



"HE PROBABLY OWED HIS LIFE TO HIS COOLNESS."

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ON MOUNTAINS, AND ON MOUNTAINEERING IN GENERAL.
By Count HENRY RUSSELL. Read before the Alpine Club, May 1871.

CONSIDERING how little I know of the Alps, where so many members of the Alpine Club have toiled for years, and won immortal fame, throwing the feats of Léotard himself into the shade, it is with great hesitation and diffidence that I have been prevailed upon by some kind friends to come forward to-day, and say something of my own experience in different parts of the world, but more especially among the Pyrenees, where probably twenty summers of my life have been—not usefully, perhaps, but actively—spent in explorations of snow and rocks. Mont Blanc is, I fear, the highest peak I have ever climbed. I never tumbled down a precipice nor disappeared under an avalanche—never analysed or discovered a plant; and the sole accident I might speak of was being lost, without food or companion, for three terrible days on the New Zealand Alps. But most of you, I hope and believe, will acknowledge that in order to say something interesting or new about peaks, enthusiasm and the habit of observing are often sufficient. We need not know the age of mountains, their weight, and the names of their plants or fossils, nor have broken any of our limbs on them, to speak of their beauties or their perils; and it is not in the Alpine Club I need fear to be contradicted, if I say boldly that there is no passion more innocent, more indisputable and more manly, than that of scaling peaks, even if science gains nothing by it, for in legitimate pleasures there is always wisdom; and, no ladies being present, I will not scruple to add, that of human passions those connected with peaks are often the strongest, although they last so long.

After these preliminaries, let me first say a word about the Pyrenees, which none of you seem to respect, perhaps because their glacier-fields are limited and far between, or else because not one of their summits attains 12,000 feet.

But even admitting what cannot be denied, that mere elevation has much to do with the attractiveness and the prestige of mountains, who can fix the height at which a peak is worthy of respect, and deserves to be called fascinating or perilous? I should say 10,000 feet (I mean in Europe). But if we once admit this theory, that the difficulties or majesty of mountains invariably increase with their elevation, the Alps themselves will have to be despised, for there are plains in other lands—in Thibet, for instance—where battles have been fought as high as Mont Blanc, and where its altitude becomes nothing. Must we ridicule it for that? In the appreciation of mountains, height therefore is not everything; for, after all, the most formidable and inaccessible aiguilles in the world are the spires of cathedrals, if climbed from outside, although not one of them is 500 feet, and they have no glaciers.

As for dangers, indeed the Pyrenees have theirs—plenty of them. Let any one who doubts it climb the frightful arêtes of the Balaïtous, or the couloirs of its precipices, with the huge crevasses of its eastern glacier yawning below. Perhaps, if you fell there, the impetus would carry you over any crevasse. No rocks could be climbed more difficult than those of the Balaïtous, only 10,318 feet above the sea. Indeed, speaking of rocks, perhaps I may venture to say that a Pyrenæan chasseur, though timid on ice, would astound any mountaineer the moment rocks are in question. He is marvellous there: no quadruped could follow him. And the reason is plain; for although some glaciers in the Pyrenees are eight miles in length, and the Vignemale Glacier has crevasses, séracs, and ice-pinnacles as enormous and blue as any in Europe, still the natural element of a mountaineer, in those hot climates, is mostly rock. There is step-cutting too, and some summits could not be reached without an axe; but, alas! they are so little known, that not one man visits them in ten years—some of the most snowy regions in the chains of Luchon have not even a name! So deserted, so misrepresented, and so ignored are those grand and sunny Pyrenees, which in some things surpass the Alps—in their tints, for instance, the purity of their waters, the loveliness of their skies, and their magnificent contrasts of torrid blue with snowy cones as white as the poles. Perhaps no one could ever paint or describe the calm and peculiar beauty of an autumn sunset on those Pyrenæan ranges. Certainly not I;

for, except on the plains of Bengal, where, face to face with the Sikkim Himalayas, and already surrounded by night, you can still see hundreds of snowy peaks, reddened with unearthly colours and shooting up six miles through the gloom and vacuum—except in those miraculous countries, with their oceans of snow and their forests as black as midnight, where you are so tempted to fall upon your knees and think you can never admire a mountain again—except in those enchanted lands, never have I seen any sunsets so tropical, and so impossible to describe, as those of a Pyrenæan autumn. No, not even in the Andes, of which Mr. Hall has spoken so truly, when he told you they were so bare and so monotonous; indeed, they seem, at a distance, to have no definite snow-line at all. And there are peaks in Bolivia, 22,000 feet high, and even more, where not a particle of snow remains to prove their height, after rainless or long summers.

Still, the Andes will, let us hope, be soon explored; and the Chimborazo, especially—the most famous, though not the loftiest of peaks—must and will be assaulted and conquered. I was not near enough to see it; but it seems probable, from what we know about it, that the difficulties would not be great, considering all the advantages it has. In the first place, its latitude: it is under or near the Equator, consequently no snow would be found until quite near the top—probably not before 18,000 feet. Then its base is itself so high that the real ascent would thus be diminished by 9,000 feet, the starting-point being Quito, a large and flourishing town, with plenty of hotels and every reasonable comfort. The shape of the Chimborazo is, according to all accounts, also in its favour: it is an immense cone, with gentle slopes. What stopped Humboldt was an arête; but, in the present state of science, no arête ever seen ought to stop any one calling himself a mountaineer. In fact, the one—the great—difficulty would probably consist in the rarefaction of the air.

