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SHAKESPEARE AS A MOUNTAINEER.

By the PRESIDENT.

II.

IN our last number we had the pleasure of following our Bard through the early stages of his climbing career. We have traced out his youthful experience on orchard walls, the "quiet walks" among the hills which delighted his adolescence, and finally we have seen how he was led on (or, as some would put it, away) by enthusiastic friends from the roads to the rocks, until the *cacoethes scandendi* had spread its subtle poison through every fibre of his being.

It will probably be conceded that up to this point the case has been fairly proved. The later stages of that sequence have in the present day become normal for all active young men, and that human nature three or four hundred years ago was extremely like what it is now, is conclusively proved by Shakespeare's own plays. But this argument may be turned against me. It may be urged that the young man of the present day has not tasted long of the joys of home climbing, before he begins to yearn for an acquaintance with the great mountains and the eternal snows.

"If human nature has not changed; if, as you make out, Shakespeare's climbing development followed so closely our modern lines, the resemblance would not have stopped there; it would have gone farther; in a word, Shakespeare would have yearned for the Alps, and not merely that, but he would have triumphed over all difficulties and would have got there." My answer to this is very simple. He did. The Swiss trip was probably suggested by the same friend who had introduced

him to the sport. At all events, the idea met with no encouragement in his own domestic circle, and we gather that his relatives at first refused to provide the necessary funds. As a theatrical man, he naturally had no money of his own so as to buy his ticket without their help, but that did not daunt him. Like Brutus, he was "an honourable man." His word was given, he said, to meet his friend in Switzerland, and he intended to :

Meet him were he tied to run afoot,
E'en to the frozen ridges of the Alps,
Or any other ground inhabitable,
Wherever Englishman durst set his foot. (*Rich. II.*)

Probably his friends did not take this bombast seriously, for even in those days the future poet's form was beginning to shew a tendency to that *embonpoint* which marked it in later years, but for that very reason his next argument was more effective.

He implored them not

To mew up
Your tender kinsman and to choke his days
With barbarous ignorance and deny his youth
The rich advantage of good exercise. (*K. John.*)

No doubt his family smiled at this plea of youth, for later on we shall see reason to believe that he was hard upon forty, but the need of "good exercise" for one who was already—

A good portly man, i' faith and a corpulent.
(*Hen. IV., Pt. I.*)

was very obvious, and apparently they waived their objections to the trip.

Our novice entered on the task of equipment for the mountains with enthusiasm. He began at the foundation :

Give me my boots I say. (*Rich. II.*)

and went on as he says to

Buy hobnails by the hundred. (*Hen. IV., Pt. I.*)

and again

Here is now the smith's note for shoeing.
(*Hen. IV., Pt. II.*)

This seems to refer to the use of *crampons*, for elsewhere he says :

Their adoption tried

Grapple them to thy sole with hooks of steel. (*Hamlet.*)

though most editions obscure the sense by giving the absurd spelling "soul."

We have, too, traces of somewhat hasty shopping; one messenger returned with a rope, which evidently had no red strand, and was at once rejected with scorn—

Take up those cords, poor ropes, you are beguiled.

(*Rom. and Jul.*)

I sent thee for a rope. (*Com. of Err.*)

The more important articles he felt he must himself choose :

I'll go fetch an axe, (*Tet. Ands.*)

though at that time, for anything that he knew of the real uses of an axe, the following quotation shews that he might as well have been artist to an illustrated newspaper.

I could hew up rocks and fight with flint.

(*Hen. VI., Pt. II.*)

In the phrase :

A canvas climber. (*Pericles.*)

there is a suggestion of disdain for the Burberry style of clothing. On smoked glasses being suggested he is at first indignant—

I can see yet without spectacles. (*Much Ado.*)

and happening to try them on, when crossing the Channel, he was again annoyed—

And called them blind and dusky spectacles

For losing sight of Albion's wished coast.

(*Hen. VI., Pt. II.*)

Arrived in Switzerland, his poet's heart expanded with joy.

At every turn he beheld—

A towered citadel, a pendant rock,

A forked mountain, or blue promontory.

