

## Mountain Climbing

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In our wanderings we sometimes come across some wild orchid that seems to have gathered up into its form all the beauty of the great forest in which it lives. We are aroused from our half dreamy mystic appreciation of the beauty about us, and our attention is riveted on the flower which becomes for the moment the revealing scripture of the world's beauty. In some such way too, our attention is called to some gem of human thought that lies hidden between the leaves of a book, a thought that discloses the entire beauty of the book. Along with most other boys, one of my book friends was Natty Bumppo, in whom Cooper has portrayed certain characteristics that go very deep into human nature.<sup>2</sup> Just what it was that I was gleaning from my long hours with Cooper's characters I did not know until sometime ago one of those people who seem to have a keener sense than most of us for finding the beautiful flowers hidden away in books, and in lives, as well as in nature, called my attention to this passage in Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*:

I have heard it said that there are men who read in books to convince themselves that there is a God. I know not but man may so deform his works in the settlement, as to leave that which is so clear in the wilderness a matter of doubt among traders and priests. If any such there be, and he will follow me from sun to sun, through the windings of the forest, he will see enough to teach him that he is a fool, and that the greatest of his folly lies in striving to

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<sup>1</sup> This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from May 24, 1908 to August 9, 1908.

<sup>2</sup> Natty Bumppo is a fictional character in James Fenimore Cooper's (1789-1851) pentalogy, *The Leatherstocking Tales*, which includes *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) the second and best-known of the pentalogy.

rise to the level of One whom he can never equal, be it in goodness or be it in power.<sup>3</sup>

The passage interested me not so much for its philosophic or theological import as for its deep and searching insight into human nature. I know not to call that strange mystic sense of man, that calls us away from the things that we are accustomed to see and handle every day, and bids us go a mountain climbing not alone in the beautiful hills of nature, but quite as much to scale the high peaks of the spirit. But of this I am persuaded, that this strange feeling and yearning within us is close to the margin of human life where the finite shades off into the infinite, and man comes face to face with his maker.

Who has not felt himself in that strange frame of mind when in spite of the fact that everything that he is interested in is to his satisfaction, in spite of the fact that he has about him all the things that he loves best and in which and in whom he is best interested, when in spite of all this a strange inexplicable longing comes over him to go off into some strange experience to climb some mountaintop of human experience, and there, where the range of vision is broad and open, to drink in of the beauty and the expansive mystery of human life. We wish to get away from the conventional straight-lined restraints and palisades of civilization, away from the dust of the thoroughfares, out into the open. There among the eternal hills of thought and deep human feeling breath in one full breath of the divine life, and feel its quickening influence creep through our hungry being, filling every nook and corner as the incoming tide fills the bay.

In these days when the Pentecostal tongues are calling us to the hills and the quiet places of the forests with the commanding voice of millions of years freedom in life stored up in our veins, we get the simplest nature call from the infinite bidding us to come again to the fountains of eternal youth, and drink our fill. That poem of Kipling's, *The Feet of the Young*

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<sup>3</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, New York: W.A. Townsend and Co., 1859 (first published in 1826), chap. 12, p. 148. This quotation was both included in the manuscript and separately on a 3x5 card with the title, "God in Nature."

*Men*<sup>4</sup> runs deep. I will quote one stanza and I hope that you will read the rest of it. It is the red blood of freedom pulsating through our whole being in response to [the] call of the infinite. To who do these words not appeal?

Do you know the blackened timber—

Do you know that racing stream

    With the raw, right-angled log-jam at the end;  
And the bar of sun-warmed shingle where a man may  
    bask and dream

To the click of shod canoe-poles round the bend?

It is there that we are going with our rods and  
    reels and traces,

To the silent, smoky Indian that we know—

To a couch of new-pulled hemlock with the star-light  
    on our faces

    For the Red Gods call us out and we must go!

They must go-go-go away from here.

    On the other side the world they're overdue.

'Send your road is clear before you when the old  
    Spring-fret comes o'er you.

And the Red Gods call for you.<sup>5</sup>

Just what it is in us that speaks to us in this strange elemental language of the soul, that bids us turn our backs upon all the conditions that make our civilization what it is, all the comforts and luxuries of the houses, all the conveniences of travel, all the events that excite our curiosity, and occupy our thoughts, but whatever it is we know it, and we realize its meaning. When we have heard the call and obeyed its summons, when we have plunged into the midst of the forest, and gloried in the work of finding our way to the very mountain top, when we have at length come to the point where the whole extent of the horizon is before us, and hills and valleys and trees and rivers speak to us of the majesty and the beauty of the world, and are themselves lost in the very spaciousness of our view; when we have made our fire, and eaten our supper, and lied down to sleep under the protection of the infinite presence that is in all this beauty, then we come to feel the depth and the glorious mystery of life. After we have refreshed ourselves in sleep, and awakened to the beauty of the new morning, how different the

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<sup>4</sup> Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) *The Feet of Young Men*, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1920.

