

In praise of alpinism

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IN PRAISE OF ALPINISM

How shall we rightly explain the great and ever increasing popularity of Alpinism among all classes to-day? In an article from which the following extract has been translated, Dr. Gos, an eminent Swiss writer, has replied to this very question. He writes: "... Pursuing our investigation along its natural course we penetrate to the very heart of our subject. We conclude that what affords the best explanation and justification of Alpinism is its valuable influence on Character. Sports, as a whole, tend to strengthen certain social qualities in individuals. They do not train the mind. Alpinism does. Sports afford an admirable training in self-control; they guard their votaries against the dangers and hurtful theories so abundant in this age of luxury. Alpinism accomplishes far more than this. It strengthens the character, stripping off all false pretensions.

Sports by calling forth all a man's energy develop his personality through competition and impart a love of emulation. So, too, does Alpinism, and that without the spice of rivalry. It brings into action all the finest qualities of a man, his perseverance, courage, self-confidence and sense of responsibility. Silence and solitude are the accompaniments of the struggle to which Alpinism calls. A man throws himself into it with the greater heroism, for he knows that failure means death. The zeal with which he strives is seen to be on the same scale as the dangers he confronts and the advantage he would gain. In short sports extend the range of a man's self, by bringing into play certain latent forces which are ignored or neglected in his daily life. Alpinism does likewise, but it also adds a fervour of its own which holds the rank of a religious faith. For there is a mysticism and a "religion" peculiar to the mountain top.

The athletic competitions of the stadium range whole battalions of picked youth in the stirring atmosphere of contest. Healthy powers are brought out and breathe a certain glory over their lives. The spirit of sport rightly balanced penetrates to their hearts. But apart from this ideal there is nothing able to afford any spiritual nourishment. The stadium has its limits, Alpinism has none. The votaries of Alpinism are drawn from a wider circle. Youths of both sexes, full grown men and women, and even old folk meet together as enthusiastic devotees of the same cult. But over and above this element of active life and physical culture, above the ideals of a mere sport, Alpinism offers man food in abundance for his higher culture in the contemplation and perception of all its beauty. Watch the exultation of a group of schoolchildren or a company of Scouts, on their way back from an excursion in the mountains! A sacred flame has been kindled in those children. They do not yet understand the full value of their precious experiences, but they eagerly tell the tale to those who

have not shared their enjoyment. Just think how splendid is the gift they have received."

This eulogy of Dr. Gos is based on personal observation. Undoubtedly the difficulties presented by rock and ice and snow are a thorough, indeed a very severe test of the "grit" of the man or woman who intends to scale the mountain peak. He must surmount glaciers with many a deep and treacherous crevasse; he must mount precipitous walls of ice and snow, hacking for himself a foothold as step by step he rises; he must spend hour after hour making his way slowly up a rocky cliff rising defiantly thousands of feet above him. Such tasks are only for the thoroughly sound, for men physically fit in every way, heart and lungs as well as muscles. Men with a steady head and a brave heart. Nor may the very fittest of fit men start his climbs without preliminary training, without expert advice and guidance, and without waiting a few days to acclimatize his organs to the rare air at these higher elevations. Foolhardiness is not courage. It is an act not only of gross stupidity in itself but of wilful disregard of the danger to which it may expose others who must come to the fool's rescue. But Alpinism is not limited to these more strenuous ventures, or it could never attain popularity.

Alpinism may be said to have begun its career of attractiveness and usefulness for the public at large with the establishment in 1857 of the Alpine Club. This Club has rendered invaluable services in organization, training, the erection of the well-known club-huts and in other ways. Thanks also to the efficient arrangements of train and coach, and to the special gift of the Swiss in the hotel line, the Alpine districts are within easy reach of London. A few hours will suffice to bring the business man, the clerk, the harassed teacher, to these Alpine slopes. There is no surer nor readier nor more agreeable cure for health or spirits of man or woman a bit "run down", than a fortnight in the air and sunshine of the Alpine stretches with their varied interests of forest, lake and mountain. There are flowers in abundance to be sought and found. There are grand subjects for the camera. There is society to be had in the hotels. There is solitude to be found within a quarter of an hour's walk. And all the time your spirits are rising. Your cheeks are acquiring a healthy tan. Those high mountain tops are an irresistible magnet for the ambitious and strenuous souls, but the call of the Alps appeals to all who enjoy exercise, who appreciate nature, who feel fagged or out of sorts. There are haunts of luxury, there are also quieter quarters for shorter purses. There are conducted parties for those who lack the energy to plan for themselves. Why not prove for yourself the delights of Alpinism?

A. B. W.