

THE WEISSHORN. By the Rev. LESLIE STEPHEN, M.A.

THE pyramid of the Weisshorn is one of the most exquisitely beautiful objects in the Alps. The only objection to the mountain is that his enormous size prevents your seeing him till you get a long way off. From whatever side, however, his graceful proportions display themselves, they excite an irresistible longing in the mountaineer to be perched on the top of his sharp snowy cone—a longing never yet gratified, except in the case of Professor Tyndall, who, in 1861, first reached the summit, and of myself, his only successor. The mountain-mass towers upwards between the valleys of Turtmann and Zermatt, about fifteen miles southwards from the Rhone.

Mountains of the lower rank generally look as if they had been formed by tilting up the edge of a thick layer of horizontal strata. One side is thus precipitous, the other a mere gentle slope. They may be compared in form to a writing desk. A well-known example of these writing desk mountains is the Righi, and I grieve to say that even the Oberland giants partake to some extent of this formation. The nobler rank of mountains is formed by the radiation of two or three grand spurs from a central knot, and of this class there is no finer example than the Weisshorn. Three great ridges descend steeply from the summit, like the claws of a gigantic tripod. Two of these are nearly in a straight line, one running approximately north and the other south. The third ridge is nearly at right angles to these two, running almost due east. In the compartment between the northern and eastern spurs lies the Bies Glacier. It is connected with the summit by long and extremely steep slopes of snow. In the compartment, again, between the eastern and southern spurs lies the Schallenberg glacier. Ranges of steep rocks rise round the whole basin of this glacier, except in one or two places where they are interrupted by couloirs of snow. Finally, on the western side the mountain presents one gigantic face of rocky precipice. The northern spur forks out at a considerable distance below the summit into two branches enclosing the Turtmann glacier.

My first attempt of this summer was made in company with Mr. Howells, with Melchior Anderegg and Franz Biener (of Zermatt). We started one morning from Zinal, with the intention of sleeping that night at the châteaux of Tracuit, and of next morning striking the northern ridge, by following the rim of the Turtmann glacier (which can easily be reached from this side) to the point of bifurcation just mentioned. A fearfully

cold and violent wind was blowing, and after a time Howells and I returned to the *châlets*, sending the guides on to explore. The said *châlets* consist of a roof (decidedly porous), a few posts for walls, and a floor of unutterable filth, open to the incursions of pigs and cows. The dry part of the roof covers the cheese-making apparatus. The more permeable part covers two small wooden trays filled with dirty remnants of hay, and one placed above the other like berths in a steamboat. I presume that the four travellers were to be jammed into one of these, and about six unwashed natives into the other. As, however, the natives talked a mysterious jargon, composed of the most unharmonious fragments of French, Italian, and German, they may have had other plans. I am willing to hope that they meant us to sleep with the cows. I was really not sorry when our guides on their return announced that we need not stay at this dismal abode. The *arête* was so precipitous, and cut into such jagged teeth, that Melchior said he thought it all but impracticable. A suggestion about 'lange Leiter,' which he threw out, was, I imagine, merely meant to avoid calling anything quite impracticable. I found out afterwards, what I might have known before, that this was the point reached by Mr. Wm. Mathews with J. B. Croz. As they also pronounced this *arête* impossible, I think it may fairly be assumed to be so for all ordinary purposes. The southern *arête* is still worse. It is cut off more abruptly than either of the others. I consequently resolved to attempt the eastern *arête*, that followed by Professor Tyndall, and am convinced that it will prove to be the only one practicable.

Accordingly, on the night of August 12th, I found myself, at the little *châlet* below the Schallenberg Alp. Mr. Howells had been compelled to leave me. I calculated that it would be unnecessary to follow Professor Tyndall's plan of sleeping on the rocks some two hours farther up, as a full moon enabled us to start at any time we desired. Even without a moon, a lantern and a native would enable one to avoid the penance of a night on freezing rocks, at a height of 10,000 feet. I curled myself up on some clean hay, congratulating myself on my wisdom, but feeling rather annoyed at my solitude. In 1859 I had slept at the same *châlet* with the same object in view. Not only had the cheerful mountain flea kept me company on that occasion with his playful bounds, but three friends, Messrs. Ormsby, Liveing, and Bruce, had been with me. We had on that occasion not started till four. It was late in the season. The party was too numerous for speed, because those in the rear were constantly checking the impetuosity of the leaders, who, in their

