wrong. You go to school. Out here in New Zealand, you understand, although we have climbed all our mountains, many of them several times over, it has been more by luck than by strategy. But in other parts of the world, where they breed the men who build the scenic railways and the ski-lifts, and the rope ladders on the peaks; where the guides know exactly how many of them it takes to get a cow or an old lady of sixty up such mountains as the Matterhorn; over there they have done away with this by-Guess and by-God system, and they can tell you exactly how it ought to be done.

Therefore, when you have assembled your equipment, put it through the checked luggage department of New Zealand railways and have it delivered at the site of the next School for Climbers. Take a small suitcase with you containing the necessities for travel by boat, train, and bus, and be sure your beer is ordered in advance.

When you arrive there you will be a little abashed at the first sight of all the overseas experts assembled to put you through your paces, but after a little while you will begin to get along with them quite satisfactorily. You will be continually amazed, however, at the extent of their knowledge. If you do not climb a peak at the end of the course—well—that will surprise nobody.

Keep Out of Crevasses!

One of the things you will learn is how to use the rope. Yes, I am afraid you will have to discard all the old theories. I remember when I was just a climber of mountains I always liked wearing the rope because it ensured that when I fell all the others would fall too. It seems now that this idea was quite wrong. Another idea of mine that seems to be wrong was the idea that you tie the rope around your waist, so that it is easily undone whenever you want to go away into quiet seclusion behind a serac, remove your shirt, pull on your storm clothes, or leave the others to fall off if they want to, without you.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. When I climbed mountains, it was generally accepted as an axiom that to fall down crevasses was quite the wrong thing. Now it is different. The compleat mountaineer is expected to fall down a crevasse, or off the mountain altogether. If he does not, I feel his instructor will be very disappointed. You will be taught how to get out of a crevasse. This technique depends on how you are attached to the rope. Now, when you fall some distance (as you will), you stop at the end of the rope with a jerk—always assuming that the person on the other end of the rope, who has already let you fall so far, will come to his senses in time to bring you up short. And this jerk may damage your ribs. Therefore you have to wear a harness. I shall not attempt to describe it.

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