(*Ant. and Cleop.*)

Nothing impressed him more than the power of the avalanche

and the melting of the snows. He expresses the idea somewhat coarsely—

Rush on his host as doth the melted snow
Upon the vallies, whose low vassal seat
The Alps doth spit and void his rheum upon. (*Hen. V.*)

He instantly recognised that one great charm of the mountains lies in their appeal to man's yearning for freedom, and embodied it in a phrase which has become proverbial—

Free as mountain winds. (*Tempest.*)

The phrase which he afterwards used so effectively—

White his shroud as the mountain snow. (*Hamlet.*)

shews what a deep impression was left on his mind by the purity of the Alps. But he had not come to the Alps merely to loaf and pick up poetic material, he meant to work. At his first arrival he was in very poor condition, what he called—

Fat and scant of breath. (*Hamlet.*)

Probably he had not considered himself "tied to run afoot," and travelled after all like other people. Indeed we have a highly significant question—

Where is the rascal Cook? (*Tam. Shrew.*)

implying in his impatience an unfavourable impression of the firm, which, no doubt, subsequent dealings entirely removed.

On the other hand he was—

Enchanted with Gaze's. (*Love's L. L.*)

or rather with a predecessor of that firm, for he calls it—

Gaze o' the time. (*Macbeth.*)

Consequently he found himself soft and his friends hard.

Eight yards of uneven ground is three score and ten yards
afoot with me, and the stony-hearted villains know it well
enough. (*Hen. V., Pt. I.*)

Their jeers at his expense were useful to him afterwards, when he came to describe Falstaff—

He sweats to death,
And lards the lean earth as he walks along.
Were't not for laughing I should pity him.

(*Hen. IV., Pt. I.*)

but with his marvellously quick insight he soon detected the grand principle—

To climb steep hills requires slow pace at first.

(*Hen. VIII.*)

and to the sorrow of his guide followed it up with a second maxim, which, silently acted upon, has been the making of many an “eminent mountaineer”:

The great one that goes upward let him draw thee after.

(*K. Lear.*)

On his next expedition he and his friends must have pushed this principle rather far, and he draws a painful picture of the guide—

Bowing his head against the steepy mount,
To climb his happiness, . . . his dependants
Which laboured after him to the mountain top,
Even on their knees and hands, let him slip down,
Not one accompanying his declining foot.

(*Tim. of Ath.*)

from which we may conclude that the guide was so sick of his “dependants” (expressive word!), that on reaching the top he glissaded down and left them, having possibly been paid in advance.

The next hill he did in better style—

He is walked up to the top of the hill. (*Hen. IV., Pt. I.*)

(not on all fours this time), and his friends consider him fit for higher game. In laying plans for his first big expedition, they warn him that an early start will be necessary:

Deep night, dark night, the silent of the night,
That time best fits the work we have in hand.

and he joyously exclaims in reply:

The day shall not be up as soon as I,
To try the fair adventure of to-morrow. (*King John.*)

He was provided with a—

“Travelling lamp.” (*Macbeth.*)

but, knowing perhaps how oil delights in getting spilled over the provisions, rejected it and called for—

My guide and lantern to my feet. (*Hen. VI., Pt. II.*)

which gave a better light than he had expected—

How far that little candle throws his beams !
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

(Merchant of V.)

On later expeditions, though we should probably make some allowance for humorous exaggeration, he seems to have tried an ingenious experiment, relying for light on that bibulous friend or porter, whom he afterwards caricatured as Bardolf.

Thou art an admiral. Thou bearest the lantern in the poop, but it is in the nose of thee. Thou art the Knight of the burning lamp. . . Thou hast saved me a thousand marks in links and torches walking with thee in the night, but the sack that thou hast drunk would have bought me lights as good cheap at the dearest chandler's in Europe.

Apparently they slept out for their peak

I abjure all roofs and choose
To wage against the enmity of the air ;
To be a comrade of the wolf and owl. *(King Lear.)*

and it was a cold night—

This field-bed is too cold for me to sleep. *(Rom. and Jul.)*

the early start was very unpleasant and such phrases as—

The air bites shrewdly, it is very cold,
It is a nipping and eager air. *(Hamlet.)*

and again—

The air is raw and cold. *(Rich. III.)*

shew that the early start was a feature of Swiss climbing not particularly pleasing to the poet. At that hour of the morning he had no desire to race, and approved of the custom of going in Indian file because it checks competition in pace :

Take the instant way,
For honour travels in a strait so narrow,
Where one but goes abreast ; keep then the path,
For emulation hath a thousand sons.

