DENT CLINTON THOMAS

ABOVE THE SNOW LINE: MOUNTAINEERING SKETCHES BETWEEN 1870 AND 1880

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Содержание

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PREFACE

Some of the following sketches do not now appear for the first time; but such as have been before published in other form have been entirely re-written, and, in great measure, recast.

To the writer the work has afforded an occasional distraction from more serious professional work, and he cannot wish better than that it should serve the same purpose to the reader.

Cortina di Ampezzo:

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CHAPTER I.
AN EXPEDITION IN THE OLDEN STYLE

Buried records —*Litera scripta manet*– The survival of the unfit – A literary octopus – Sybaritic mountaineering – On mountain "form" – Lessons to be learned in the Alps – The growth and spread of the climbing craze – Variations of the art – A tropical day in the valley – A deserted hostelry – The hotel staff appears in several characters – Ascent of the Balfrinhorn – Our baggage train and transport department – A well-ventilated shelter – On sleeping out: its advantages on the present occasion – The Mischabelhörner family group – A plea for Saas and the Fée plateau – We attack the Südlenzspitz – The art of detecting hidden crevasses – Plans for the future – Sentiment on a summit – The feast is spread – The Alphubeljoch – We meet our warmest welcome at an inn.

There exists a class of generously-minded folk who display a desire to improve their fellow-creatures and a love for their species, by referring pointedly to others for the purpose of mentioning that the objects of their remarks have never been guilty of certain enormities: a critical process, which is about equivalent to tarring an individual, but, from humanitarian considerations, omitting to feather him also. The ordeal, as applied to others, is unwarrantable; but there is a certain odd pleasure in subjecting oneself to it. Now, it is but a paraphrase to say that the more we go about, the more, in all probability, shall we be strengthened in the conviction that the paradise of fools must have a large acreage. The average Briton has a constantly present dread that he is likely to do something to justify his admission into that department of Elysium. The thought that he has so qualified, will wake him up if it crosses his mind even in a dream, or make his blood run cold – whatever that may mean – in his active state. Thus it falls out that he is for ever, as it were, conning over the pass-book of his actions, and marvelling how few entries he can find on the credit side, as he does so. It is asserted as a fact (and it were hard to gainsay the sentiment), that *Litera scripta manet*. No doubt; but how much more obtrusively true is it that printed matter is as indestructible as the Hydra? It has occurred sometimes to the writer, on very, very sleepless nights, to take down from a shelf, to slap the cover in order to get rid of a considerable amount of dust, and to peruse, in a volume well-known to all members of the Alpine Club, accounts written years before, of early mountain expeditions. To trace in some such way, at any rate to search for, indications of a fancied development of mind has a curious fascination for the solitary man. Effusions which an author would jealously hide away from the eyes of his friends, have a strangely absorbing interest to the man who reflects that he himself was their perpetrator.

The survival of the unfit

We most of us, whatever principles we assert on the matter, keep stowed away, in some corner or another, the overflow of a fancied talent. The form varies: it may, perhaps, be a five act tragedy, possibly a psychological disquisition, or a sensational novel in three volumes of MS. It is a satisfaction to turn such treasures out from time to time when no eyes are upon us, even if it be only to thank Heaven devoutly that they have always lain unknown and uncriticised. "Il n'y a rien qui rafraichisse le sang comme d'avoir su éviter de faire une sottise." Of work done, of which the author had no especial reason to be proud, a feeling of thankfulness in a lesser degree may arise from the consciousness that, if ever recognised at all, it is now, happily, forgotten. So have these early effusions sometimes amused, not infrequently astounded, and at the worst have nearly always brought the wished-for slumber; and yet in Alpine writings the same accounts were for the most part as faithful representations as the writer could set down on paper of impressions made at the time. It has often occurred to me to ask what manner of description a writer would give of an expedition made many years before. How would the lapse of time influence him? Would he make light of whatever danger there was?

Would the picture require a very decided coat of varnish to make it at all recognisable? Would the crudities come out still more strongly, or would the colours all have faded and sunk harmoniously together in his picture? The speculation promised to be interesting enough to make it worth while to give practical effect to the idea. Now the expedition narrated in this chapter was made in 1870, and possibly, therefore, if a description were worth giving at all, it had better have been given fresh. We can always find some proverb tending more or less to justify any course of action that we may be desirous of pursuing, and by distorting the meaning of a quotation manage to serve our own ends. Of all the ill-used remarks of this nature, surely the most often employed is, "Better late than never;" the extreme elasticity of which saying, in the application thereof, is well evidenced by the doctor who employed it in justification of his late arrival when he came on a professional visit to the lady and found the baby learning its alphabet.

Sybaritic mountaineering

When an aquarium was a fashionable resort, amongst a good many queer and loose fish, we became familiar with a monstrously ill-favoured beast called a cuttle-fish: and may have had a chance of seeing how the animal, if attacked by his physical superior, resorted to the ingenious plan of effusing a quantity of ink, and, under cover of this, retreating hastily backwards out of harm's way. There are some, less ingenuous than the Octopus, who retreat first into obscurity and then pour out their effusion of ink. But it is more common to use the flare of an epigram or of a proverb, as a conjurer does his wand, to distract attention for the moment and divert the thought current from matters we do not wish to be too evident. At any rate, I must in the present instance lay under tribute the author of Proverbs, and add another straw to the already portentous burden that they who wish to compound for literary sins have already piled on his back. Apologising is, however, a dangerous vice, as a well-known writer has remarked. The account, though a sort of literary congenital cripple, has still a prescriptive right to live. Besides this expedition was undertaken in the pre-Sybaritic age of mountaineering, and before the later refinements of that art and science had taken firm hold of its votaries. What would the stern explorers of former time have thought, or said, if they had perceived persons engaged on the glaciers sitting down on camp-stools to a light refection of truffle pie and cold punch? Such banquets are not uncommon now, though precisians with a tendency to dyspepsia still object strongly to them. In those days, too, mountaineers were not so much differentiated that climbers were talked of by their fellows like cricketers are described in the book of Lillywhite. "Jones," for instance, "is a brilliant cragsman, but inclined to be careless on moraines." "Noakes," again, "remarkably sure and steady on snow, fairly good in a couloir, would do better if he did not possess such an astounding appetite and would pay more attention to the use of the rope." "Stokes possesses remarkable knowledge of the Alps; on rocks climbs with his head; we wish we could say honestly that he can climb at all with his hands and feet." "Thompson, first-rate step-cutter; walks on snow with the graceful gait and unlaboured action of a shrimp-catcher at his work: kicks down every loose stone he touches." Thus different styles of climbing are recognised. "Form," as it is called in climbing, was in the old days an unknown term, and yet it is probable that the "form" was by no means inferior to any that can be shown now-a-days. The reason is obvious enough and the explanation lies simply in the fact that the apprenticeship served in the mountains was then much longer than it is now. People did not so often try to ride a steeple-chase before they had learnt to sit in a saddle, or appreciated that the near side was the best by which to get up. When this particular expedition was made (towards which I feel that I am an unconscionable time in making a start) I had been five or six seasons in the Alps, during the first two of which I had never set foot on a snow-slope. There had always seemed to me from the first, to be so much absolutely to learn in mountaineering: there is no less now, indeed there is more, for the science has been developed, but it seems beyond doubt, that fewer people recognise the fact. Like most other arts, it can only be learnt in one way, by constant practice, by constant care and attention and by always doing everything in the mountains to the best

of one's ability. Too many may seem to think that there is a royal road, and fail to recognise that a plebeian does not alter his status by walking along this variety of highway.

The growth of the climbing craze

Time rolled on. The fascination of climbing spread abroad, and it followed with the increasing number of mountaineers that more and more difficulties were experienced in attempts to diversify the sport in the Alps alone, and in emerging from the common herd of climbers. Then a new danger arose. The sport grew fashionable – a serious symptom to its true lovers. Books of Alpine adventure readily found readers; novels, and other forms of nonsense, were written about the mountains; accounts of new expeditions were telegraphed at once to all parts of the world, and found as important a place in the newspapers as the Derby betting, or the latest reports as to the precise medical details of some eminent person's internal complaint. Still further did the craving for novelty spread, and more strange did the means of satisfying it become. The mountains were ascended without guides: in winter; by people afflicted with mental aberration who wore tall hats and frock coats on the glaciers; by persons who were ignorant of the laws of optics as applied to large telescopes; in bad weather, by wrong routes and so forth. Then, too, set in what may be called the variation craze. This is very infectious. For those who can see no beauty in a scene that some one else has gazed on before it is still a passion. We may still at times, in the Alps, hear people say, "Oh yes, that is a very fine expedition, no doubt, but I don't think I care much about undertaking it; you see so and so has done it; couldn't we manage to strike out a different line?" The result is a "variation" expedition. The composer when hard driven, and not strongly under the influence of the Muse, will at times take some innocent, simple melody and submit it to exquisite torture by writing what he is pleased to call variations. Sometimes he will not rest till he has perpetrated as many as thirty-two on some innocent little tune of our childhood. The original air becomes entirely lost, like a sixpence buried in a flour bag, and we may marvel, for instance, as may the travelled American, at the immense amount of foreign matter that may be introduced into "Home, sweet home." Even so does the climber sometimes practise his art. But for one who entertains a strict respect for the old order of things, and for the memory of an age of mountaineering now rapidly passing into oblivion, to write in any such strain would be intolerable. And so, even as a theatrical manager when his brilliant play, stolen, or, as it is generally described, "adapted," from the French, does not run, I may be allowed to raise the curtain on a revival of the old drama, a comedy in one short act, and not provided with any very thrilling "situations." The "scenarium" lay ready to hand in the leaves of an old journal, which may possibly share, with other old leaves, the property of being rather dry. But we are meandering, as it were, in the valleys, and run some risk of digressing too far from the path which should lead to the mountain in hand. There is a story of a clergyman who selected a rather long text as a preface to his discourse, and finding, when he had read it at length a second time, that his congregation were mostly disposed in attitudes which might be of attention, but which were, at the same time, suggestive of slumber, wisely concluded to defer enlarging upon it till a more fitting occasion, and dismissed his hearers, or at any rate those present, with the remark that they had heard his text and that he would not presume to mar its effectiveness by any exordium upon it. *Revenons.*

A tropical day in the valley

In the early part of August 1870, our party walked one sultry day up the Saas Valley. The dust glittered thick and yellow on our boots. Many of the smaller brooks had struck work altogether, while the main river was reduced to a clear stream trickling lazily down between sloping banks of rounded white boulders that shone with a painful glare in the strong sunlight. The more muscular of the grasshoppers found their limbs so lissom in the warmth that they achieved the most prodigious leaps out of sheer lightheartedness; for they sprang so far that they could have had no definite idea where they might chance to light. On the stone walls busy little lizards, with heaving flanks, scurried about with little fitful spurts, and vanished abruptly into the crannies, perpetually playing hide and seek with each other, and always seeming out of breath. The foliage drooped motionless in the heavy air and the shadows it cast lengthened along the dusty ground as steadily as the streak on a sundial.

