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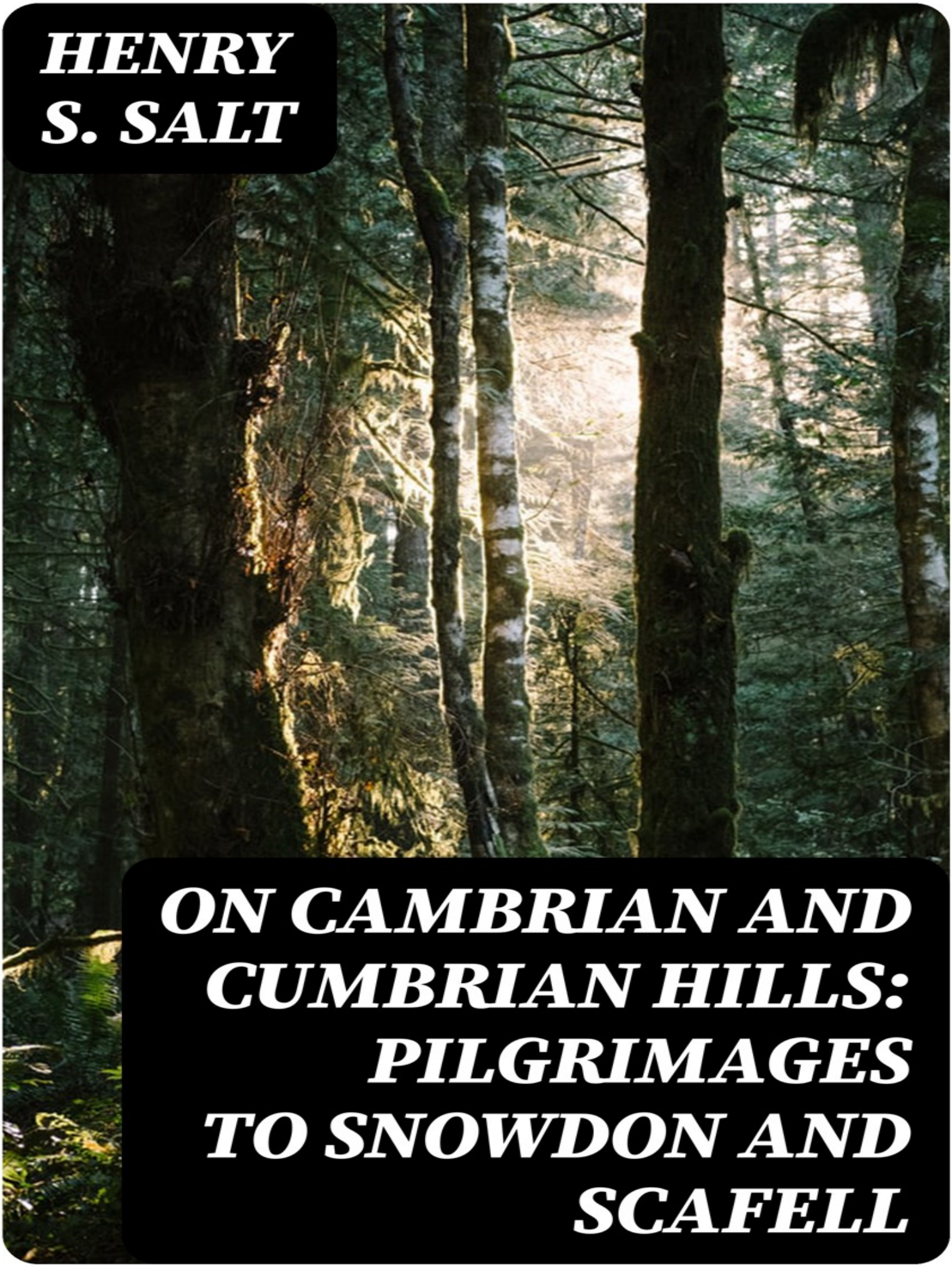

ON CAMBRIAN AND CUMBRIAN HILLS: PILGRIMAGES TO SNOWDON AND SCAFELL

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The pilgrimages of which I write are not made in Switzerland; my theme is a homelier and more humble one. Yet it is a mistake to think that to see great or at least real mountains it is necessary to go abroad; for the effect of highland scenery is not a matter of mere height, but is due far more to shapeliness than to size. There is no lack of British Alps within our reach, if we know how to regard them; as, for instance, the gloomily impressive Coolins of Skye, the granite peaks of Arran, or, to come at once to the subject of this book, the mountains of Carnarvonshire and Cumberland.

