

THE COMPARATIVE SKILL OF TRAVELLERS AND GUIDES.

By F. CRAUFURD GROVE. Read before the Alpine Club on June 13, 1870.

SOME years ago a member of this Club was ascending a small and easy peak in company with a famous Oberland guide. Part of their course lay over a snow-field sinking gradually on one side, sharply ended by a precipice on the other. The two were walking along, not far from the edge of this precipice, when the Englishman, thinking that an easier path might be made by going still nearer the edge, diverged a little from his companion's track. To his considerable surprise the guide immediately caught hold of him, and pulled him back with a great deal more vigour than ceremony, well nigh throwing him down in the operation. Wrathful, and not disinclined to return the compliment, the Englishman remonstrated. The guide's only answer was to point to a small crack, apparently like scores of other cracks in the névé, which ran for some distance parallel to the edge of the precipice, and about fifteen feet from it.

The traveller was not satisfied, but he was too wise a man to spend time in arguing and disputing, while a desired summit was still some distance above him. They went on their way, gained the top, and the traveller's equanimity was restored by a splendid view. When, on the descent, the scene of the morning's incident was reached, the guide pointed to the little crack in the névé, which had grown perceptibly wider. 'This marks,' he said, 'the place where the true snow-field ends. I feel certain that the ice from here to the edge is nothing but an unsupported cornice, hanging over the tremendous precipice beneath. It might possibly have borne your weight in the early morning, though I don't think it would. As to what it will bear now that a powerful sun has been on it for some time,—why, let us see.' Therewith he struck the névé on the further side of the ice sharply with his axe. A huge mass, some twenty or thirty feet long, immediately broke away, and went roaring down the cliff in angry avalanche. Whereat the traveller was full of amazement and admiration, and thought how there, on an easy mountain with smiling weather, he had not been very far from making himself into an avalanche, to his own great discomfort and to the infinite tribulation of the Alpine Club.

Now, was not this an instance of the knowledge of mountains which a man has whose life has been passed amongst them, and

which the traveller, who only roams amongst them at long intervals, can never hope to equal? This one case I have described may, I think, be taken as typical of many. I believe that most of those members of this Club whose experience is considerable, can recall occasions on which, notwithstanding their greatest care and best exertion, they would have fared ill had it not been for some Swiss, to whom 'the snows and rocks and clouds speak by signs which we are unable to read,' to use the language of Mr. Leslie Stephen. As it is with knowledge and judgment, so it is with the purely physical powers required for climbing. What Swiss traveller cannot recall many occasions, when he has seen a guide overcome difficulties which to him, the traveller, if unaided, must have brought utter and hopeless defeat?

I wish, if possible, to avoid exaggeration on this subject. I know that there has sometimes been a tendency shown to elevate the skill of guides into something almost supernatural, and a short time ago a writer in the 'Spectator,' obviously well acquainted with his subject, spoke of those writers in newspapers who seem to regard a guide as a kind of fetich, under whose protection nothing can miscarry, no evil can happen. Newspaper writers here, as in other cases, exaggerate a feeling which undoubtedly exists, but I must say that I think this feeling on the whole founded on good sense and long experience. I will even take the expression used. If any one says that my guide is a 'fetich' to me, may I not answer, 'That is only a figurative way of saying that I have thorough confidence in a man of courage and matured skill when he is engaged in following his own craft'? Let us imagine the same feeling in other things, and even this 'fetich' idea does not seem so very absurd. If three or four Englishmen are going down the rapids of a Canadian river, what is the skill of the boatmen but a 'fetich' to the passengers, who would inevitably be drowned if they tried to go over the course by themselves. What is the skill of an Indian hunter in finding a track but a 'fetich' to a less-experienced man who follows him.

I insist thus on the skill of the professional mountain guides, on their great superiority even to the strongest and most active amateurs, because I think that a disposition to underrate the power of guides, and, as a necessary corollary with enterprising men, a desire to undertake difficult expeditions without them, are likely to lead to practical results of a very serious nature. A gentleman of exceptionally large experience has recently written a work to prove that the greater number of Alpine expeditions may safely and enjoyably be

made without guides. I believe myself that he is mistaken, and I hope he will forgive me if I say that I think that anything like a general belief in his doctrine will probably bring some of his followers to perdition—in an earthly sense. On this work I shall have some remarks to make shortly. I would venture to offer briefly some general considerations first.