The smoke from the guides' pipes (and guides, like itinerant nigger minstrels, always have pipes in their mouths when moving from the scene of one performance to another) hung in mid air, and the vile choking smell of the sputtering lucifer matches was perceptible when the laggards reached the spot where a man a hundred yards ahead had lighted one of these abominations.

To pass under the shade of a walnut tree was refreshing like a cold douche; and to step forth again into the heat and glare made one almost gasp. Flannel shirts were miserably inadequate to the strain put upon their absorbent qualities. The potatoes and cabbages were white and piteously dusty. Even the pumpkins seemed to be trying to bury their plump forms in the cool recesses of the earth. Everywhere there seemed a consciousness as of a heavy droning hum. All of which may be concisely summed up in the now classical opening remark of a well-known comedy character, one "Perkyn Middlewick" to wit, "It's 'ot."

A deserted hostelry

When within a little distance of the hotel I enquired whether it was worth while for one of the party to push on to secure rooms. The guides thought, on the whole, that it was unnecessary, and this opinion was justified subsequently by the fact that we found ourselves the sole occupants of the hotel during the week or so that we remained in the district. It was the year of the war; ugly rumours were about, but very few tourists. Selecting, therefore, the most luxurious apartment, and having given over to the care of one Franz, who appeared in the character of "boots" to the hotel, a remarkable pair of cowhide brogues of original design, as hard as sabots and much more uncomfortable, I sat down on a stone slab, in order to cool down to a temperature that might permit of dining without fear of imperilling digestion. So pleased were the hotel authorities at the presence of a traveller that they exerted themselves to the utmost to entertain us well, and with remarkable results. I find a record of the dinner served. There were ten dishes in consecutive order, exclusive of what Americans term "fixings." As to the nature of nine it was difficult to speak with any degree of certainty, but the tenth was apparently a blackbird that had perished of starvation and whose attenuated form the chef had bulged out with extraneous matter. Franz, who seemed to be a sort of general utility man to the establishment, had thrown off, with the ease of a Gomersal or a Ducrow, the outward habiliments of a boots and appeared now as a waiter, in a shirt so hard and starched that he was unable to bend and could only button his waistcoat by the sense of touch. The repast over, Franz removed the shirt front and unbent thereupon in manner as in person. Assuming engaging airs, he entered into conversation, disappearing however for short intervals at times, in order, as might be inferred from certain sounds proceeding from an adjoining apartment, to discharge the duties of a chamber-maid. Subsequently it transpired that he was the proprietor of the hotel.

The hut above Fée

We agreed to commence our mountaineering by an ascent of the Balfrinhorn, a most charming walk and one which even in those days was considered a gentle climb. There are few peaks about this district which will better repay the climber of moderately high ambition, and it is possible to complete the expedition without retracing the steps. There is no danger, and it is hard to say to what part of the mountain an enthusiast would have to go in order to discover any: so the expedition, though perhaps prosaic, is still very interesting throughout and quite in the olden style. The solitude at the hotel was somewhat dull, and the conversational powers of the guides soon exhausted if we travelled beyond the subject of chamois hunting, I did indeed try on one occasion to explain to them, in answer to an earnest request, the military system of Great Britain. But, with a limited vocabulary, the task was not easy and, as I could not think of any words to express what was meant by red tape, circumlocution, and short service, my exposition was limited to enlarging on the facts that the warriors of my native country were exceeding valiant folk with very fine chests, that they wore highly padded red coats and little hats like half bonbon boxes cocked on one side and that they would never consent to be slaves. Burgener, anxious for some more stirring expedition, suggested that we should climb the Dom from the Saas side or make a first ascent of the Südlenzspitz. We had often talked of the former

expedition, which had not at the time been achieved, and, in order to facilitate its accomplishment, divers small grants of money had been sent out from England to be expended in the construction of a hut some five hours' walk above Fée. In answer to enquiries, the guides reported with no small amount of pride, that the building had been satisfactorily completed and they were of opinion that it was ready for occupation. At some length the process of building was described and it really seemed from their account that they had caused to be erected a shelter of unduly pretentious dimensions. It appeared, however, that the residence was equally well placed to serve as a shelter for an ascent of the Südlenzspitz and we decided ultimately to attack that peak first. Great preparations were made; an extensive assortment of very inferior blankets was produced and spread out in the road in front of the hotel, either for airing or some other ill-defined purpose, possibly from some natural pride in the extensive resources of the hotel. Then they pulled down and piled into a little stack, opposite the front door, fire wood enough to roast an ox, or convert an enthusiast into a saint.

How ruin seized a roofless thing

One fine afternoon we started. The entire staff and *personnel* of the hotel would have turned out to wish us good luck, but did not actually do so, as he was engaged in a back shed milking a cow. Laden with a large bundle of fire wood, I toiled up the steep grass slopes above Fée, leading to the Hochbalm glacier. The day was oppressively hot, and I was not wholly ungrateful on finding that the string round my bundle was loose and that the sticks dropped out one after another: accordingly I selected a place in the extreme rear of the caravan, lest my delinquencies should perchance be observed. The sun beat mercilessly down upon our backs on these bare slopes and we sighed involuntarily for Vallombrosa or Monaco or some equally shady place. The guides, who up to that time had spoken of their building as if it were of somewhat palatial dimensions, now began rather to disparage the construction. Doubts were expressed as to the effects certain storms and heavy falls of snow might have had on it and regrets that the weather had prevented the builders from attending as minutely to details of finish and decoration as they could have wished. Putting this and that together, I came to the conclusion that the erection would probably be found to display but indifferent architectural merit. However, there was nothing better to look forward to. "Where is it?" "Oh, right up there, under the big cliff, close to where Alexander is." In the dim distance could be distinguished the form of our guide as a little dark mass progressing on two pink flesh-coloured streaks, striding rapidly up the hill. The phenomenon of colour was due to the fact that, prompted by the sultriness of the day, Alexander had adopted in his garb a temporary variation of the Highland costume. A few minutes later he joined us, clothed indeed, and in a right, but still a melancholy frame of mind. Shaking his head sadly, he explained that a grievous disaster had taken place, evidently in the spring. The forebodings of the constructively-minded rustics we had left below, who knew about as much of architecture as they did of metaphysics, proved now to be true. They had remarked that they feared lest some chance stone should have fallen, and possibly have inflicted damage on the hut. Why they had selected a site where such an accident might happen, was not at the moment quite obvious, but it became so later on. Burgener told us that the roof had been carried away. Beyond question the roof was gone; at any rate it was not there, and the rock must have fallen in a remarkable way indeed, for the cliff above was slightly overhanging, and the falling boulder, which was held accountable for the disaster, had carried away every vestige of wood-work about the place, not leaving even a splinter or a chip. However, to the credit of the builders, be it said that they had tidied up and swept very nicely, for there was no sawdust to be seen anywhere, nor indeed, any trace of carpentering work. The hut consequently resolved itself into a semi-circular stone wall, very much out of the perpendicular, built against a rock face. The chief architect, evidently a thoughtful person, had not omitted to leave a door. But it was easier on the whole to step over the wall, which I did, with as much scorn as Remus himself could have thrown into the action when seeking to aggravate his brother Romulus. So we entered into possession of the premises without, at any rate, the trouble of any preliminary legal formalities.

On sleeping out

In the matter of sleeping out, all mountaineers pass, provided they keep long enough at it, through three stages. In the early period, when imbued with what has been poetically termed the "ecstatic alacrity" of youth, they burn with a desire to undergo hardship on mountains. Possibly a craving for sympathy in discomfort – that most universal of human attributes – prompts them to spend their nights in the most unsuitable places for repose. The practical carrying out of this tendency is apt to freeze very literally their ardour; at least, it did so in our case. Then follows a period during which the climber laughs to scorn any idea of dividing his mountain expedition. He starts the moment after midnight and plods along with a gait as free and elastic as that of a stage pilgrim or a competitor in a six days' "go-as-you-please" pedestrian contest: for those who have a certain gift of somnambulism this method has its advantages. Finally comes a stage when the climber's one thought is to get all the enjoyment possible out of his expedition and to get it in the way that seems best at the time. Now again he may be found at times tenanting huts, or the forms of shelter which are supposed to represent them. But his manner is changed; he no longer travels burdened with the impedimenta of his earlier days. He never looks at his watch now, except to ascertain the utmost limit of time he can dwell on a view. With advancing years and increasing Alpine wisdom, he derides the idea of accurately timing an expedition. His pedometer is probably left at home; he eats whenever he is hungry, and ceases to consider it a *sine quâ non* that he must return to hotel quarters in time for dinner. Nor does he ever commit the youthful folly of walking at the rate of five miles an hour along the mule path in the valley or the high road at the end of an expedition, gaining thereby sore feet and absolutely nothing else. When he has reached this stage, however, he is considered *passé*; and when he has reached this stage he probably begins really to appreciate to the full the depth of the charm to be found in mountaineering.

But I digress even as the driven pig. A miserable night did we spend behind the stone wall. About 9 P.M. came a furious hail-storm: at 10 P.M. rain fell heavily: at 11 P.M. snow began and went on till daybreak about 4 A.M. At 5 A.M. we got up quite stiff and stark like a recently killed villain of melodrama, when carried off the stage by four supers. By 6 A.M. I had got into my boots. At 9 A.M. we swooped down once more on Franz at the hotel at Saas, persuaded him to relinquish certain scavenging occupations in which he was engaged, and to resume his post of waiter. A day or two later we sought our shelter once more. No luxurious provisions did we take with us. Some remarkable red wine, so sour that it forced one involuntarily to turn the head round over the shoulder on drinking it, filled one knapsack. The other contained slices of bread with parallel strata of a greasy nature intervening. These were spoken of, when we had occasion to allude to them, as sandwiches. The fat was found to be an excellent emollient to my boots.

The Südlenzspitz

The Südlenzspitz, though tall, labours under the topographical disadvantage of being placed in the company of giants. Close by, on the north side, is the Nadelhorn (14,876 ft.), while to the south, at no great distance, the Dom towers far above, reaching a height of 14,942 feet. In the Federal map of Switzerland (which is not very accurate in its delineation of the Saas district), the height of the Südlenzspitz is marked as 14,108 ft. North and south from the Südlenzspitz, stretch away well-marked, but not particularly sharp ridges, the northern being chiefly of snow, and inclined at a moderate angle. To the east, a sharper rocky ridge falls away, terminating below, after the fashion of a "rational" divided skirt, in two undecided continuations which enclosed the Fall glacier. Climbing up by this ridge, Mr. W. W. Graham ascended the mountain in 1882. The "variation" is described as presenting very serious difficulties. But in our day, the old-fashioned custom of ascending mountains by the most obviously practicable way was still in vogue, and we decided, therefore, to make for the northern buttress. Leaping over the wall enclosing the ground-floor of our bivouac, we descended on to the Hochbalm glacier, made our way across the upper snow basin, and in good time reached the foot of the slope no great distance south of the Nadelhorn. The view during this part of the walk is very characteristic of the range. From almost any point of view, the traveller is surrounded on

three sides by a clearly marked amphitheatre of very beautifully formed mountains. On the right, the shapely little Ulrichshorn rises up in a self-sufficient manner, like a single artichoke in a vegetable dish. In front is the mass of the Nadelhorn and Südlenzspitz, while, looking back, the view of the mountains on the east side of the Saas valley is one of great and varied beauty. It must be confessed that these statements are derived principally from a contemplation of the map, for, to tell the truth, the recollection of the panorama we actually saw is rather indistinct. This much, however, I may record with confidence; that in all parts of the Saas district, the views struck me, in a day when I did not very much look at them, as possessing strong individuality and the greatest beauty.