For small and simple as are these Cambrian and Cumbrian hills of ours, when compared with the exceeding grandeur and vast complexities of the Swiss Alps or the Pyrenees, they are nevertheless gifted with the essential features of true mountains—with ridge and precipice, cloud and mist, wind and storm, tarn and torrent; nor are snow and ice wanting to complete the picture in winter-time. Why, then, with this native wealth within our shores, must we all be carried oversea to climb Alps with guides, when without guides, and at far less cost of time and money, we may have the same mountain visions, and hear the same mountain voices at home? A few of us, at least, will refuse to bow the knee in this fetish-worship of “going abroad”; for the benefit of going abroad depends mainly on person, temper, and circumstance; and to some mountain lovers a lifelong intimacy with their own hills is more fruitful than any foreign excursions can be.

For my part, I like to do my distant mountaineering by means of books. If I wish, for example, to see the Sierra

Nevada of the West, can I not do so in Muir's *Mountains of California*, a book scarcely less real and life-giving than the heights by which it is inspired—far more so than any superficial visit in the weary rôle of tourist? And then, if the mood takes me, I know where to find and enjoy a Sierra Nevada of our own; for is not Snowdon, is not Scafell, too, a Sierra Nevada during half the months of the year?

My pilgrims, then, are pilgrims to the less lofty, but not less worthy shrines of Lakeland and Wales; and nowhere do we see more clearly than in these districts the startling change that has come over the relations between Mountain and Man. When Gilpin visited Derwentwater in 1786, he quoted with approval the remark of an "ingenious person" who, on seeing the lake, cried out, "Here is Beauty indeed, Beauty lying in the lap of Horrour!" and in like spirit Thomas Pennant, in his *Tours in North Wales*, described the shore of Llyn Idwal as "a fit place to inspire murderous thoughts, environed with horrible precipices." Then gradually the sense of beauty displaced the sense of "horrour," and awe was melted into admiration; though still, to a quite recent time, we see reflected in the literature of our British mountains the belief that to ascend them was a perilous feat not to be lightly undertaken. Thus we read of a traveller who, having inquired of his host at Pen-y-Gwryd whether he might venture to ascend Snowdon without a guide, was dissuaded from such a headstrong attempt, which "would necessarily be attended with great risk"[1]; and another writer, in narrating his ascent by the easy Beddgelert ridge, some fifty years ago, exclaims with solemnity, "You *felt* that a false step would be fatal."

But there were some pioneers, long before climbing became a fine art, who knew and loved the mountains too well to fear them. Take, for instance, the story—one of the most interesting in these early records—of the unknown clergyman who, about the middle of the last century, used to haunt the Welsh hills, and was “possessed with a most extraordinary mania for climbing.” It is delightful to read of the enthusiasm with which he engaged in his pursuit.

His object was, to use his own expression, “to follow the sky-line” of every mountain he visited. For example, he would ascend Snowdon from Llanberis, but instead of following the beaten track he would take the edge of the mountain along the verge of the highest precipices, following what he called the “sky-line,” until he reached the summit; he would then descend the other side of the mountain toward Beddgelert, in a similar manner. He appeared to have no other object in climbing to the wild mountain-tops, than merely, as he said, to behold the wonderful works of the Almighty. In following the “sky-line,” no rocks, however rough, no precipices, unless perfectly inaccessible, ever daunted him. This singular mania, or hobby horse, he appears to have followed up for years, and continued with unabated ardour.[2]

That enthusiast, I am sure, was a true pilgrim, and it is to be regretted that his name is unrecorded.