I maintain—to put what I have to say in a formal way—

1. That to be a good mountaineer is a very difficult thing, quite as difficult as to excel in any of the great athletic sports.
2. That men who make difficult glacier expeditions without being good mountaineers themselves, and without taking good mountaineers with them, run more or less into danger.
3. That some of the Swiss, living in a mountain country, do acquire very great skill, but that this cannot in the nature of things be attained by Englishmen living in England, any more than a Frenchman living in France can become a good cricketer.

With regard to the first matter, that mountaineering is a difficult thing. At the risk of being accused of a *petitio principii*, I must, having some regard for the time of those present, take this for granted when addressing the Alpine Club. I think that men who have made many expeditions in the high Alps are well nigh unanimous on this subject. Indeed, one has only to consider the remarkable union of qualities which is required for a first-class mountaineer. He must have some power of determining from below the best way up a mountain, or to the top of a col, a thing requiring a long-practised eye and considerable judgment. He must be able to see his way through the complicated entanglement of an ice-fall; to tell from a distance whether rocks are likely to be practicable or not; to follow his line of ascent down again with certainty over a wilderness of rock, where footsteps have left no trace; few know how difficult this is until they try to do it for themselves. He must be able to judge rapidly and surely whether snow is in a dangerous state, and whether séracs are likely to fall; must be strong and enduring, able to undergo the severe labour of making steps in the snow, or cutting steps in the ice, and, most important of all, must have that singular combination of strength with activity matured by long practice, which makes a man a good iceman and a good cragsman. I think it will hardly be said that this is an exaggerated description of what is required for a really good mountaineer, or that excellence is easy of attainment in an athletic pursuit where these qualifications are required. Now as to my second statement—that there will always be danger in glacier expeditions made by men who are not good mountaineers.

Here again I shall be brief. I am sorry to say that there is at hand a proof only too cogent and decisive. I need only point to the sad list of fatal Alpine accidents. Let me observe that these have not by any means been confined to expeditions of great difficulty, but have occurred on all kind of mountains, from the Matterhorn down to the tiny and mule-trampled Monte San Salvatore, where an unfortunate young Englishman was killed not long ago. It would be a waste of time to examine again at length cases which have been handled by critics far more competent than myself. The general opinion of experts has been, that these mishaps have been caused by neglect of the precautions which good mountaineers take and enforce, or, in other words, that there has been, in each case, a want either of skill or knowledge. I think, then, that I may fairly assume that there is some danger even in moderate glacier expeditions, unless fairly good mountaineers are of the party, and that there is considerable danger in great and difficult expeditions when undertaken without the leadership of first-rate mountaineers.

And now as to the other point—the question whether Englishmen can ever attain to some such degree of skill as I have endeavoured to indicate above. An opponent might admit all that I have hitherto said, and still urge that the English are quite as strong a race as the Swiss; that young Englishmen of the middle and upper classes excel in those sports which require a combination of strength with activity and power of endurance; that there is no reason why they should not excel in mountaineering, be it as difficult as may be, if they work at it enough. I should answer, that is in my opinion perfectly true, that the English are quite as strong and capable a race as the Swiss; indeed, that they probably surpass them. For instance, the Swiss are fond of wrestling, but I think that their wrestlers would have small chance against men from the north and west of England; but that, nevertheless, the Swiss are often good and sometimes first-rate mountaineers, while the Englishmen never are, for the very simple reason that they never have an opportunity of properly learning the work. Excellence in any difficult athletic pursuit can only be attained by the man who begins young and practises continuously, and how, with regard to mountaineering, any Englishman is to fulfil these conditions, it is beyond me to discover.

Let me compare the amount of training which a good Swiss guide receives with that which is undergone by a persevering and energetic traveller, and then let me, by way of illustration, attempt to show what hope of excellence in other work such an amount of training as the latter gets would give him.