zeal, were kicking down occasional masses of heavy angular granite. We had consequently only advanced about half-way across the rocks when it became necessary to retreat. Warned by this misfortune, I sprang up early on the present occasion, and was out in the clear moonlight at 1 A.M., punctually. Never had I watched the sunset so anxiously as on the previous evening, and the light flakes of cloud which were drifting high above the highest mountain-tops before a gentle north-west wind. All the signs had been good, and now not a breath of wind was stirring, and every mountain was as clear as at noon-day. We followed exactly the same track as we had done before—with one exception. A Randa porter had offered to point out to me Professor Tyndall's route, and from over-anxiety I had accepted his services. He now misled us by inducing us to follow for a short way in Professor Tyndall's track, instead of our own. This would have been quite right, if we had slept in the same rocky lair as Professor Tyndall, but as we should have made a considerable détour to reach that lair, we, in fact, lost both time and temper in consequence. The porter was sent back to Randa as soon as we touched the ice, with something which had a superficial resemblance to a blessing. We were, however, on the rocks above the first small glacier by moonlight, and took our first breakfast at a height of, I guessed, 11,000 feet, before sunrise. We went steadily to work at the tiresome rocky labyrinth, keeping below the ridge, on its southern face, looking down upon the Schallenberg glacier. Once only we topped the ridge, and judged that as a rule it might be better to have crept along the top of the snowslopes on the north or 'Schattenseite.' The snow was now, however, too hard. I will not attempt to describe the dreary work of laboriously turning one rocky shoulder, covered with big loose stones, only in order to see another rocky shoulder, covered with big loose stones, just in front of you. Imagine a fraction of a vast stony horizontal wilderness, heaved into long parallel ridges, like a long ocean swell. Suppose that this wilderness had performed a miracle analogous to that by which the pavement of Glasgow astonished the Scotch divine after his whisky toddy, when it rose up and smote him in the face; you will then have a very fair notion of the monotonous piece of work which employed us for four or five hours. At eight o'clock we reached the point where the arête of rocks is merged in a more commonplace arête of snow. Here, after breakfast No. 2, we started along the arête, which has no very remarkable peculiarities, except that every successive knob along it looks exactly like the top, till you surmount it, and see

that the top has moved a little farther off than before. There is an occasional parapet of stones below you on the southern slope, but every now and then this ceases; the snow then ends abruptly at the edge of precipices of really frightful steepness. I have never seen more fearful cliffs. In passing these, it was of course necessary to cut steps with more than usual care, and from the state of the snow, we had a considerable deal of work to do, every bit of which was done by Melchior with unflagging spirit. At half-past ten, however, every difficulty was passed, and we found ourselves landed at the top.

Of all mountain tops that I know, that of the Weisshorn is, I think, the most beautiful, with perhaps, the one exception, of the Wetterhorn. It is none of the great round domes of snow where you might erect a tent to sleep in. It is formed by three of those firm and delicate edges which can only be modelled in the mountain snow, uniting to meet in a mathematical point. The three faces of the solid angle correspond to the three sides of the mountain. Curiously enough a crevasse crossed the névé within a few inches of the top. I flattened down the little cone with my foot, and felt in its highest degree the exquisite pleasure of standing in the thin, clear, and most exhilarating mountain air, with the Alpine world lying at my feet, from the Monte Viso to the Jura, and from the Bernina to Mont Blanc. It was warm, and absolutely calm, and only one deficiency occurred to my imagination. Need I mention a glass of British beer? We took off Biener's shirt for a flag, made a staff of his alpenstock, and at 10.45 turned to descend. The steps had partly melted, and made our progress slow. Melchior clung on, like a kind of universal anchor, to the occasional bits of rock till Biener and I had passed on to places of comparative safety, and were able to hold the rope firm whilst he followed. We returned for a knapsack which we had left at the foot of the snow arête, but instead of another meal, we started for a race over the rock slopes. We took them at a lower level than on our ascent, and found them easier. We did not halt once, though our mouths were parched, except at one place where the guides sucked a little trickling water, till we got back to the place where we had first reached the rocks. Here we had a final lunch and a cigar, and watched behind us one of those great showers of stones, so well described by Professor Tyndall, which we had successfully evaded by our forced march from the top. The return home needs no description. We passed a gap in the cliffs by the same guidance as that which Professor Tyndall describes, the track of a chamois which had ascended it. We had a quiet

lounge through the pleasant Alps into the deeply trenched gorge of the Zermatt valley, reached Randa at six, and, after an hour's halt and refreshment, got to the admirable Monte Rosa inn at Zermatt, with supper and civilisation, at 9 P.M.

I may remark that we had a clear view of the point reached by Mr. C. E. Mathews\* with Melchior in 1860. If they had not been prevented by the dangerous state of the snow from advancing, there was no obstacle between them and the summit of the ridge, and thence, to the top of the mountain, their progress would be easy.

### NOTES AND QUERIES.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE 'ALPINE JOURNAL.'—Sir,—A question has often presented itself to my mind, which the publication of the 'Alpine Journal' enables me to bring before those most likely to feel an interest in it. What is the life of the mountain guides when illness, or accident, or age renders them unable to follow their calling? There is a bond of union between the guide and his employer which seems to remove the former in some degree from his ordinary sphere. Dangers and difficulties shared, and the exchange of thoughts and opinions, which must result from days and sometimes weeks of companionship, wonderfully diminish, for the time, at least, the gulf that exists, socially, between them; while the courage, presence of mind, endurance, and unselfishness which is so often displayed in behalf of the traveller, makes him feel that his advantages of birth and education do not weigh so very heavily against native worth. Of course, all guides cannot thus be spoken of, but a large proportion can, if we may judge by the terms in which Alpine travellers speak of those they trust to. Should not our annually renewed intercourse with them excite some more lasting interest than that which originates in our need of them for the accomplishment of projected enjoyment? When we remember the steady eye, the firm foot, and the unflinching courage which many a time have ensured us a hairbreadth escape, we feel that the payment agreed upon, however liberal, but feebly expresses our obligations towards them. Might not some plan be suggested for establishing a fund to give aid in sickness, or a small pension when quite unable to work? The pastor, or some resident in each of the principal guides' localities, might, perhaps, be found willing to manage a portion of the fund; and if none were ever to benefit by it but those of sober, honest worth, it might prove an incentive to those who are still able to follow their calling. I believe that many a tourist would rejoice, on quitting the mountain districts, to leave behind him a

\* See note by that gentleman at p. 45.