A plea for Saas and Fée

The Zermatt district may be still more striking, and they who have no time to visit both, no doubt do wisely to seek the more hackneyed valley. But for such as do not look upon guide-book statements as the dicta of an autocrat, and can exercise a thousandth part of the independence of judgment they manifest in the ordinary affairs of life, a brief deviation to the Saas country will come as a revelation. After the crowd, dust, and bustle of the highway to the recognised centre of the Alps, to turn aside to this region is a relief, like stepping out of a crowded ball-room on to a verandah, or gliding away in a gondola from the railway station at Venice. Look, too, at the architecture of the great mountains here, and the spectator will perceive how nature has succeeded to perfection in achieving what all artists fail in doing; that is in designing, and in a manner that precludes criticism, a pendant; and a pendant too to the Zermatt panorama. The necessary object in the foreground of the picture – which we all know to be an hotel – is provided. Who but nature would think of framing a pure white picture in a setting of the soft green pastures below, and the deep blue sky above? but here it is, and it is perfect. Yet the blue of the sky is repeated in the picture, for the towering séracs throw azure shadows on the satin-smooth snow slopes at their feet. Rest, strength, eternal solidity above in the mountain forms and crags; repose, softness, and the charm of a brightness below that must yield and fade before long to gather force for fresh development and renewal. No need to seek far for a parallel in our human world. Between the two districts, Zermatt and Saas-Fée, there is but the difference between the man who impresses at once by the force of character, and the man who has to be studied and learned before we recognise that he is something beyond the ordinary run of our fellow-creatures.

We attack the Südlenzspitz

Before leaving England we had made tolerably minute inquiries, but had failed to discover any record of a previous ascent of the Südlenzspitz, though, as suggested by Mr. W. M. Conway, the mountain may have been previously climbed by Mr. Chapman. Some uncertainty, therefore, whether we should find any traces of previous climbers, gave the required piquancy to the expedition. We made at once up the slope for a long rocky buttress, and towards a part of the mountain down which the guides asserted stones had been known to fall in the afternoon. This statement was probably made with a view of encouraging their charge to greater exertions, for an old sprained ankle compelled me to the continual necessity of putting my best foot foremost in walking over difficult places. Still, the rocks were at no point very formidable, and progress was rendered somewhat easier by the fact that no critical companion was with me, so I felt at perfect liberty to transport myself upwards in any style that happened to suit the exigencies of the moment. I had not at that time quite passed the stage of believing all that the guides asserted with reference to the climbing capacities of the individual who pays them for assisting his locomotion, and had a distinct idea that I mastered all the obstacles in a particularly skilful manner. They said as much in fact, but reiterated their compliments so often that I somewhat fear now that I must frequently have given occasion for these remarks of approbation; remarks which I have since observed are more frequently called forth to cover a blunder than to praise an exhibition of science. Probably my progress was about as graceful and sure as that of a weak-legged puppy placed for the first time in its life on a frozen pond, or a cockroach seeking to escape from the entrapping basin, for I had not then developed, in climbing rocks, the adhesive powers of – say the chest, which longer practice will sometimes furnish. We were accompanied by a porter

of advanced years whose conversational powers were limited by an odd practice of carrying heavy parcels in his mouth. The day before he had carried up a large beam of wood for the camp fire in this manner. I never met a man with so much jaw and so little talk. He had apparently come out in order to practise himself for the mastication of the Saas mutton, for at the end of the day he would accept of nothing but a sum of two francs, for which I was very thankful. Similar disinterestedness in men of his class is not often met with nowadays.

The art of probing snow

After awhile we left the buttress of rock and turned our attention to a snow slope and made our way up its crest. Here steps were necessary but there was no particular difficulty, for the slope resembled a modern French drawing-room tragedy, in that it was as broad as it was long. We had but to feel that the rope was taut, and could then look about with security. In good time we stepped on to the ridge, and a glance upwards showed that the way was easy enough. We could not but feel that if we were to achieve the honour of a first ascent, such honour would be principally due to the fact that we had subdivided the secondary peaks of the chain more minutely than other travellers. The principle has been carried still further in these latter days, and as any little pale fish that can be caught and fried is considered whitebait, and any article that ladies choose to attach to their heads is termed a bonnet, so any point that can be climbed by an individual line of ascent is now held to be a separate mountain. A considerable snow cornice hung over on the northern side of the arête and great care was necessary, for the ridge itself was so broad and easy, that less careful guides might have made light of it; but Burgener, though he had already acquired a reputation for brilliancy and dash, never suffered himself for one moment to lose sight of the two great qualities in a guide, caution and thoroughness. At each step he probed the snow in front of him with all the diligence of a chiffonnier. It followed that our progress was somewhat slow, but it was none the less highly instructive. The accurate sense of touch in probing doubtful snow with the axe requires and deserves very much more practice than most people would imagine. The unpractised mountaineer may climb with more or less ease a difficult rock the first time he is brought face to face with it, but long and carefully acquired experience is necessary before a man can estimate with certainty the bearing power of a snow bridge with a single thrust of the axe. Indeed many guides of reputation either do not possess or never acquire the muscular sense necessary to enable them to form a reliable opinion on this matter. As a rule, if the rope be properly used and such a mistake be made, somebody plunges through, is hauled out again and no harm is done; but there are occasions when serious accidents have happened, when probably lives have been lost owing to want of skilled knowledge in this detail of snow mountaineering. I have known guides who never failed when they came to a treacherous-looking bridge, to give it one apparently careless thrust with the axe and then walk across with perfect confidence; and I have seen others do exactly the same and disappear suddenly to cool regions below through the bridge; and *vice versâ*. The unskilful prober will make wide detours when he might go in safety, and the man of good snow touch will avoid what looks sound enough: till in returning, perhaps you see that the hard crust concealed but rotten things beneath: as in an ill-made dumpling. It needs no small amount of training to judge between the man who quickly and with certainty satisfies himself of the safety of a particular snow passage, and the man who is too careless properly to investigate it; yet without such experience the amateur is not really able to decide whether a guide be a good or a bad one.

Sentiment on a summit

Here and there along the ridge short rock passages gave a welcome relief and at length we stood on the highest point of the ridge which culminates so gently in the actual peak of the Südlenzspitz. Our first care was to scrape about and hunt diligently for traces of any previous party. No relic of conviviality could be found, and as all the flat stones about appeared to be in their natural state of disorder, we piled up some of them into a neat little heap, and came to the conclusion that we had performed very doughty deeds. But we were younger then. The sun was out, there was a dead calm, and we lay for a while basking in the warmth and planning a serious expedition for some future year.

It may seem strange in these days of rocket-like mountaineering when the climber, like the poet, *nascitur non fit*, but the peak whose assault we discussed was none other than the Matterhorn. It was no longer thought that goblins and elves tenanted its crags; but although these spectres had not yet been frightened away and turned out of house and home by sardine boxes and broken bottles, some trace of prestige still adhered to the mountain. It had not then, like a galley slave, been bound with chains, or, even as a trussed chicken, girt about with many cords. Nor was the ascent of the peak then talked about as carelessly as might be a walk along Margate pier. Alexander Burgener had never been up the peak, though he was most anxious to get an opportunity of doing so. I can remember well the advice that was given to me on the top of the Südlenzspitz to practise further on a few less formidable mountains before attacking the fascinating Mont Cervin itself. Alas for the old days and the old style of mountaineering! It may be doubted whether such discussions often take place nowadays; but then it was only my sixth season in the Alps. The following year we did hatch out the project laid on the top of the Südlenzspitz to climb the Matterhorn together. To this moment I can remember as I write every detail of the climb and every incident of the day as vividly as if it were yesterday; and what a splendid expedition it was then. The old, old fascination can never come back again in quite the same colours; better, perhaps, that it should not. Is it always true that "a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things"? Surely there is a keenness and a depth of pleasure to be found in recalling happiness, though it may never return in its old form; and the memory of pleasure just toned with a trace of sadness is one of the most profound emotions that can stir the human heart. Go on and climb the Alps ye that follow: nowhere else will you find the same pleasure. But it is changed, and in this amusement the old fascination will never be quite the same to you. It may be, it will be, equally keen, but as there is a difference between skating on virgin ice and that which, though still good, is scored by marks of predecessors, so will you fail to find a something which in the olden days of mountaineering seemed always present. Go elsewhere if you will, and seek fresh fields for mountaineering enterprise in the Caucasus, the Himalayas, the Andes. There you will find the mountains have a charm of their own: the mark is as good, but it is not the Alpine mark. That has been taken by others. *Beati possidentes.*

The feast is spread

Judging by the nature of these sentiments it would seem that we must have become pensive to the verge of slumber while on the summit. In descending, we followed our morning's tracks, and scorning the seductive shelter of the hut made straight down for the hotel. On this occasion we found Franz, who was a man of varied resources and accomplishments, hanging his shirt, which apparently he had just washed, up to dry. Our unexpected arrival appeared to disconcert him a little, for the straitened nature of his wardrobe precluded him, to his great disappointment, from appearing at dinner in full costume. He conceived, however, an ingenious, though somewhat transparent subterfuge, and made believe that he had got a bad cold in the chest which compelled him to button his coat up tight round the neck. In honour of our achievements he said he would go down to the cellar and bring us up a curious old wine. The cellar consisted apparently of a packing-case in a shed. Old the wine may have been; curious it certainly was, for it possessed a strong heathery flavour and seemed to turn hot very suddenly and stick fast in the throat like champagne at a suburban charity ball. But nevertheless, with the remnants of the blackbird or some other *rara avis* made into a species of pie, we feasted royally.

A few days later we crossed over to Zermatt by the Alphubel Joch, a heavy fall of snow having prevented any idea of making our contemplated assault on the Dom. A Swiss gentleman of a lively nature and excessive loquacity accompanied us. He was not an adroit snow walker, and disappeared on some five or six occasions abruptly into crevasses. The moment, however, that he got his head out again, he resumed his narrative at the exact point at which it had been perforce broken off without exhibiting the least discomposure. The subject to which his remarks referred I did not succeed in ascertaining. We parted at a little chalet not far from the Riffel, leaving our friend lying flat on his back on the grass contemplating the sky with a fixed expression, with his hands folded over his waistcoat.

He may have been a poet inspired with a sudden desire for composition for aught I know, or may have assumed this attitude as likely to facilitate the absorption of a prodigious quantity of milk which he took at the chalet.

