

ON THE USE OF QUOTATION IN MOUNTAINEERING

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Much has been written of the climbing-rope as a Moral Support. Manners and Speech, as moral adjuncts of mountaineering, have been dealt with at considerable length in Winthrop Young's *Mountain Craft*. The Art of Quotation in its higher usages has scarcely received the attention it merits.

It would perhaps be too much to claim that a Quotation aptly used at the right moment can make possible a difficult ascent which would otherwise be abandoned. Were that admitted, we might well be faced with a problem akin to the vexed question of pitons : was it fair, was it true mountaineering, to use a Quotation on that pitch ? Yet it is a matter of experience with more than one mountaineer that the Quotation rightly placed is a definite aid to climbing, and the climber who can state with truth that he has never made use of a Quotation on a climb is certainly the exception rather than the rule.

The simplest form of this Art is in the use of the words or phrases which have become the *clichés* of the sport. We do not know (at least, I don't, and would be grateful to anyone who can tell me) what poet among climbers first applied the expressive term "jug-handle" to a hold. How comforting those three homely syllables must have been to hundreds of shivering Seconds as they watched, with sinking hearts, their Leaders negotiating a pitch both steep and smooth ! If the Leader merely informs his humble follower that he has reached "a good handhold" he conveys little assurance ; the Second knows from saddening experience that a good handhold for his Leader may be a dug-in fingernail to him. But if he exclaims "A jug-handle !" that quotation from an unknown benefactor of climbing phraseology tells him the heart-warming truth, and the morale of the party benefits accordingly. The term "Thank-God hold" is a similar phrase from the past, its genesis the Slab on Lliwedd's Route Two where on an early ascent each successive climber of a party of four emitted the same pious exclamation as he grasped the two good holds at the top. It is only mildly comforting to the apprehensive, for it implies an escape from a position conducive to backsliding.

Such simple examples, however, are the veriest alphabet of a far subtler art. Looked at from the psychological angle, it could be held that the moral support of a Quotation lies, not in the Quotation itself, but in the act of Quoting. On any difficult rock-climb, where A is the Leader and B the average shrinking Second, it would appear (from this viewpoint, ably supported by Professor Ewigkeit) that it

is the mere fact that A can emit a Quotation at all that persuades B that the situation of the party cannot be as precarious as he thought it. There is doubtless a modicum of truth in this theory. To admit its entire truth would be to deny the value of *selective* Quotation, a value which has been attested by the experience of many. By way of example, let us take the case of A and B aforesaid. B would hardly have been reassured if A had chosen, from the rock-face above, to quote—I choose at random—from Belloc :

*The rocks have evil faces, Lord,
And I am awfully afraid.*

We may confidently postulate that if the Quotation is to be an aid to climbing, it must be well chosen.

Broadly speaking, the species of Quotation with which I am dealing can be divided into two classes : first, the Quotation from the literature or poetry of mountaineering ; second, the Quotation from literature or poetry whose author had no thought of mountaineering when he wrote it. I have seen a timorous Second heartened and even smiling when he heard, from the Leader belaying on an invisible stance above, Sir Walter Scott's admirable lines :

*Come one, come all ! This rock shall fly
From its firm base as soon as I !*

The Seventeenth Century poet Henry Vaughan has little that can be quoted for the moral uplift of climbers in action, unless the famous ejaculation

How fair a prospect is a bright back-side !

is considered heartening to the Leader when quoted by his Second below. Ben King's plaintive lines

*Nowhere to fall but off,
Nowhere to stand but on,*

which I once heard quoted on Napes Needle, are of a rather later date. So are the fruitful poems of Pope, wherein lies much excellent aptitude awaiting the quoter-climber. A reflective murmur of the following, pitched however to reach the ears of a long-hesitant Leader, might spur him to further effort :

*Fixed like a plant on his peculiar spot,
To draw nutrition, propagate, and rot.*

To which the Leader might reply, a little stiffly, from another poem by the same hand :

*'Tis fixed ; the irrevocable doom of Jove ;
No force can bend me, no persuasion move.*

And then the Second, not to be out-quoted, might suggest a retreat to the stance for a rest, adding (from Milton) :

And short retirement urges sweet return.

These samples are from the almost virgin quarry of Quotations of the second class, whose originators had no intentional link with the mountaineer's sport. Less extensive but more familiar are the quotable areas in climbing literature.

Of these, there are first the words of the Prophets ; those phrases and passages bequeathed to us by the pioneers of the sport in their classic and much-reprinted records. Mummery's "great brown slabs bending over into immeasurable space," for instance, has quotable merit even when one is only perched halfway up Hope with an immeasurable gang of C.C.P.R. students horizontally lunching below. And the same author, in the midst of much hearty Victorian fun, occasionally produces toothsome phrases such as the one about the man who was in "a Pre-Raphaelite condition of body." *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers* can provide the apt and memorable phrase upon occasion. But probably the most often-quoted sources are the Guide Books, old and new.

J. M. Archer Thomson is, of course, pre-eminently the quotable guide-book writer : "The passage can be made *à cheval*, but carking care will sit at the horseman's back" "Any Gallio will complacently demand a shoulder" "The rocks recede but little from the vertical"—and so on, not to mention the spicules of rock and the rugosities, minute or delectable, which are still banded back and forth on the rock-faces. To be familiar with the source of Quotation has its drawbacks. There was an occasion when I was waiting on a highly uncomfortable stance for the Leader—invisible round a corner above—to bring me up to something safer. His voice reached me at length : "I patiently await my companion with the utmost composure of mind." I recognised the Quotation (from Archer Thomson) but was scarcely reassured, recalling that on the Quoted climb the Leader is "seated . . . upon a solitary grass tuft . . . an impossible crag rises above, and smooth slabs shelving away on either side show an outline of swelling curves."

J. M. Edwards in his often unsuccessful search for clarity in guide-book writing produced one or two good things. "Over to the left now is a fresh and rather more proper groove," for instance, is pleasant in its hinting at the impropriety of some grooves. We may forgive him much obscurity for his delightful (if not quite accurate) description of the Devil's Kitchen as a place "where one may tread in perfect safety on other people's considered opinions."

To touch the fringe of a subject, as I have done, is to give little real idea of its scope. Much remains to be said. But it is time to consider, very briefly, the future of Quotation in Mountaineering. Now that "tension climbing" is replacing the old faith in foothold and handhold, it begins to look as though the new practitioners will have little to aid them in the well-worn Quotations from the classics. Sir Henry Wotton's "Hanging is the worst use a man can be put to" will hardly encourage a Leader of the Dangle-and-Whack school, nor will Pope's line :

And wretches hang, that jurymen may dine.

A new output of quotable literature will have to be set going for the use of our friends the Ironmongrels, and I am happy to announce that the first verse of a new but reminiscent poem by Mr. Youngthrop Winn has come to hand in time to serve as a finale to my present writings :

From these two pegs
banged in the overhang below the top
some fifteen hundred feet above the drop
I dangle by the legs ;
from this my fist
the hammer slipped and fell some hours ago,
and if I shortly follow it, you know,
I don't think I'll be missed ;
For who will want to hear my story told
if those pegs hold ?
And what remains for me to boast about
if they come out ?