The Swiss is on the mountain from his earliest childhood. When very young, if he is a strong and plucky boy, he begins to acquire surefootedness and a mountaineer's activity by having to follow about and watch over those enterprising and over-audacious creatures, goats, whom he constantly has to rescue from the dangerous places into which their bold greediness has led them. After some years of this and similar work, the Swiss, if ambitious and anxious to rise above his fellows in the village, takes to chamois hunting, which he begins probably just at that happy time of life between boyhood and early manhood, when skill in a difficult athletic pursuit is best attained. For year after year the Swiss passes his winter in this arduous sport, not unfrequently poaching in the summer besides, until, after many days, he gains the reputation—not easily earned in a Swiss village—of being a bold and skilful gems-jäger, and is an authority on all the adjacent glaciers and ridges. Travellers employ him, and he gets known by degrees. By the time when his reputation is established as a capable and trustworthy guide, he has probably been for eight or nine years constantly on the high mountains. Let me now see what sort of training a traveller gets. He goes to Switzerland probably at about two-and-twenty, that is, 'after the time at which athletic sports are best learnt,' to use again the language of Mr. Leslie Stephen. He spends probably some six weeks in the country, and makes on an average, if blessed with fine weather, about three expeditions a week. After this he comes back to England, and for more than ten months never sees glacier or mountain. The next season comes round. He again goes to Switzerland, again seeks the glaciers. Again a long period of inactivity follows, and so on for five years or so. At the end of such a time he would fairly be considered as a practised traveller. And what manner of chance has this practised traveller, after such late beginning and intermittent work as I have described, of vieing with or even approaching the skill of a man who has trod the mountains from childhood, and whose skill comes from practice of a lifetime? Let mountaineering be put out of question for the moment, and some other difficult sport or exercise taken. What would such an amount of training as I have described be worth? Take cricket for instance. Suppose a man beginning at two-and-twenty were to practise three times a week for six weeks, then not to touch a bat for ten months, then to have six weeks' practice again, and so on for five years. What sort of power would he have in the game? And what manner of cricketer would he be as compared, not with great players, but small professionals or

modest amateurs? Let a similar amount of work, begun as late, and broken by such periods of idleness, be done in boating or in cross-country riding, and where would the aspirant be, as compared again not to first-class, but to moderate oars and to fairly good sportsmen? I do not think there can be much doubt as to the answer. Well, mountaineering, as I have already said, is an athletic exercise or sport, differing, it is true, from those I have mentioned just as they differ from each other, but having one thing in common with them as they have one thing in common with each other—to wit, excessive difficulty; and I venture humbly to maintain that there is no reason for supposing that the difficulty of becoming a good mountaineer can be more easily or rapidly overcome than those difficulties which have to be vanquished in order to attain excellence in other great athletic exercises, and that therefore, for the reasons above stated, Englishmen can never hope, save in cases so exceptional as not to come within the scope of any general argument, to equal even second-rate guides, or to be anything but awkward tyros by the side of bold and experienced chamois hunters, such as those whose names are written in that *libro d'oro* which is to be found in Mr. Ball's 'Alpine Guide.'

Perhaps it may be said of what I have ventured to advance, that it is but killing the slain; that experienced travellers in the high Alps are agreed almost unanimously that in mountaineering the difference between the amateur and the professional is very great, indeed greater than in other athletic sports; and, moreover, that the Alps are quite dangerous enough to render expeditions undertaken by amateurs alone matters of more or less risk. Perhaps it is so. If the members of the Alpine Club are generally of this opinion, then, as I humbly think, so much the better. But is it absolutely so? Has not the unfounded self-confidence which led to the accidents of 1865 re-appeared? Last year we heard of the death of an Englishman of rare activity and strength, who was killed because he thought that he could do even as the guides do. The other day we heard of the death of a man in the flower of youth and strength, an athlete amongst athletes I understand, who was killed because he tried to make his way in the dark over the slopes of a very small mountain. And to add to these the testimony of one who, I am glad to say, is living, a book has appeared to prove the possibility of making in safety a large number of Alpine expeditions without guides, and to show the pleasure thence accruing to all concerned.