(Troil. and Cress.)

In due course they reached the glacier, and some discussion arose, probably about the route or as to where they should

breakfast, and our poet, who could never quite shake off the staginess of the stage, sought to emphasise his opinion by an almost childish exhibition of violence—

In an angry parle,
He smote his leaded pole-axe on the ice. (*Hamlet.*)

where we adopt the reading suggested by Moltke in place of the old and obscure “sledged polacks.” Soon it became necessary to put on spectacles, and here we are confronted with an epithet—

Heart-hardening spectacles. (*Coriolanus.*)

which requires some explanation. It is said of a great Alpine climber (probably without a grain of truth), that his confidential guide always carries for him glasses of two kinds, one pair of ordinary darkness and the other almost opaque. A judicious mixture of *bouvier* and *schnaps* elicited the fact that the ordinary glasses were for use on snow, and the extraordinary for use on the rocks, as the great climber’s nerves put all steep places out of the question unless he was practically blindfolded. We can understand that a man who could not look over Dover cliffs without exclaiming :

How fearful
And dizzy ’tis to cast one’s eyes so low !
. I’ll look no more
Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong. (*Lear.*)

must have been the very man to want “heart-hardening spectacles” among the precipices of the Alps. However, the time for their employment was not yet. They were now quitting the smooth glacier and advancing towards the more hummocky portion below the ice fall, the part of which he speaks so enthusiastically, wishing his—

Delighted spirit to reside
In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice. (*Meas. for Meas.*)

and it became necessary to put on the rope. The question of knots gave a good deal of trouble. The first attempt evidently

produced a "granny," which he stigmatizes as

Churlish knot of all abhorred. (*Hen. IV., Pt. I.*)

then came—

Another knot five-finger-tied. (*Troilus and Cr.*)

an absurdly complicated one, then a slip knot, and finally the expert of the party made a series, calculated, as he told the rest :

To make you brothers and to knit your hearts
With an unslipping knot. (*Ant. and Cl.*)

Crossing the glacier without incident, their difficulty in getting off the ice is recorded in the picture :

As fearfully as doth a galled rock
O'erhang and jutting his confounded base,
Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.

where the last word suggests that the "confounded base" of this great climb rose from the neighbourhood of the *Mer de Glace*. The party now had to take to the rocks, and it is not too much to say that the Plays fairly bristle with references to this part of the day's work. We have space only for a few but they scarcely require any comment, and most of them are repeated in other plays.

The stone's too hard to come by. (*Cymbeline.*)

Wilt thou set thy foot o' my neck. (*Tw. Night.*)

Set your knee against my foot. (*Hen. VI., Pt. I.*)

The firm fixture of thy foot would give an excellent motion
to thy gait. (*Merry W. W.*)

I told ye all,

When we first put this dangerous stone a-rolling,

T would fall upon ourselves. (*Hen. VIII.*)

And the first stone drop in my neck. (*Ant. and Cleop.*)

Fix thy foot. (*Coriolanus.*)

Thy knee bussing the stones. (*Coriolanus.*)

With my nails digged stones. (*Hen. VI., Pt. I.*)

With a two-fold vigour lift me up

To reach at victory above my head. (*Rich. II.*)

Till that my nails were anchored. (*Rich. III.*)

Hold him up with ropes. (*Tw. Night.*)

(where the ordinary edition reads "hopes," which would, of course, be absurdly inadequate to the purpose). These examples could easily be multiplied, but they are enough to shew that this was the climb of the poet's life. His excitement carried him along, puffing and blowing, but full of enjoyment, and with an eye for every incident of the day. Even the effect of the fierce Swiss sun on a rock-climber's face did not escape him. As the party straddled along a narrow arête he recorded their mottled appearance in the phrase—

Ridges horsed with variable complexions. (*Coriolanus.*)
and in this picturesque attitude we must leave them

To witch the world with noble horsemanship.

(*Hen. IV., Pt. I.*)

until our next number.

(*To be continued.*)

