

WISHING YOU WERE HERE

“JUNIUS”*

Mountaineers, taken by and large, are not the wholesale recipients of brief and jolly postcards that other people are. Climbers who Wish We Were There are those usually to be found down a crevasse on the Aletsch Glacier or shivering under a boulder in the Cairngorms. It is only by the exercise of great restraint that such people do not add “our bivouac is marked X” to such messages.

This is not to say that climbers do not frequently wish themselves here, there and anywhere other than their immediate position. Broadly speaking, two main types are distinguishable; those who are stuck or lost on a mountain and who wish they were back at the hut, and those who stand at the foot of a thousand-foot scree slope and wish they were at the top of it. The first type, miserable creatures that they are, do not concern us here, but a scholarly little monograph on the second type has long been considered by the serious mountaineer to be overdue.

Levitation and chair-lifts aside, there are many interesting devices currently in use for making light of the uphill grind. Frequent halts protract the ascent too much, and incessant conversation leaves one distressingly short of breath, but the right exercise of the mind will wear down the steepest slope. For simple and fairly short slopes, it is sufficient to concentrate on supper at the hut, and by this means one can reasonably be expected to reach, say, the start of the Heather Terrace in good shape, but for the more arduous grinds more exacting mental effort is needed.

For people who can count, counting is probably the best of the elementary methods. Most experienced numero-mountaineers scorn the monotony of counting in English or French and count their way slowly over the hills in German or Welsh. Since very few people can ever get beyond *ugain* in the latter language, German is the more popular, as I, who once reached the top of Carn Beag Dearg from the Allt a’Mhuilinn in *fünf tausend, vier hundert und achtzehn*, can testify; though of recent years its pre-eminence has been challenged by the growing use of Roman numerals. The man who can get up to MDXCVIII without putting his foot down between two boulders and twisting his ankle off is, it is felt, a step ahead of the man who merely proceeds gutturally from cairn to cairn.

Next on the list comes Poetic Declamation. “*The Ancient Mariner*” probably tops the poll, with “*A Shropshire Lad*” a good second, but any other piece of epic poetry will do and many a corrie and cwm has had to listen to the details of the Aix-Ghent route or

* *not* Edmund Burke

Lars Porsena of Clusium. Music, though, is not recommended. The steady rhythm becomes monotonous, you begin to loathe your own scant repertoire very quickly, and in a very short time *molto vivace* decelerates to *largo con perspirazione*. Mathematics, including contemplation of the square root of minus one, bell-ringing, and theological disputation are advisable only to those who understand them.

Of course, many tender consciences will deplore all this. Surely, they will say, this is heresy ? Are not mountains to be enjoyed in their fullness, and should not one consciously savour every step of the way, even when one has passed the point where the anorak concedes victory to Welsh rain ? Perhaps so ; but it is an ill wind that blows nobody uphill, and as all this was composed *en route* for the top of Pen yr Oleu Wen the Editor will no doubt agree that it is all very good for trade.