The Rev. A. G. Girdlestone, the author of the book in question, is a gentleman whose qualification to write on the subject

no one can dispute, and before briefly examining his account of his expeditions, I hope I may be permitted to pay my tribute of respect to his exceedingly pleasant and well-written narrative. Some admiration is also due to the graphic drawing with which the volume is adorned. I should say, by the way, that this drawing is the cause of the remarks I now venture to submit. It represents a stalwart young Englishman, who has contrived to get into such a position on the face of a cliff that he cannot go downwards, except in one fashion, or upwards or sideways at all, and cannot possibly hold on long where he is. A sympathetic head below is apparently receiving the last injunctions. When I first saw this engraving and read on the corresponding title-page that the work was called 'High Alps without Guides,' I thought that it was written to advocate the doctrine which I have endeavoured to maintain, and that the picture forcibly represented the sort of fix into which an Englishman gets when he goes into high places without his proper Alpine pastors and masters, and how, if he exalteth himself, he shall be most unpleasantly abased. When I discovered my mistake, and found but an Antipope where I expected infallible authority, I was moved to attempt a refutation and to appeal to the Alpine Club to confirm me. I have striven to show deductively, if so large a word may be allowed, why Englishmen cannot hope to rival or even approach guides. By a brief examination of Mr. Girdlestone's records of his expeditions, I will now attempt to show what mountaineering without guides is, as described by one who advocates it.

Twenty-one glacier expeditions made without guides are described or mentioned in the work, but it should be noted that these twenty-one are selected from a much larger number. The writer mentions at p. 57 that he has made more than seventy expeditions without guides. It may fairly be presumed that he has chosen the most successful ones, and that in the remaining forty-nine he did not consider himself fortunate. Bearing this in mind, let us see then what the selected twenty-one were like.

Four of these—to wit, the attempts on the Orteler Spitze, the Aletsch Horn, the Buet, and the writer's first attempt on the Wetterhorn, were complete failures. Four failures out of twenty-one are, however, no great number. Bad weather had something to do with them. How as to the seventeen successful ones?

Well, on one of them, the Weissthor, Mr. Girdlestone got off the right track in ascending, was in consequence exposed to a shower of falling stones, and had, to use his own words, 'to run for his life,' finding his way ultimately by the tracks

of another party. On another, the Sella Pass, he mistook the way down, and he and his companion had in consequence to pass the night out, sitting for eight hours on a narrow ledge of rock slanting downwards, their legs dangling in the air and stones falling close to them. The danger of being frozen to death was not inconsiderable. On another, the Oberland Trift Joch, Mr. Girdlestone began to cut steps on a snow-bridge too weak to support him. The bridge gave way; down went Mr. Girdlestone and his friend, falling twenty feet and alighting on their heads; after them playfully bounded a huge block of ice, but about this let me quote the writer's words: 'My coat was held firmly down under an immense block of ice by the elbow and right pocket. Had the block fallen an inch nearer, my right elbow must have been crushed, and we must have laid there and died.' That is, he and his companion must have died by one of the most horrible deaths which it is possible to conceive. Thus in three expeditions out of seventeen the writer and his companions had three narrow escapes, two caused by want of local knowledge which any common local guide would have supplied; the third by a mistake as to the tenacity of an ice-bridge, which probably no decent iceman would have made.

With respect to the fourteen remaining expeditions, I would observe that on four of them, the Tschingel, the Clariden Grat, the Alphubel, and the Col d'Herens, Mr. Girdlestone found his way in part by the tracks of others. Now of course he was perfectly right to take a track when he found it, but he can hardly say when he has done this that he has crossed a pass without guides. On some passes, the Alphubel and Tschingel for instance, the only function of a guide is to be a guide in the literal sense of the word, and to show the way. If a man crosses by the aid of the tracks which another man's guides have made, he has gone over by having the advantage of other men's work. It is noticeable that on two of these four passes, the Tschingel and Alphubel, Mr. Girdlestone lost his way after leaving the glacier when the tracks ceased. There remain then, out of twenty-one expeditions, ten in which Mr. Girdlestone succeeded without having a narrow escape, and without being aided by the tracks of others. These were the Adler, the Brunni Pass, the Ofen Fuorcla, the Löttschberg, the Löttschen Lücke, the Sursura Joch, the Strahl-eck, the Col du Tour, the Col du Mont Tondu, and the Wetterhorn, on which last, after one failure, Mr. Girdlestone succeeded by a second and most gallant effort. I gather from the writer's account that, out of these, four, although glacier