As we drew nearer to the odd mixture of highly coloured huts and comfortable hotels that make up the village of Zermatt, a sense of returning home crept over the mind, a consciousness of friends at hand, of warm welcomes, mixed with the half presentiment that is always felt on such occasions, that some change would be found; but happily it was not so. The roadway was in its former state; the cobble stones a trifle more irregular and worn more smooth, but still the same. The same guides, or their prototypes, were sitting on the same wall drumming their heels. The same artist was hard at work on a sketch of the Matterhorn in a field hard by. The same party just returning from the Görner Grat. The same man looking out with sun-scorched face from the salon window and the same click from the self-willed billiard balls on the uncertain table below. Ay, and the same unmistakable heartfelt greetings and handshakings at the door of the Monte Rosa. Churlish indeed should we have been if we had sighed to think that we had met our warmest welcome at an inn.

CHAPTER II.
THE ROTHHORN (MOMING) FROM ZERMATT

The Alpine dramatis personæ – Mountaineering fact and romance – The thirst for novelty and its symptoms – The first ascent of the Moming – Preliminaries are observed – Rock *v.* snow mountains – The amateur and the guide on rocks and on snow – The programme is made out – Franz Andermatten – Falling stones in the gully – We smooth away the difficulties – The psychological effects of reaching mountain summits – A rock bombardment and a narrow escape – The youthful tourist and his baggage – Hotel trials – We are interviewed – The gushers.

The writer of an Alpine narrative labours under more disadvantages than most literary folk – if authors generally will permit the association, and allow that those who rush into print with their Alpine experiences have the smallest claim to be dignified with such a title. One drawback is that their accounts necessarily suffer from a paucity of characters. A five-act tragedy supported, to use a theatrical expression, by two walking gentlemen, one heavy lead and a low comedy "super," might possibly pall upon an audience, but in Alpine literature, if I may be permitted to push the metaphor a little further, not only is this the case but the unhappy reader finds the characters like "barn stormers" playing now comedy, now tragedy, and sometimes, it may possibly be added, dramas of romance.

Fact and romance

Again, in all matters absolutely relating to mountaineering in the Alps, the narrator feels bound to stick to matters of fact. The drama of romance must be excluded from his répertoire, or, at any rate, very cautiously handled. I knew a man once, who on a single occasion went a-fishing in Norway and caught a salmon. Naturally he was proud of the achievement, and when in the company of brother sportsmen, would hold up his head, assume a knowing air, and take part in the conversation, such conversation relating, of course, to the size of the various fish those present had caught. Such unswerving and prosaic veracity did my friend possess, that, though sorely tempted as he must have been on many occasions, for ten years he never added a single ounce to the weight of his fish. A writer, an Alpine scribbler at any rate, is perhaps justified if he introduces incidents into an account of an expedition which may not have happened on that particular occasion, but which did happen on some other; and surely he may, without impropriety, romance a little on such part of his work as is not strictly geographical; for example, he may describe a chalet as being dirty, when according to the peasant's standard of cleanliness it would have been considered spotless, or describe a view as magnificent, when as a matter of fact he paid no attention to it, but he would be acting most culpably if he asserted that he got within fifty feet of the summit, well knowing that he was not fifty feet from the base of the peak, or if he stated that rocks were impossible, or an ice-fall impracticable, when the sole reason for his failure consisted in his being possessed with a strong desire to go back home. Of course a writer can only give his own impressions, and these are much tempered by increased experience and the lapse of time, but in taking up old accounts of Alpine work one not unfrequently finds a good deal of description that requires toning down. In these sketches I have striven honestly to render all that relates intimately to the actual mountains as accurate as possible, and would sooner be considered a dull than an unreliable historian.

It is no easy matter to reproduce almost on the spot an account of a climb with absolute accuracy, however strong the desire may be to do so. Besides, a climber does not pursue his pastime with a note book perpetually open before him. If he does, his mountaineering is more of a business than he is usually willing to admit. The guide often, the amateur commonly, fails to recognise exactly from a distance a line of ascent or descent on rocks, though but just completed. Still more difficult is it to work out the precise details of a particular route on a map or photograph. The microscopist

knows that the higher powers of his instrument give him no additional insight into the structure of certain objects, but rather mislead. Even so may my readers be asked to employ but gymnoscopic criticism of these sketches.

The thirst for novelty

In September 1872 our party reached Zermatt from Chamouni by the "high-level" route, a series of walks which no amount of familiarity will ever deprive of their charm, and concerning which more will be found elsewhere in this work. All Alpine climbers were then burning as fiercely as they ever did to achieve something new. They had just begun to realise that the stock of new peaks and passes was not inexhaustible, and that the supply was wholly inadequate to meet the demand. This feeling showed itself in various ways. Climbers looked upon each other with something of suspicion and jealousy, and if any new expedition was being planned by any one of their number the others would quickly recognise the state of affairs. If an Alpine man were found secreted in obscure corners conversing in a low voice with his guides and intent on a study of the map, or if he returned evasive answers when questioned as to his plans, he was at once set down as having, probably, a new expedition in mind. As for the guides, they assumed at once airs of importance, as does a commencing schoolboy newly arrayed in a tall hat, and exhibited such mystery that their intentions were unmistakable. Their behaviour, indeed, may have been partly due to the fact that the natural efforts of their comrades to extract information was invariably accompanied by somewhat undue hospitality, and their brotherly feelings were usually expressed in an acceptably liquid form. As a rule such hospitality did not fail in its object. Whether due to a certain natural leakiness of mind on the part of the guides or not, I cannot say, but certainly the information always oozed out, and the intentions of the party were invariably thoroughly well known before the expedition actually started to achieve fresh glory. Every one of the first-rate peaks in the Zermatt district had been ascended, most of them over and over again, before 1872, but the Rothhorn was still out of the pale of the Zermatt expeditions. Messrs. Leslie Stephen and F. Craufurd Grove, who first climbed the peak, ascended it from Zinal, and descended to the same place. It seemed to us, therefore, that if we could prove the accessibility of the mountain from Zermatt, we should do something more than merely climb the peak by a new route. The rocks looked attractive, and the peak itself lay so immediately above Zermatt that it seemed possible enough to make the ascent without sleeping out or consuming any great amount of time.

We went through all the necessary preliminary formalities. We assumed airs of mystery at times; why, I know not. We inspected distant peaks through the telescope. At other times we displayed an excess of candour, and talked effusively about districts remote from that which we intended to investigate. We climbed up a hill, and surveyed the face of our mountain through a telescope, thereby wasting a day and acquiring no information whatever. We pointed out to each other the parts of the mountain which appeared most difficult, and displayed marvellous differences of opinion on the subject, owing, as it is usually the case, to the circumstance that we were commonly, in all probability, talking at the same time about totally distinct parts of the peak. With the telescope I succeeded in discovering to my own entire satisfaction a perfectly impracticable route to the summit. Finally, in order that no single precaution might be omitted to ensure success, we sent up the guides to reconnoitre – a most useless proceeding. We had new nails put in our boots, ordered provisions, uncoiled our rope and coiled it up again quite unnecessarily, gave directions that we should be called at an unhallowed hour in the morning, and went to bed under the impression that we should not be object in the least to turn out at the time arranged.

Rock v. snow mountains

It is on the rock mountains of Switzerland that the acme of enjoyment is to be found. Not that I wish to disparage the snow-peaks; but if a comparison be instituted it is to most climbers, at any rate in their youthful days, infinitely in favour of the rock. Of course it may be argued that there are comparatively few mountains where the two are not combined. But a mountaineer classifies peaks roughly as rock or snow, according to the chief obstacles that each presents. A climber may

encounter serious difficulties in the way of bergschrunds, steep couloirs, soft snow, and so forth; but if on the same expedition he meets with rocks which compel him to put forth greater energies and perseverance than the snow required, he will set the expedition down as a difficult rock climb, simply, of course, because the idea of difficulty which is most vividly impressed on his mind is in connection with that portion of his climb, and *vice versâ*. An undeniable drawback to the snow peaks consists in their monotony. The long series of steps that have to be cut at times, or the dreary wading for hours through soft or powdery snow, are not always forgotten in the pleasure of overcoming the difficulties of a crevasse, reaching the summit of a peak, or the excitement of a good glissade. It is the diversity of obstacles that meet the rock climber, the uncertainty as to what may turn up next, the doubt as to the possibility of finding the friendly crack or the apposite ledge, that constitute some of the main charms. Every step is different, every muscle is called into play as the climber is now flattened against a rough slab, now abnormally stretched from one hold to another, or folded up like the conventional pictures of the ibex, and every step can be recalled afterwards with pleasure and amusement as the mountain is climbed over again in imagination.

The amateur and the guide

But there is more than this; on rocks the amateur is much less dependent on his guides and has much more opportunity of exercising his own powers. It must be admitted that on rocks some amateurs are occasionally wholly dependent not on, but from their guides, and take no more active share in locomotion than does a bale of goods in its transit from a ship's hold to a warehouse. Too often the amateurs who will not take the trouble to learn something of the science and art of mountaineering are but an impediment, an extra burden, as has been often said, to the guides. The guides have to hack out huge steps for their benefit. The amateurs wholly trust to them for steering clear of avalanches, rotten snow bridges, and the like. The amateur's share in a snow ascent usually consists, in fact, either in counselling retreat, insisting on progress, indicating impossible lines of ascent, or in the highly intellectual and arithmetical exercise of counting the number of steps hewn out to ensure his locomotion in the proper direction.

Place the unpaid climber, on the other hand, on rocks. Here the probability is that a slip will entail no unpleasant consequences to anyone but the slipper. The power of sustaining a sudden strain is so enormously increased when the hands have a firm grip that the amateur can, if he please, sprawl and scramble unaided over difficult places with satisfaction to himself and usually without risk to anyone else; that is, as soon as he has fully persuaded the guides (no easy task, I admit) that the process of pulling vehemently at the rope, possibly encircling his waist in a slip knot, is as detrimental to his equilibrium as it is to his digestion. Guides, however, as has been hinted, do not acknowledge this fact in animal mechanics, and their employers frequently experience as an acute torture that compressing process which, more deliberately applied, is not regarded by some as hurtful, but rather as a necessary accompaniment of fashionable attire. When the amateur has succeeded in overcoming the natural instinct of the guides to pull when there is no occasion to do so, he becomes a unit in the party, a burden of course, and a hindrance to some guides, but nothing to what he was on the snow.

Sentiments similar to the above have not unfrequently been set forth in print: they seldom, if ever, actuate the minds of mountaineers when actually engaged in their pastime or when describing their exploits to less skilled persons.

There is great satisfaction, too, in translating one's self over a given difficult rock passage without other assistance than that provided by nature herself, and without surreptitious aid from one's neighbour in the shape of steps. Then again, snow mountains are as inconsistent as cheap aneroids. One day each step costs much labour and toil, and almost the next perhaps the peak will allow itself to be conquered in one-tenth of the time. Not that the writer seeks to argue that there is no pleasure to be derived from snow mountains. It is to climbing *per se* that these remarks apply. After all, everyone has his own opinion; but he who has not tasted the pleasures of a really difficult and successful rock climb – especially if it be a new one – knows not what the Alps can really do for his amusement.

