CHAPTER I

AMBITIONS AND DREAMS

In the geography class at school we knew, on paper, three kinds of mountain ranges. There was the mountain range represented by a long line supported on either side by little legs which straggled pathetically across the page of our freehand geography drawing books, like some starved Mediæval dragon. This method of mountain delineation is technically known as hachuring, but our Geography Master generally referred to mountain ranges drawn thus contemptuously as " centipedes " and awarded but a low mark to home-made maps drawn in, as he rightly considered, such a slovenly fashion. Then there was the shading method. The idea of this was in imagining the sun to be shining on one side only of the range, the other side being in funereal shadow. Well done it is quite effective, and as there are few schoolboys who can resist rubbing a pencil lead up and down a piece of paper, it was universally popular. Yet, if giving some vague impression of form and relief, the mountain ranges we drew were grim sad affairs as desolate and unattractive as the airless vistas of the moon. And lastly, there was the contour method. This was popular among few owing to the time and labour involved, for unless approximate accuracy was achieved, a map drawn thus was sure to incur the wrath of the Geography Master.

Personally, I found much satisfaction in laboriously

drawing out and colouring any mountain range portion of the map, sometimes to the exclusion of all else on the map and other items of homework. Geography, was, indeed, one of the few subjects in which I took any interest whatever at school, and had it been the only subject necessary to qualify for promotion I *might* have reached the "Sixth." As it was, I was relegated for the remainder of my natural school life to the "Fifth Modern," a polite term for "Remove," the pupils of which were taught handicrafts on the apparent assumption that their mental equipment was such as to render it impossible for them to make their living otherwise than with their hands.

The green lowlands of the map had little fascination for me. Mentally, I was ever seeking escape from the plains of commerce into those regions which by virtue of their height, their inaccessibility and their distance from the centres of civilisation were marked, "Barren Regions Incapable of Commercial Development." My gods were Scott, Shackleton, and Edward Whymper.

There was one portion of the Earth's surface at which I would gaze more often than at any other, the indeterminate masses of reds and browns in the map which sprawl over Central Asia. For hours I would pore over the names of ranges, deserts and cities until they were at my finger-tips. By comparison with distances I knew—the distance to the seaside, or to London—I tried to gain some idea of a mountain range the length of which is measured in thousands of miles, the Himalayas.

In imagination I would start from the green plains, and follow the straggling line of a river up through the light browns of the map to the dark browns, to halt finally on

one of the white bits that represented the snowy summits of the highest peaks. There I would stop and dream, trying to picture great mountain ranges lifting far above the world : the dull walls of the schoolroom would recede, and vanish, great peaks of dazzling white surrounded me, the airs of heaven caressed me, the blizzards lashed me. And so I would dream until the harsh voice of the Geography Master broke in with its threats and promises of punishment for slackness and gross inattention. If he had known, perhaps he would have left me there on my dream summits, for he was an understanding soul.

If I had learnt as much about other branches of geography as I knew about mountains I should, indeed, have been a paragon. As it was, the knowledge gained from every book on the subject on which I could lay my hands had its drawbacks, and I have a distinct recollection of being sent to the bottom of the form for daring to argue that the Dom, and not Mont Blanc was the highest mountain entirely in Switzerland.[1]

Three Himalayan names stood out before everything else, Mount Everest, Mount Godwin Austin (now called K 2) and Kangchenjunga. Once the knowledge that Everest was 29,002 feet high, instead of a mere 29,000 feet, resulted in my promotion to the top of the form, where for a short time I remained, basking in the sun of the Geography Master's approval (for he was a discriminating man) before sinking steadily to my own level, which was seldom far from the bottom.

For years my ambitions were centred about the hills and

[1] The peak of Mont Blanc is equally portioned between France and Italy. Only the extreme eastern end of the Mont Blanc *range* being in Switzerland.

crags of Britain ; the Alps followed naturally. They were satisfying, if not supremely satisfying, for they enabled me to erect a more solid castle of imagination upon the foundations of my early dreams. On their peaks I learnt the art and craft of mountaineering, and the brotherhood of the hillside. To some the British hills are an end in themselves, and to others the Alps, but the "Journey's End" of the mountaineer is the summit of Mount Everest.

Is mountaineering worth while? ask many. Not to them, but to others. Adventure has its roots deep in the heart of man. Had man not been imbued with it from the beginning of his existence, he could not have survived, for he could never have subdued his environment, and were that spirit ever to die out, the human race would retrogress. By " adventure " I do not necessarily mean the taking of physical risks. Every new thought, or new invention of the mind is adventure. But the highest form of adventure is the blending of the mental with the physical. It may be a mental adventure to sit in a chair, and think out some new invention, but the perfect adventure is that in which the measure of achievement is so great that life itself must be risked. A life so risked is not risked uselessly, and sacrifice is not to be measured in terms of lucre.

Mental alertness is dependent on physical virility, and an inscrutable Nature decrees that man shall ever war against the elemental powers of her Universe. If man were to acknowledge defeat, he would descend in the scale of life and sink once more to the animal. But there has been given to him that " something " which is called the " Spirit of Adventure." It was this spirit that sustained Captain Scott and his companions, and Mallory and

Irvine. Even in their last harsh moments, the crew of the R.101 knew that they did not perish uselessly. Mr. G. Winthrop Young wrote, " Will the impulse to adventure—which has coincided so happily for a time with that 'feeling' for mountains—die with its opportunity? Or will new outlets be found during yet another stage in our conquest of the elements? " I think they will, when man has conquered the Earth, he will turn his eyes to the stars.