passes, were exceedingly easy, not more difficult apparently than the St. Théodule, and, if so, they would hardly come into the category of those expeditions which in the opinion of most Alpine men it would be imprudent to undertake without a guide. Be this as it may, there can be no doubt that some of the expeditions mentioned must have involved very considerable difficulties for men without professional aid, and that the ascent of the Wetterhorn especially was a remarkable feat. Indeed, I think that no one who reads Mr. Girdlestone's book can doubt that, on every expedition described, he did everything that could be done by courage, determination, and such skill as an amateur can possess. That skill I have endeavoured to show must, in almost all cases, be very small.

The net result, then, of mountaineering without guides in the present instance appears to be this:—that in twenty-one expeditions selected out of seventy for description, the traveller failed absolutely four times; was in great danger three times; was aided in finding the way by the tracks of other men's guides four times; succeeded absolutely without aid of any kind ten times on expeditions, four of which were very easy, three of moderate difficulty, and one very difficult. Making excursions without guides is no doubt a bolder and harder thing than making them with guides; but mountaineering, however bold and hardy or not, is after all a sport not a duty. Whether in going without guides the game is worth the candle, Mr. Girdlestone has, as it appears to me, given us a very good opportunity of judging.

Before concluding this paper, I would say that I feel that some apology is due from me to the Alpine Club for bringing forward a subject which many members of Alpine experience very much greater than mine are infinitely better qualified to treat than I am. Unfortunately for this matter, the men who are most active in the Alps are often when at home the most active in the work of life, and have little time to spare for the writing or reading of papers. I have therefore ventured to speak on the subject in the hope that the Alpine Club may pronounce an opinion against mountaineering without guides, a practice which I believe to be fraught with danger, unless the most extreme and elaborate precautions are taken. I would then fain finish according to a good old-fashioned formula, by saying that if the opinions elicited from leading members of the Club by this paper are the means of preventing any enterprising young gentleman from knocking himself into little bits, breaking his back, rubbing his head off, or enshrining himself in a glacier, then these humble lines will not have been written in vain.

NOTE BY THE EDITOR.

A discussion followed the reading of the above paper, in which Messrs. Ball, Wills, W. Mathews, Ramsay, Foster, Freshfield, Hudson, and Stephen took part. The opinions expressed were generally in accordance with those defended by Mr. Grove. It was agreed, on the one hand, that it was impossible to lay down any rigid principles upon the use to be made of the assistance of guides. The skill of the travellers, the difficulty of the mountain, the state of the weather, and various other conditions must be taken into account before the prudence of undertaking any expedition without guides can be precisely estimated; and as no exact measure of the degree of difficulty can be obtained, the question must be left in each case to the judgment of the persons concerned, with, of course, a general presumption in favour of the more prudent decision. On the other hand, it was agreed with entire unanimity, that the expeditions described by Mr. Girdlestone by no means justified that gentleman's inferences. It was the general opinion that he had not taken proper precautions, and that, if his example should be generally followed, the result would be a frightful increase of accidents. Mr. Wills called special attention to the extreme impropriety of taking inexperienced travellers upon expeditions, which can never be free from a certain amount of danger. By such a course the risk is enormously increased, and almost every fatal accident has been due either to the non-observance of this rule, or, though more rarely, to a neglect of the well-understood precautionary measures by more experienced men. Nothing can make mountain expeditions, whether in the higher or in the lower regions, entirely free from risk; but it was agreed, without a single dissentient, that it is highly desirable that it should be known to be the settled opinion of the Alpine Club, that, whilst the danger may be reduced to an insignificant amount by proper care, the neglect to take guides on difficult expeditions, and especially the neglect to take them when the party is not exclusively composed of practised mountaineers, is totally unjustifiable, and calculated to produce the most lamentable results. Whilst it is impossible to give a formal code of rules upon the subject, or to give effect in any other way to the general opinion of the Club, it was desired that their opinion should be recorded in the Journal in the most unequivocal terms.