The guides' room

An expedition of suitable magnitude and difficulty was suggested by the guides, viz. an ascent of the Rothhorn (or Moming) from the Zermatt side. Mr. Passingham of Cambridge was at the time staying at the Monte Rosa Hotel, and it was soon arranged that we should combine our forces. The guides, on being asked their opinion as to the projected climb, reported diplomatically that, given fine weather, the ascent would be difficult but possible. This is the answer that the guides generally do give. We decided to attempt the whole excursion in a single day, considering that a short rest in the comparatively luxurious beds provided by M. Seiler was preferable on the whole to more prolonged repose in a shepherd's hut; for the so-called repose means usually a night of misery, and the misery under these conditions is apt to make a man literally acquainted with strange bed-fellows. At 2 in the morning we sought for the guides' room, to superintend the packing of our provisions. It was not easy to find, but at last we discovered a dingy little subterranean vault with one small window tightly jammed up and covered with dust. Of this den there were two occupants. One was employed silently in eating large blocks of a curious boiled mess out of a pipkin. The other was smoking a very complicated pipe, and sitting bolt upright on a bench with half a bottle of *vin ordinaire* before him. Why he was carousing thus in the small hours was not evident. From these signs we judged correctly that the apartment was devoted to the guides as a dining, smoking, club and recreation room.

Our staff was already in attendance, and it struck both of us that the success of the expedition was a foregone conclusion if it depended on the excellence of our guides – Alexander Burgener, the embodiment of strength, endurance, and pluck; Ferdinand Imseng, of activity and perseverance, alone would have sufficed, but we had in addition a tough, weather-beaten, cheery companion (for he was always a companion as well as a guide), Franz Andermatten, ever sagacious, ever helpful and ever determined. It would be hard to find a successor adequately to fill our old friend's place. It is impossible to efface his memory from my mind, nor can I ever forget how on that day he showed all his best qualities and contributed mainly to our success.[11] The prologue is spoken; let us raise the curtain on the comedy.

A false start

The guides had already made their usual preparations for packing up – that is to say, they had constructed a multiplicity of little paper parcels and spread them about the room. As to the contents of these little parcels, they were of course uncertain, and all had to be undone to make sure that nothing had been omitted. A good deal of time was thus lost, and nothing much was gained, except that we corrected the error of packing up a handful of loose lucifers and two tallow dips with the butter and honey in a glass tumbler. Then the parcels were stowed away in the knapsacks, the straps of course all rearranged and ultimately replaced by odds and ends of string. Eventually, at 3 A.M., we started, leaving the two occupants of the guides' room still engaged in the same manner as when they first came under observation, and walked up the narrow valley running due north of Zermatt and leading towards the Trift Joch and the base of the mountain for which we were making. Having journeyed for about half an hour, it was discovered that the telescope had been left behind. Franz instantly started off to get it; not because it was considered particularly necessary, but chiefly on the ground that it is not orthodox to go on a new expedition without a telescope. We stumbled up the narrow winding path, and close below the moraine called our first halt and waited for Franz's return. I selected a cool rock on which to complete the slumber which had been commenced in bed and continued on a tilted chair in the guides' room. After waiting an hour we decided to proceed, as no answer was returned to our frequent shouts. Presently, however, a distant yell attracted our attention, and we beheld, to our astonishment, the cheery face of Franz looking down on us from the top of the moraine. Stimulated by this apparition, we pushed on with great vigour, clambered up the moraine,

[11] Franz Andermatten died in August 1883. His name is mentioned elsewhere in these sketches, but I leave what I have written untouched: for I do not hold with those who would efface the recollection of all that was bright and merry in one taken from us.

whose extreme want of cohesion necessitated a treadmill style of progression, and having reached the top passed along it to the snow. Here we bore first to the right, and then, working round, made straight for a sharp-topped buttress which juts out at a right angle from the main mass of the mountain. Arrived at a patch of rocks near the commencement of the arête, we disencumbered ourselves of superfluous baggage; that is to say, after the traditional manner of mountaineers, we discarded about three-fourths of the impedimenta we had so laboriously dragged up to that point, and of which at no subsequent period of the expedition did we make the slightest use. Next, we prepared for such rock difficulties as might present themselves, by buttoning up our coats as tight as was convenient, and decorated our heads respectively with woollen extinguishers like unto the covers placed by old maids over cherished teapots.

It is a grand moment that, when the difficulty of an expedition opens out, when you grasp the axe firmly, settle in to the rope, and brace up the muscles for the effort of the hour: a moment probably the most pleasurable of the whole expedition, when the peak towers clear and bright above, when the climber realises that he is on the point of deciding whether he shall achieve or fail in achieving a long wished for success, or what it may be perhaps allowable to call a cutting-out expedition (for even mountain climbers are prone to small jealousies). The excitement on nearing the actual summit often rather fades away than increases, and the climber lounges up the last few steps to the top with the same sort of nonchalance that a guest invited to drink displays in approaching the bar.

Falling stones in the gully

Dividing into two parties, we passed rapidly along the snow ridge which abuts against the east face of the mountain. The cliffs of the Rothhorn seem almost to overhang on this face, and were from our point of view magnificent. On the right, too, the precipice is a sheer one, to employ a not uncommon epithet. Without much difficulty we clambered up the first part of the face of the mountain, taking a zigzag course towards the large gully which is distinctly visible from the other side of the valley, and which terminates above in a deep jagged notch in the ridge not far below the summit. Gradually the climbing became more difficult, and it was found necessary to cross the gully backwards and forwards on several occasions. In so crossing we were exposed to some risk from falling stones; that is to say, some chips and bits of rock on a few occasions went flying by without any very apparent reason. In those days mountaineers were in the habit of considering these projectiles as a possible source of risk. A later generation would pass them by as easily as the stones passed by us, and it is not now the fashion to consider such a situation as we were in at all dangerous. It is difficult to see the reason why. Perhaps people's heads are harder now than they were then. For the greater part of the time we kept to the left or south side of the gully, and reaching the notch looked right down upon the commencement of the Glacier du Durand, a fine expanse of snowfield, singularly wild-looking and much crevassed. Turning to the right, we ascended a short distance along the ridge, and then a halt was called. The guides now proceeded to arrange a length of some hundred feet of rope on the rocks above to assist in our return. The process sorely tried our patience, and we were right glad when the signal was given to go on again. We had now to leave the arête, to descend a little, and so pass on to the west face of the mountain, and by this face to ascend and gradually work back to the ridge. No doubt during this part of the climb we made much the same mistake in judgment as had previously been made on a memorable ascent of the Matterhorn, and crossed far more on to the face than was really necessary or advisable. The mountain has since the time when these lines were originally written passed through the regular stages of gradual depreciation, and it is more difficult now to realise that we considered it at the time very difficult. Probably, however, subsequent travellers have improved considerably on the details of the route we actually followed; at any rate the ascent is now considered quite proper for a novice to attempt, at any rate by the novice himself. We worked ourselves slowly along in the teeth of a biting cold wind, and without finding the fixed rope necessary to assist our progress. Reaching the ridge again, the way became distinctly easier, and we felt now that the peak was at our mercy. Presently, however, we came to a huge inverted pyramid of rock that

tried rather successfully to look like the summit, and we had some little difficulty in surmounting it. By dint of strange acrobatic feats and considerable exertion we hoisted our leading guide on to the top. It was fortunate for him perhaps that the seams of his garments were not machine-sewn, or he would certainly have rent his raiment. Finding, however, that the only alternative that offered when he got to the top of the rock was to get down again on the other side, the rest of us concluded that on the whole we should prefer to walk round. The last few yards were perfectly easy, and at 1.30 P.M. we stood on the summit enjoying a most magnificent view in every direction.

Effects of reaching a summit

It is a somewhat curious phenomenon, but one frequently remarked, that the mountaineer's characteristics seem abruptly to change when he reaches the summit of a peak. The impressionable, excitable person instantly becomes preternaturally calm and prosaic, while those of lymphatic temperament have not unfrequently been observed to develop suddenly rather explosive qualities, and to yell or wave their hats without any very apparent incitement thereto. Individuals whose detractors hold to be gifted with poetic attributes have been heard to utter quite commonplace remarks, and I have even known a phlegmatic companion so far forget himself, under these modifying circumstances, as to make an excessively bad pun and laugh very heartily at it himself, quite an unusual occurrence in a wag. Others find relief for their feelings by punching their companions violently in the back, or resorting to such horse-play as the area of the summit allows scope for. Directly, however, the descent commences the climber resumes his normal nature. The fact is, that in most cases, perhaps, the chief pleasure of the expedition does not come at the moment when the climber realises that he is about to undo, as it were, all his work of the day. There is no real climax of an expedition, and, as has been said, it is quite artificial to suppose that the enjoyment must culminate on reaching the top. But still it is considered proper to testify to some unusual emotional feelings. Some of the most enjoyable climbs that the mountaineer can recall in after life, are not those in which he has reached any particular point. Guides consider it becoming to evince in a somewhat forced way the liveliness of their delight on completing an ascent. But such joy as they exhibit is usually about as genuine and heartfelt as an organ-grinder's grin, or a Lord Mayor's smile on receiving a guest whom he does not know and who has merely come to feed at his expense.

The wind was too cold to permit of a very long stay on the summit, and having added a proper number of stones to the cairn, a ceremony as indispensable as the cutting of a notch in the mainmast when the traditional fisherman changes his shirt, we descended rapidly to the point where it was necessary to quit the ridge. Down the first portion of the steep rock slope we passed with great caution, some of the blocks of stone being treacherously loose, or only lightly frozen to the face.

A narrow escape

We had arrived at the most difficult part of the whole climb, and at a rock passage which at that time we considered was the nastiest we had ever encountered. The smooth, almost unbroken face of the slope scarcely afforded any foot-hold, and our security almost entirely depended on the rope we had laid down in our ascent. Had not the rope been in position we should have varied our route, and no doubt found a line of descent over this part much easier than the one we actually made for, even without any help from the fixed cord. Imseng was far below, working his way back to the arête, while the rest of the party were holding on or moving but slowly with faces turned to the mountain. Suddenly I heard a shout from above; those below glanced up at once: a large flat slab of rock, that had afforded us good hold in ascending, but proved now to have been only frozen in to a shallow basin of ice, had been dislodged by the slightest touch from one of the party above, and was sliding down straight at us. It seemed an age, though the stone could not have had to fall more than ten feet or so, before it reached us. Just above me it turned its course slightly; Franz, who was just below, more in its direct line of descent, attempted to stop the mass, but it ground his hands against the rock and swept by straight at Imseng. A yell from us hardly awoke him to the danger: the slab slid on faster and faster, but just as we expected to see our guide swept away, the rock gave a bound for the first time, and

as, with a startled expression, he flung himself against the rock face, it leapt up and, flying by within a few inches of his head, thundered down below. A moment or two of silence followed, and then a modified cheer from Imseng, as subdued as that of a "super" welcoming a theatrical king, announced his safety, and he looked up at us with a serious expression on his face. Franz's escape had been a remarkably lucky one, but his hands were badly cut about and bruised. In fact it was a near thing for all of us, and the mere recollection will still call up that odd sort of thrill a man experiences on suddenly recollecting at 11 P.M. that he ought to have dined out that evening with some very particular people. Had not the rock turned its course just before it reached Franz, and bounded from the face of the mountain over Imseng's head, one or more of the party must unquestionably have been swept away. The place was rather an exceptional one, and the rock glided a remarkably long distance without a bound, but still the incident may serve to show that falling stones are not a wholly imaginary danger.