People sometimes write as if these mountains were “discovered,” and first ascended, by English travellers, and as if the native dalesmen had known nothing of their own country before. Such statements can hardly be taken with seriousness, for it is evident that, as sheep were pastured

on these hills from the earliest times, the shepherd must have long preceded the tourist as mountaineer. Thus we find Pennant, in his description of the “stupendous” ridges that surround Nant Ffrancon, remarking: “I have, from the depth beneath, seen the shepherds skipping from peak to peak; but the point of contact was so small that from this distance they seemed to my uplifted eyes like beings of another order, floating in the air.” To the shepherds, of course, mountain climbing was not a sport but a business, and it would not have occurred to them to climb higher than was necessary; but who can doubt that, in the course of their daily rounds, the summits as well as the sides of the hills must have become known to them?

And if the tourist thinks the native cold and unimpressionable, what does the man who has been born and bred on the hills think of the man who comes on purpose to scramble there? It is difficult to say, so friendly yet inscrutable is his attitude; but I remember hearing from a shepherd in Wastdale, who had tended sheep on the Gable till every crag was familiar to him, a story which seemed to throw some light on his sentiments. He had been asked by a rock-climbing visitor, in the dearth of companions at the hotel, to join him in the ascent of a ridge where it would have been rash for one to go alone, and he did so; but, as he said to me, though he was always ready to go on the rocks to rescue a sheep, it did a bit puzzle him that the gentleman should wish to go there “for no reason.” That, I suspect, is the underlying problem in the mind of the hillsman with respect to the amateur; but, of course, both interest and politeness prevent the free expression of it.[3]

There are cases, however, where the mountain dwellers become themselves inspired with the love of climbing for climbing's sake. I was told of an inhabitant of Snowdonia who had been away in a lowland county for several years, and when at last he returned, and saw his beloved hill-tops again, could not satisfy his feelings until he had traversed, in one walk, the whole circuit of Snowdon, the Glyders, and the Carnedds, a distance of some thirty miles. Even when there is no such visible enthusiasm, we may feel assured that the mountains wield a real though subconscious influence upon their children.

It was not till the early 'eighties that the Alpinists discovered that there are fine gymnastic "problems" among the rocks of Wales and Cumberland, and the word went forth that every buttress and gully, every pinnacle and arête, were to be mastered; from which time onward the cry of the ambitious climber has been (like the cry of the religious devotee) *scando quia impossibile est*, with the result that the "impossible" has mostly become the accomplished. So that whereas, some twenty-five years ago, an ascent of the more precipitous ridges and rock-faces was a rare achievement, we now see the very hotel walls covered with pictures of "pillars" and "needles," with adventurous cragsmen perched in alarming postures on the verge, and the frivolities of visitors'-books interspersed with the grim seriousness of the climbers' records, telling in technical language how Messrs. So and So, "led" by Mr. Dash, surmounted some particular "pitch" (ominous term!) in Mr. Blank's gully—for every gully must now be named after its conqueror.[4]

Let me not be misunderstood as wishing to depreciate in any way the craft of the climber, which, even apart from its great scientific and geographical value in the pioneering of Alps, Andes or Himalayas, and regarded merely as an athletic exercise, is one of the finest of sports; for which reason those who have long been familiar with the mountain life, though themselves not rock-climbers, will be the first to admire, and to envy, the marvellous skill which has carried men into places where, a quarter-century back, no one dreamed of venturing. But I would point out that there is another and still more important function of great mountains—the culture not of the athletic faculty alone, but of that intellectual sympathy with untamed and primitive Nature which our civilization threatens to destroy. A mountain is something more than a thing to climb. To the many who, on a fine summer day, swarm up Skiddaw or Snowdon by the well-worn pony-paths, it is pure holiday-making: to the few who (in another sense) swarm up Scafell Pinnacle or the Napes Needle, it is pure gymnastics; but between or beyond these two classes there are those—pilgrims I call them—who find in mountain climbing what only mountains can give, the contact with unsophisticated Nature, the opportunity to be alone, to be out of and above the world of ordinary life, to pass from the familiar sights and surroundings into a cloud-land of new shapes and sounds, where one feels the fascination of that undiscoverable secret (I do not know how else to name it) by which every true nature-lover is allured.

Now, judging from the current literature of mountain climbing, one might suppose that mountains had no such