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world seems to us than it did when we left it but a few short hours before? How trivial seem those thoughts that we were thinking, how unimportant seem those irritating things over which we have been worrying, how silly seem those little gossipings that so filled us with indignation. What a new glorious life we are living. How we long to bring our friends there that they too may feel the regenerating influence on the mountains, where things assume their true proportions, and little things learn to know their places in some inconspicuous spot among the greater and the more important things that make the prospect significant.

For the Red Gods call us out and we must go.

I think that it was something of this kind of a feeling that Cooper had in mind when he put into the mouth of his frontier hunter the words that I read to you. I know not that men may so deform God's work in the settlement as to leave that which is so clear in the wilderness a matter of doubt among priests and traders. Because we do not the more frequently obey the call for freedom and breathing space, our lives become narrow and small.

But this inherent propensity to mountain climbing has a more far-reaching significance than I have yet spoken of. There are mountain tops of the mind and of the spirit. They are the everlasting hills that are ever round about us, to which we may turn to get the vision of the great and the important things of human life. That is [the] touch of beauty in the old Hebrew legend which tells us that Moses when he was perplexed with his tasks as leader of the children of Israel, went to Mt. Sinai where he met God and God gives to him the Ten Commandments. Thus do we do the great things of life. In the world of thought we are free. When we are surrounded by little petty thoughts, when we let the powers of the human mind, born to think over after him the great truths of the universe, it does seem a pitiable waste of human life to allow our minds to become completely tenanted by thoughts about the most insignificant things, or perhaps it is better to say small thoughts about important things. For I take it that there is not an event in human life that may not in the mind of a big thinker be the starting point of a pathway that leads to infinite truth. Suppose you are discouraged, and the life that you are living does not seem to be important. Somehow you seem to have been sidetracked from the great motive that you fixed upon some time ago. It is all that

you can do to scrape together money enough to pay your weekly bills. You have no time for great and noble thoughts; those heroic deeds that in your imagination you pictured yourself as doing, you have never done; those people that you were going to help in a day of need when you had earned the money, have never received your aid. Those great thoughts that you were going to think after you had made your money to that you could have the opportunity, have never been thought. Altogether your life seems to you a miserable and worthless failure. Leave all that behind you, plunge into the forest, find your way from some mountaintop of thought from which an Emerson has caught a glimpse of the eternal. Sit down there for a time and let him point out to you the landmarks of the eternal life. Get the vision of what it is to live, let him show you that life is not measured by the success of your business enterprises, by the kind of a house that you have, or the street that you live on, or the kind of rugs that you have on your floors, or the amount of money that you give to charity. Let him show you that all these things derive their significance and their importance from the extent to which you have responded to the call of the free spirit that has always been and is now urging you to the mountaintops of human aspirations and hopes. Let him tell you that you are the channel of the revelation of infinite truth, that the glory of human life is as dependent upon you and your fidelity to its choicest ideals as it has been upon the greatest of those who have explored the mountaintops of truth. From the vantage point of his mountaintop let him point out to you the backward trail over which man has made his way up to the present day, let him show you the outline of the country through which man is to travel in the future. Study its geography, learn its character, pick out the distinguishing landmarks, see what must be done. Then leave your guide, go apart by yourself, and think over all that you have seen, recall in the mental image the tremendous sweep of the landscape of thought and moral purpose; picture to yourself what has been done in the long overland journey; try to estimate what has to be done in the years that are immediately before you. Then in the stillness of impressive silence that you feel about you as you sit alone on this high mountaintop of truth, ask yourself the question, "Who is to accomplish this work, where is the one to do it? Upon whom does it fall?" Soon, out of the very bottom of your own being, in the silence and the stillness, come the words, "Thou art the man." You lie down to sleep a new life has opened up before you. In the morning, refreshed, strengthened, you awake to find that you are not

alone. Others have been on the mountaintop with you. They, too, have heard the words, "Thou art the Man." You have joined the fellowship of those who live the life of the free spirit, and pledge themselves to the work of human soul for the best of life in this best of worlds.