The youthful tourist

It would have been difficult, with the elementary knowledge of mountaineering that I now see we possessed at that day, to have descended without using the attached rope, and quite out of the question for anyone possessed of a proper respect for his suit of dittos to have done so. In this latter respect we had to exercise economical caution: for we had no very great store at the hotel or many changes of raiment. It is generally possible to gauge pretty accurately an Alpine traveller's experience by the amount of luggage he takes on a tour. Some tourists, following the advice given in the "Practical Guide Book" (a disconnected work written in the style of Mr. Jingle's conversation, but much in favour at one time), were in the habit of travelling with one suit of clothes and a portable bath. The latter, though they took it with them, they seldom took more than once; at the best it was of comparatively little use as an article of apparel, but imparted an aromatic flavour to anything packed up in its immediate neighbourhood. In those youthful days we considered, forsooth, that a little leathern wallet adequately replaced a portmanteau, and in transporting luggage did not always act on the sound commercial maxim that you should never do anything for yourself which a paid person might do equally well for you; consequently a heavy rain shower reduced the traveller to inactivity, and an oversight on the part of the laundress entailed consequences that it is not permissible to mention.

Meanwhile our turn had come to move on. A zigzagging crack, which was too narrow to admit of anything but a most uncomfortable position, afforded the only hand and foot hold on which we could rely. Our gloveless hands, clutching at the rope, cooled down slowly to an unpleasant temperature that rendered it doubtful whether they were attached to the arms or not, and we began to wish we had gone down the Zinal side of the mountain. However, Imseng wormed himself along the rocks, to which he adhered with the tenacity of a lizard, and finally reached the end of our rope and a region of comparative safety. We followed his example slowly, and, having joined him, seated ourselves on some rocks inappropriately designed for repose, and finished off the food we had with us. Climbing carefully down the east face of the mountain, we reached the snow ridge and passed rapidly along it, our spirits rising exuberantly as we looked back on the vanquished peak. As usually happens, the guides had entirely forgotten the place where they had concealed our baggage on the ascent, and in fact had hidden it so carefully that they had some difficulty in finding it when they came to the spot. It is curious to note how often the instinct of guides, so much talked about, is at fault in this matter, and how systematically they are in the habit of carrying up on the mountains superfluous articles, hiding them with entirely unnecessary precautions, and subsequently forgetting the whole transaction.

Hotel trials

While they searched about for their cache we enjoyed the use of tobacco, if such an expression be allowable in the case of some curious stuff purchased in the valley. Still, as the packet in which it was contained was labelled "Tabak," we considered it to be such. Being indulgently disposed, and not being profound botanists, poetic license alone enabled us to imagine that

"We soared above
Dull earth, in those ambrosial clouds like Jove,
And from our own empyrean height
Looked down upon Zermatt with calm delight."

The gushers

It may have been so; it gave me a sore throat. Descending rapidly, we reached the Monte Rosa Hotel at 7 P.M., in an exultant frame of mind, a ragged condition of attire, and a preposterous state of hunger. The whole time occupied in the climb was sixteen hours. Of this an hour was wasted while we were waiting for the telescope, and three-quarters of an hour was spent in arranging the rope, by the aid of which we descended. Probably in actual climbing and walking we employed rather under thirteen hours; but the snow was in excellent order, and we descended on the whole very rapidly. Our trials were not over for the day, when we reached the hotel. Two arch young things had prepared an ambuscade and surprised us successfully at the door of the hotel. Sweetly did they gush. "Oh! where had we been?" We said we had been up in the mountains, indicating the general line of locality with retrospective thumb. "Oh! wasn't it fearfully dangerous? Weren't we all tied tightly together?" (as if, on the principle of union being strength, we had been fastened up and bound like a bundle of quill pens). "Oh! hadn't we done something very wonderful?" The situation was becoming irritating. "Oh! didn't we have to drag ourselves up precipices by the chamois horns on the tops of our sticks?" "No indeed – " "Oh! really, now, that guide there" (a driver with imperfectly buttoned garments who was sitting on the wall with a vacuous look) "told us you were *such* wonderful climbers." It was becoming exasperating. "And oh! we wanted to ask you so much, for you know all about it. *Do* you think we could walk over the Théodule? Papa" (great heavens! he must be a nonagenarian) "thinks we should be so foolish to try. Could you persuade him?" "Well, really – " "Wouldn't the precipices make us dreadfully giddy?" "No, no more than you are now." "Oh! thank you so much. And you really won't tell us what awful ascent you have been making?" It was maddening. "After dinner perhaps?" "Oh! thank you. Oh! Sustie" (this to each other; they both spoke together: probably the names were Susie and Tottie), "won't that be delightful?" By dexterous manœuvring we escaped these gushing Circes during the evening. Happening to pass later on by the open door of the little *salon*, the following remark was overheard: "My dear, the conceit of these climbing objects is quite dreadful. They do nothing but flourish their nasty sticks and ropes about: they want the whole place to themselves" (we had been sitting on wooden chairs in the middle of the high street, near an unsavoury heap of refuse), "and they talk, talk, talk, my dear, all day and all night about what they have been doing in the mountains and of their nonsensical climbs. And what frights they look. I think they are perfectly horrid." Can the voice have been that of the gusher?

CHAPTER III.
EARLY ATTEMPTS ON THE AIGUILLE DU DRU

The Alps and the early mountaineers – The last peaks to surrender – The Aiguille du Dru – Messrs. Kennedy and Pendlebury's attempt on the peak – One-day expeditions in the Alps and thoughts on huts and sleeping out – The Chamouni guide system – A word on guides, past and present – The somnolent landlord and his peculiarities – Some of the party see a chamois – Doubts as to the peak and the way – The duplicity of the Aiguille deceives us – Telescopic observations – An ill-arranged glacier – Franz and his mighty axe – A start on the rocks in the wrong direction – Progress reported – An adjournment – The rocks of the lower peak of the Aiguille du Dru – Our first failure – The expedition resumed – A new line of ascent – We reach the sticking point – Beaten back – The results gained by the two days' climbing.

The last peaks to surrender

Accounts of failures on the mountains in books of Alpine adventure are as much out of place, according to some critics, as a new hat in a crowded church. Humanly speaking, the possession of this head-gear under such circumstances renders it impossible to divert the thoughts wholly from worldly affairs. This, however, by the way. Now the pioneers of the Alps, the Stephenses, the Willses, the Moores, the Morsheads, and many others, had used up all new material with alarming rapidity, I might say voracity, before the climbing epoch to which the present sketches relate. There is an old story of a man who arrived running in a breathless condition on a railway platform just in time to see the train disappearing. "You didn't run fast enough, sir," remarked the porter to him. "You idiot!" was the answer, "I ran plenty fast enough, but I didn't begin running soon enough." Even so was it with the climbers of our generation. They climbed with all possible diligence, but they began their climbing too late. Novelty, that is the desire for achieving new expeditions, was still considered of paramount importance, but unfortunately there was very little new material left. It is difficult to realise adequately now the real veneration entertained for an untrodden peak. A certain amount of familiarity seemed indispensable before a new ascent was even seriously contemplated. It had occurred to certain bold minds that the aiguilles around Chamouni might not be quite as bad as they looked. In 1873 the chief of the still unconquered peaks of the Mont Blanc district were the Aiguille des Charmoz, the Aiguille Blaitière, the Aiguille du Géant, the Aiguille Peuteret, the Aiguille du Dru, and a few other minor points. All of these have since been captured, some of them bound in chains. Opinions differed considerably as to their accessibility. Some hopeful spirits thought that by constantly "pegging away" they might be scaled; others thought that the only feasible plan would be indeed to peg away, but were of opinion that the pegs should be of iron and driven into the rock. Such views naturally lead to discussions, sometimes rather heated, as to whether mountaineering morality might fitly tolerate such aids to the climber. Of all the peaks mentioned above, the Aiguille du Dru and the Aiguille du Géant were considered as the most hopeful by the leading guides, though the older members of that body held out little prospect of success. It is a rather curious fact that the majority of the leading guides who gave their opinions to us in the matter thought that the Aiguille du Géant was the more promising peak to attack. Subsequent experience has proved that they were greatly in error in this judgment. The Aiguille du Géant has indeed been ascended, but much more aid than is comprised in the ordinary mountaineer's equipment was found necessary. In fact, the stronghold was not carried by direct assault, but by sapping and mining. There is a certain rock needle in Norway which, I am told, was once, and once only, ascended by a party on surveying operations bent. No other means could be found, so a wooden structure was built up around the peak, such as may be seen investing a

dilapidated church steeple; and the mountain, like the Royal Martyr of history, yielded up its crowning point at the scaffold. We did not like the prospect of employing any such architectural means to gain our end and the summit, and, from no very clearly defined reasons, turned our attention chiefly to the Aiguille du Dru. Perhaps the prominent appearance of this Aiguille, and the fact that its outline was so familiar from the Montanvert, gradually imbued us with a certain sense of familiarity, which ultimately developed into a notion that if not actually accessible it might at least be worth trying. It seemed too prominent to be impossible; from its height – 12,517 feet only – the mountain would doubtless not attract much attention, were it not so advantageously placed. Thousands of tourists had gazed on its symmetrical form: it had been photographed, stared at through binoculars, portrayed in little distorted pictures on useless work-boxes, trays and other toy-shop gimcracks, more often than any other mountain of the chain, Mont Blanc excepted. Like an undersized volunteer officer, it no doubt made the most of its height. But in truth the Aiguille du Dru is a magnificent mountain form, with its vast dark precipices on the north face, with its long lines of cliff, broken and jagged and sparsely wrinkled with gullies free from even a patch or trace of snow. Point after point, and pinnacle after pinnacle catch the gaze as we follow the edge of the north-west "Kamm," until the eye rests at last on the singularly graceful isosceles triangle of rock which forms the peak. It is spoken of lightly as merely a tooth of rock jutting up from the ridge which culminates in the Aiguille Verte, but when viewed from the Glacier de la Charpoua it is obviously a separate mountain; at any rate it became such when the highest point of the ridge, the Aiguille Verte, had been climbed by somebody else. The cleft in the ridge on the right side of the main mass of the Aiguille du Dru is a very deep one as seen from the glacier, and the sharp needle of rock which is next in the chain is a long way from the Aiguille du Dru itself. North and south the precipices run sheer down to the glaciers beneath. The mountain has then four distinct sides, three of them running down to great depths. Thus, even in the prehistoric days of Alpine climbing, it had some claim to individuality and might fairly be considered as something more than, as it were, one unimportant pinnacle on the roof of some huge cathedral. Perhaps, however, repeated failures to ascend the mountain begot undue veneration and caused an aspiring climber to look with a prejudiced eye on its dimensions.

The Aiguille du Dru

So far as I know, the mountain had never been assailed till 1873, when Messrs. Pendlebury and Kennedy made an attempt. Mr. R. Pendlebury has kindly furnished me with notes of the climb, which I may be allowed to reproduce nearly in his own words: – Two parties started simultaneously for the expedition. One was composed of Messrs. Kennedy and Marshall, with the guides Johann Fischer and Ulric Almer of Grindelwald; the other party consisted of the Rev. C. Taylor, Messrs. W. M. and R. Pendlebury, with the guides Hans Baumann, Peter Baumann, and Edouard Cupelin. The first-mentioned party slept at the Montanvert, while the others enjoyed themselves in a bivouac high up on the side of the Glacier de la Charpoua between the Aiguille du Dru and the Aiguille Moine. This Glacier de la Charpoua, it may be mentioned, is sometimes called the Glacier du Chapeau.

The first attempt

The bivouac appears to have been so comfortable that Mr. Pendlebury and his friends did not take advantage of their start. The Montanvert detachment, who found no such inducement to stay one moment longer than was absolutely necessary[2] in their costly quarters, caught them up the next morning, and the whole party started together. Mr. Kennedy's guides kept to the left of the Glacier de la Charpoua, which looks more broken up than the right-hand side, but apparently proved better going. This, however, it should be observed, was in 1873, and these hanging glaciers alter marvellously in detail from year to year, though always preserving from a distance the same general features. On the same principle, at the proper distance, a mother may be mistaken for her daughter, especially by a judicious person. But on drawing near, however discreet the observer may be, he is yet conscious

[2] In the old house, be it noted – not the modern luxurious combination of a granite fortress and a palace.

of little furrows, diminutive wrinkles, and perhaps of a general shrinkage not to be found in the more recent specimen. Speaking very generally, I should say that these glaciers are, on the whole, easier to traverse than they used to be: at any rate my own personal observation of this particular little glacier extends over a period of some years, and the intricacies – it is hardly proper to call them difficulties – were distinctly less towards the end of the time than they were at the beginning. Of course a different interpretation might be put upon such an opinion: with the evolution of mountaineering skill the complexity of these crumpled up snow-fields may seem to have disentangled, but I am assured that in this particular case it was not so.

First attempt on the peak

This digression must be pardoned. It arose naturally from the circumstance that the route Mr. Kennedy adopted would have proved, at any rate in later years, a digression from the best way. Mr. Pendlebury's party went straight up, keeping, that is, to the right-hand side of the glacier. Towards the upper part the snow slopes became steeper, and soon some step-cutting was required. The object in view was to reach the lowest point in the ridge between the Aiguille du Dru and the Aiguille Verte. It was thought that, by turning to the left from the col, it might be possible to reach the summit by the eastern arête. The col itself from below seemed easily attainable by means of a narrow zigzagging gully, interrupted here and there, that runs down from the summit of the ridge. Ascending by the rocks on the left of the gully the party made for some little way good progress, but then a sudden change came over the scene. After a consultation, it was proposed that the guides Hans Baumann, Peter Baumann, and Fischer should go on a little by themselves and make for the ridge, which they estimated lay about half an hour above them. They were then to examine the rocks above and to bring back a report. The rest of the party remained where they were, and disported themselves as comfortably as circumstances would permit. Hour after hour, however, passed away, and the three guides seemed to make but little progress. They returned at last with the melancholy tidings that they had climbed nearly up to the ridge and had found the rocks very difficult and dangerous. (It should be noted that the line of attack chosen on this occasion – the first serious attempt on the peak – was devised by Hans Baumann, and it says much for his sagacity that this very route proved years afterwards to be the right one.) Questioned as to the advisability of proceeding upwards, the guides employed their favourite figure of speech and remarked that not for millions of francs would they consent to try again. Hans Baumann asserted that he had never climbed more difficult rocks. This opinion, as Mr. Pendlebury suggested at the time, was probably owing to the fact that the cliffs above were covered with snow and glazed with ice, and this condition of the mountain face made each step precarious. The amateurs of the party were of opinion that the ridge would prove attainable later in the season or in exceptionally fine weather. As to the possibility of climbing the rocks above – that is to say, the actual peak – none of the party were able to come to any very positive conclusion. At a rough guess it was estimated that the party halted between two and three hundred feet below the ridge. On the presentation of the guides report the whole caravan turned back and reached Chamouni safely, but not entirely without incident, for the monotony of the descent and Mr. Taylor's head were broken by the fall of a big stone. This little accident, Mr. Pendlebury remarked with disinterested cheerfulness, was but a trifle. I have not been able to ascertain Mr. Taylor's views on the subject.

When our party first essayed the ascent we knew none of the above particulars, save only that some mountaineers had endeavoured to reach the ridge but had failed to ascend to any great height. Of the actual cause of their ill success, and whether it were owing to the unpropitious elements or to the actual difficulties encountered, we were unaware.

Huts and sleeping out

At the time of which I am writing, a somewhat novel mode of ascending mountains was coming into vogue, which consisted in waiting for a suitable day at headquarters, starting at unheard-of hours, and completing the expedition in one day – that is, within twenty-four hours. It was argued in support of this plan, that it was economical and that bivouacking was but a laborious and expensive method

of obtaining discomfort. There are, said the advocates of the method, but few mountains in the Alps which cannot be ascended with much greater comfort in one day than in two. The day's climb is much more enjoyable when it is possible to start from sleeping quarters in which it is possible to sleep. The argument that repose in hotel beds, though undoubtedly more luxurious, was of comparatively little use if there were no time to enjoy it, was held to be little to the purpose. Some enthusiasts were wont to state that passing a night in a chalet, or those magnified sentry boxes called cabanes, constituted half the enjoyment on the expedition. This is a little strong – like the flavour of the cabanes – and if it were actually so the whole pleasure would be but small. The camper out arises in the morning from his delicious couch of soft new-mown hay in a spotty and sticky condition, attended with considerable local irritation, and feeling like a person who has recently had his hair cut, with a pinafore but loosely tied around his neck. Porters, like barbers, exhibit a propensity for indulging in garlic immediately before pursuing their avocation, which is not without discomfort to their employers. (And here I may note as a psychological fact that one action of this permeating vegetable is to induce confidential propensities in the consumer. The point may be deemed worthy of investigation, by personal experiment, by botanists and students of materia medica, men who in the interests of science are not prone to consider their personal comfort and finer sensibilities.) Again, in unsettled weather a fine day is often wasted by journeying up in the afternoon to some chalet, or hovel, merely to enjoy the pleasure of returning the following morning in the rain. There is some force too in the argument that but little actual time is gained by the first day's performance, for it is very difficult to start at anything like the prearranged hour for departure from a camp. An immensity of time is always spent in lighting the morning fire, preparing breakfast, and getting under way. On the other side, some little time is undoubtedly saved by discarding the wholly superfluous ceremony of washing, a process at once suggesting itself to the mind of the Briton abroad if he beholds a basin and cold water.

The sum of the argument would seem to be that camping out in some one else's hut is but an unpleasant fiction; that if the climber chooses to go to the expense, he can succeed in making himself a trifle less comfortable in his own tent or under a rock than he would be in an hotel; and that he is the wisest man who refrains from bivouacking when it is not really necessary and is able to make the best of matters when it is: and undoubtedly for many of the recognised expeditions it is essential to have every possible minute of spare time in hand.

The Chamouni guide system

We were naturally rather doubtful as to the successful issue of our expedition, at any rate at the first attempt, and we therefore impressed upon the guides the necessity of not divulging the plan. The secret, however, proved to be so big that it was too much for two, and they imparted consequently so much of the information as they had not adequate storage for in their own minds to any who chose to listen. Consequently our intentions were thoroughly well known before we started. There were in those days, perhaps, more good guides, at any rate there were fewer bad ones, in Chamouni than are to be found nowadays. We could not, however, obtain the services – even if we had desired them – of any of the local celebrities. As a matter of fact, we were both of opinion that a training in climbing, such as is acquired among the Oberland and Valais men by chamois hunting and constant rock work, would be most likely to have produced the qualities which would undoubtedly be needed on the aiguilles.

The question of the efficiency of the Chamouni guides and of the Chamouni guide system, a question coeval with mountaineering itself, was burning then as fiercely as it does now. The Alpine Club had striven in vain to improve matters; they had pointed out that ability to answer a kind of mountaineering catechism did not in itself constitute a very reliable test of a peasant's power; they had pointed out too that the plan of electing a "guide chef" from the general body of guides was one most open to abuse, one sure to lead to favouritism and injustice, and one obviously ill calculated to bring to the front any specially efficient man. But unhappily the regulations of the body of guides

were, and still are, entangled hopelessly in the French equivalent for red tape. Jealousy and mistrust of the German-speaking guides, whom serious mountaineers were beginning to import in rather formidable numbers, were beginning to awaken in the simple bosoms of the Savoyard peasants; and our proceedings were consequently looked upon with contemptuous disfavour by those who had any knowledge of our project.

A word on guides

On August 18, 1873, we started. Our guides were Alexander Burgener as leader, Franz Andermatten, the best of companions, our guide, our friend, and sometimes our philosopher, as second string, while a taciturn porter of large frame and small mind, who came from the Saas valley, completed the tale. Of Burgener's exceptional talent in climbing difficult rocks we had had already good proof, and no doubt he was, and still is, a man of remarkable daring, endurance, and activity on rocks. I had reached then that stage in the mountaineering art at which a man is prone to consider the guide he knows best as, beyond all comparison, the best guide that could possibly exist. The lapse of years renders me perhaps better able now to form a dispassionate judgment of Burgener's capacity and skill. Both were very great. I have seen at their work most of the leaders in this department. Burgener never had the marvellous neatness and finish so characteristic of Melchior Anderegg, who, when mountaineering has passed away into the limbo of extinct sports, such as bear-baiting, croquet, and pell-mell, will, if he gets his deserts, even by those who remember Maguignaz, Carrel, Croz, and Almer, still be spoken of as *the* best guide that ever lived. Nor was Burgener gifted with the same simple unaffected qualities which made Jakob Anderegg's loss so keenly felt, nor the lightness and agility of Rey or Jaun; but he united well in himself qualities of strength, carefulness, perseverance and activity, and possessed in addition the numerous attributes of observation, experience, and desire for improvement in his art which together make up what is spoken of as the natural instinct of guides. These were the qualities that made him a first-rate, indeed an exceptional, guide. *Nunc liberavi animam meam.* There is an old saying, involving a sound doctrine, that

> When you flatter lay it on thick;
> Some will come off, but a deal will stick.

The porter proved himself a skilful and strong climber, but he was as silent as an oyster and, like that bivalve mollusc when the freshness of its youth has passed off, was perpetually on the gape.

A landlord's peculiarities

A hot walk – it always is hot along this part – took us up to the Montanvert. The moonlight threw quaint, fantastic shadows along the path and made the dewy gossamer filaments which swung from branch to branch across the track twinkle into grey and silver; and anything more aggravating than these spiders' threads at night it is hard to imagine. What earthly purpose these animals think they serve by this reckless nocturnal expenditure of bodily glue it is hard to say: possibly the lines are swung across in order that they may practise equilibrium; possibly the threads may serve as lines of escape and retreat after the male spinners have been a-wooing. The atmosphere through the wood was as stuffy as a ship's saloon in a storm, and we were right glad to reach the Montanvert at 3.30 A.M. Here, being athirst, we clamoured for refreshment. The landlord of the ramshackle hostelry at once appeared in full costume; indeed I observed that during the summer it was impossible to tell from his attire whether he had arisen immediately from bed or no. He seemed to act on the principle of the Norwegian peasant, who apparently undresses once a year when the winter commences, and resumes his garments when the light once more comes back and the summer season sets in. Our friend had cultivated to great perfection the art of half sleeping during his waking hours – that is, during such time as he might be called upon to provide entertainment for man and beast. Now at the Montanvert, during the tourists' season, this period extended over the whole twenty-four hours. It was necessary, therefore, in order that he might enjoy a proper physiological period of rest, for him to remain in a

dozing state – a sort of æstival hybernation – for the whole time, which in fact he did; or else he was by nature a very dull person, and had actually a very restricted stock of ideas.

The landlord produced at once a battered teapot with a little sieve dangling from its snout, which had been stewing on the hob, and poured out the contained fluid into two stalked saucers of inconvenient diameter. Stimulated by this watery extract, we entered into conversation together. The sight of a tourist with an ice axe led by a kind of reflex process to the landlord's unburdening his mind with his usual remarks. Like other natives of the valley he had but two ideas of "extraordinary" expeditions. "Monsieur is going to the Jardin?" he remarked. "No, monsieur isn't." "Then beyond a doubt monsieur will cross the Col du Géant?" he said, playing his trump card. "No, monsieur will not." "Pardon – where does monsieur expect to go to?" "On the present occasion we go to try the Aiguille du Dru." The landlord smiled in an aggravating manner. "Does monsieur think he will get up?" "Time will show." "Ah!" The landlord, who had a chronic cold in the head, searched for his pockethandkerchief, but not finding it, modified the necessary sniff into one of derision, and then demanded the usual exorbitant price for the refreshment, amounting to about five times the value of the teapot, sieve and all. We paid, and left him chuckling softly to himself at our insane idea, as he replaced the teapot on the hob in readiness for the next arrival. That landlord, though physically sleepy, was still wide awake in matters of finance. He once charged me five francs for the loan of a secondhand collection of holes which he termed a blanket.

We see a chamois

We got on to the glacier at the usual point and made straight across the slippery hummocks to the grass slope encircling the base of the Aiguille du Dru and the Glacier de la Charpoua. The glacier above gives birth to a feeble meandering little stream which wanders fitfully down the mountain side. At first we kept to the left, but after a while crossed the little torrent, and bearing more to the right plodded leisurely up the steep grass and rock slope. We had made good progress when of a sudden Franz gave a loud whistle and then fell flat down. The other two guides immediately followed his example and beckoned to us with excited gesticulations to behave in a similarly foolish manner. Thereupon we too sat down, and enquired what the purport of this performance might be. It turned out that there was a very little chamois about half a mile off. Knowing that it would be impossible to induce the guides to move on till the animal had disappeared, we seized the opportunity of taking an early breakfast. The guides meanwhile wriggled about on their stomachs, with eyes starting out of their heads, possessed by an extraordinary desire to miss no single movement of the object of their attention. "See, it moves," said Franz in a whisper. "Himmel! it is feeding," said Burgener. "It must be the same that Johann saw three weeks ago." "Ach! no, that was but a little one" (no true chamois hunter will ever allow that a brother sportsman can possibly have set eyes on a larger animal than himself). "Truly it is fine." "Thunder weather! it moves its head." In their excitement I regretted that I could not share, not being well versed in hunting craft: my own experience of sport in the Alps being limited to missing one marmot that was sitting on a rock licking its paws. In due course the chamois walked away. Apparently much relieved by there being no further necessity to continue in their former uncomfortable attitudes, the guides sat up and fell to a warm discussion as to the size of the animal. A chamois is to a guide as a fish to the baffled angler or the last new baby to a monthly nurse, and is always pronounced to be beyond question the finest that has ever been seen. To this they agreed generally, but Franz, whose spirits had suddenly evaporated, now shook his head dismally, with the remark that it was unlucky to see a single chamois, and that we should have no success that day. Undaunted by his croaking, we pursued our way to the right side of the glacier, while our guide, who had a ballad appropriate to every occasion, sang rather gaspingly a tremulous little funeral dirge. We worked well across to the right, in order to obtain the best possible view of the Aiguille, and halted repeatedly while discussing the best point at which to attack the rocks. While thus engaged in reconnoitring close under the cliffs of the ridge running between the Aiguille Moine and the Aiguille Verte, a considerable block of ice, falling from the rocks above, whizzed past just in front of us and

capered gaily down the slope. Hereupon we came rather rapidly to the conclusion that we had better proceed. Half an hour further on we reached the top of a steep little snow slope, and a point secure from falling stones and ice. Recognising that we must soon cross back to the rocks of the Dru, we tried to come to a final conclusion as to the way to be chosen. As usual, everybody pointed out different routes: even a vestry meeting could hardly have been less unanimous. Some one now ventured to put a question that had been troubling in reality our minds for some time past, viz. which of the peaks that towered above us was really the Aiguille du Dru. On the left there were two distinct points which, though close together, were separated apparently by a deep rift, and some distance to the right of the col which the previous party had tried to reach, a sharp tooth of rock towered up to a considerable height. Evidently, however, from its position this latter needle could not be visible from Chamouni or from the Montanvert. Again, it was clear that the mass comprising the two points close together must be visible from the valley, but which of the two was the higher? Alexander gave as his opinion that the more distant of these two points, that on the right, was the higher, and turned to the porter for confirmation. That worthy nodded his head affirmatively with extreme sagacity, evidently implying that he was of the same opinion. Franz on the other hand thought the left-hand peak was the one that we ought to make for, arguing that it most resembled the Dru as seen from the Montanvert, that there was probably little difference in height between the two, that our ascent would not be believed in unless we were to place a flag on the point visible from Chamouni, and finally that the left-hand peak seemed to be the easier, and would probably be found to conceal the sharper point of the right-hand summit. Having expressed these views, he in turn looked towards the porter to ascertain his sentiments. The porter, who was evidently of a complaisant temperament, nodded his head very vigorously to intimate that these arguments seemed the more powerful of the two to his mind, and then cocked his head on one side in a knowing manner, intended to express that he was studying the angles and that he was prepared to find himself in the right whichever view prevailed. We did not find out for certain till some time after that the right-hand summit, though concealed from view by the Montanvert, is very distinctly visible from Chamouni: excusable ignorance, as most of the Chamouni people are unaware of it to this day. Professor Forbes, as Mr. Douglas Freshfield has kindly pointed out to me, with his usual accuracy distinguished and also measured the two summits, giving their heights respectively as 12,178, and 12,245 feet.[3] Knowing little as we did then of the details of the mountain, we followed Franz's advice and made for the left-hand peak, under the impression that if one proved accessible the other might also, and there really seemed no reason why we should not, if occasion demanded, ascend both.

Doubts as to the peak

Leading up from the glacier two distinct lines of attack presented themselves. The right-hand ridge descends to the col very precipitously, but still we had some idea that the rocks did not look wholly impossible. Again, on the left of the Dru the rocks are cut away very abruptly and form the long precipitous ridge seen from the Montanvert. This ridge was so jagged that we could see no possible advantage in climbing to any part of it, except just at the termination where it merges into the south-western face of the main mountain. The choice therefore, in our judgment, lay between storming the mountain by the face right opposite to us or else making for the col and the right-hand ridge; but the latter was the route that Messrs. Pendlebury and Kennedy had followed, and we could not hope to succeed where such giants had failed. Burgener indeed wished to try, but the rest of the party were unanimously in favour of attempting to find a way up the face, a route that at the worst had the merit of novelty. We thought too that if a closer acquaintance proved that the crags were ill arranged for upward locomotion, we might be able to work round on the face and so reach the col by a more circuitous route. With the naked eye – especially a myopic one – the rocks appeared unpromising enough; while viewed through the telescope the rocks looked utterly impossible. But

[3] Travels in the Alps, p. 119.

little faith, however, can be rested in telescopic observations of a mountain, so far as the question of determining a route is concerned. Amateurs, who, as a rule, understand the use of a telescope much better than guides, have not the requisite experience to determine the value of what they see, while but few guides see enough to form any basis for determination. Moreover, the instrument we carried with us, though it had an extraordinary number of sections and pulled out like the ill-fated tradesman's trousers in a pantomime, was not a very remarkable one in the matter of definition. Still it is always proper and orthodox to look at a new peak through the telescope, and we were determined not to neglect any formality on the present occasion.

Telescopic observations

We were now rather more than half-way up the Glacier de la Charpoua. To reach the most promising-looking point at which we might hope to get on the rocks, it was necessary to travel straight across the snow at about the level on which we stood. Now, this Glacier de la Charpoua is not constructed on ordinary principles. Instead of the orthodox transverse bergschrund it possesses a longitudinal crack running up its whole length, a peculiarity that vexed us hugely. Half a dozen times did we attempt to cross by some tempting-looking bridge, but on each occasion we were brought to a stand by impassable crevasses; then had to turn back, go up a little farther, and try again. It was already late in the day and we could ill spare the time lost in this to and fro movement. Eventually we reached a little patch of rocks not far from the head of the glacier. No sooner had we reached these rocks than the guides hunted up a suitable place and concealed some utterly worthless property as carefully as if they expected evil-minded marauders to be wandering about, seeking what they might pilfer. Having effected the cache with due care, Franz once again burst into a strange carol, the burden of which was unintelligible, but the chorus made frequent allusion to "der Teufel." We now saw that, after all, the only feasible plan would be to cut our way still higher up a steep slope, and thus to work right round, describing a large curve. An occasional step required to be scraped, for the glacier is in shadow till late in the morning, owing to the Aiguille Verte intervening and cutting off the sun's rays. Throughout the day our second guide had been burning with a desire to exhibit the good qualities of the most portentous ice axe I ever saw, an instrument of an unwieldy character resembling a labourer's pick on the top of a May pole. Its dimensions were monstrous and its weight preposterous: moreover, the cutting spike had an evil curve and, instead of hewing out blocks of ice neatly, preferred to ram a huge hole in the slope and stick fast therein, while a quiver ran through its mighty frame and communicated itself to the striker, who shuddered at each blow as after taking a dose of very bitter physic. However, Franz was so proud of his halberd that we were obliged to sacrifice rapid progress to the consideration of his feelings, and he was accordingly sent on to cut the steps which were now found necessary. With no little exertion did he construct a staircase of which the steps were about the size of foot baths, and with no slight impatience did we watch his gymnastics and athletic flourishes, which were a sort of mixture of tossing the caber and throwing the hammer combined with a touch of polo. Ultimately we were able to quit the glacier for the actual face of the mountain, at a point probably not very much below that struck by the previous party; but it was our intention at once to bear off to the left.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.