And here allow me to make a few remarks, which may not be out of place. I am afraid there is a tendency in the Alpine Club to deny or underrate danger in mountain ascents, and to maintain that imprudence alone explains all accidents. Now I beg to protest most energetically against such a fatal doctrine. Danger is, no doubt, one of the charms of mountains, and in many cases their greatest attraction. It has a mesmeric effect. An easy peak is left alone, and deserves to be so. But, that granted, it is surely one thing to face peril, and another to deny its existence. Well, there are two dangers which, in my mind, will for ever attend ascents, even by balloon, in the high

regions of air ; one of them, it is true, might be called a great inconvenience, rather than a danger—I mean the action on the lungs of air reduced to half its density ; but the other danger I feel sure no one will hesitate, on reflection, to call by its proper name—and that is, the *weather*.

I am indeed sorry to see that some of the greatest authorities in the Alpine Club have gone the length of utterly denying any such thing as the painful phenomenon known in all lands by the name of ‘mountain-sickness,’ or, at least, of calling it an exception, or mere fatigue and exhaustion. Very privileged lungs may rise very high, and continue to breathe quite comfortably. In the same way, some travellers are exempt from sea-sickness ; but you might as well deny one of those evils as the other ; and mountain-sickness is an infirmity known and felt all over the world (though less in the tropics)—in the Andes, and in the Altaï, in the Himalayas, where the silly natives attribute it to the exhalations of a venomous plant—in fact, everywhere. No animal is anywhere exempt from it at a certain elevation ; and as regards myself, I humbly confess that I could scarcely breathe on the top of Mont Blanc ; in fact, we were all sick, more or less, including the guides. On the Calotte, where the slopes are nothing, not one of us could walk more than thirty-four steps without a good halt. And it was not fatigue, for we all ran down in two hours to the Grands Mulets, in excellent spirits and health.

However, I am ready to grant that mere height is not exclusively the cause of this painful feeling. I believe, and others have believed before me, that snow has a great deal to do with it, for the moment you touch *terra firma* you feel relieved. Has not every one of us often observed that on glaciers the air has a metallic taste, analogous to snow-water—that it feels vitiated, as if ice and snow poisoned it in evaporating? Why is it that under the tropics, where you can walk on grass up to 18,000 feet, this nausea and sleepiness, not unlike somnambulism, are only felt at much greater heights than in Europe?

In any case, whatever the reason may be, that peculiar sickness is plainly quite beyond dispute, and man can no more live at certain altitudes than in the depths of the ocean.

Now, to the weather, if you will forgive me for alluding briefly to so many subjects. Perhaps it is because my own experience of weather has generally been a sad one, but I am bound to say that to me the weather seems not only the most formidable of all dangers connected with ascents or travel, but greater by far than all the rest put together. Let us reflect

and remember, and surely none of us will then speak lightly of polar colds in mid-summer, of furious blasts, of snow-storms and lightning. In certain winds man cannot live, especially on an arête or a glacier; and, on the other hand, given a calm and sunny day, things are greatly simplified. But on the Alps, of which the martyrology could fill a book, is it not true that bad and dangerous weather is constantly to be met with, and that it is a rule, and not an exception? Do not snow-storms, as violent as typhoons, but with Patagonian horrors of every variety, burst several times a week upon the Alps, with such fury and pertinacity that Alpine travel, in numberless cases, becomes a mere battle between the elements and man? It is the same at sea and on deserts, where the weather literally kills travellers wholesale. Indeed, if I were not selfish, I could give many a proof of the perils of snow and sand, and wind, sadly illustrated by my own travels. Even in the Pyrenees I was once thrown down by the wind, with four strong men, and we were blown away like feathers or straw. Fortunately, it was on a level snow-field. On an arête, none could have lived. And on the cold and lofty solitudes of the Desert of Gobi, the 'roof of the world,' as it is called, which I crossed in the depth of winter in going from Moscow to Peking, and where we ate brandy, with the Fahrenheit thermometer at 90° below freezing-point, I really could not say how often we were assailed, especially in returning in spring, by such storms of sand or snow that the word 'infernal' is the only one I can apply to them. And so it is on mountains—often, very often, I should even say oftener in summer than in winter. This seems a paradox, but I think it is true. And Mr. Moore has told you the same thing; but I am very glad to be able to confirm his conclusions. I believe that November and spring are by far the worst and most stormy seasons on mountains; summer is a little better, but mid-winter is, perhaps, on the whole, the best and the safest of all. Of course there are plenty of exceptions; but, as a rule, in mid-winter both snow and air appear to fall asleep; there is a lull of about two months between the angry storms of December and those of March. Then the sky is clear, spotless, and calm. And so it is in high latitudes. Never have I seen weather more cheerful and lovely, on the whole, than in Siberia in the heart of winter. On the Gobi Desert, once behind the Altaï, it became very bad; but no rules apply to deserts, where caprice reigns supreme. In Siberia it seldom snows in mid-winter; the air is calm, and when, from a hot room, you look outside at the deep blue sky, the blazing sun, the peaceful wilderness,

and the smoke curling up so slowly from the roofs in vertical columns coloured by morning or evening tints, you might imagine you were in the tropics. Winter is the proper season for travelling in high latitudes, and, for my part, I have no doubt that if ever the poles are reached, it will be in winter, on the ice and in sledges—never by navigation.

Indeed, I would say the same of the Himalayas. If ever those huge peaks are climbed, I strongly suspect it will be in winter, by sleeping for weeks in bags made of rein-deer or other furs, and in snow-huts, such as the Esquimaux are used to build in a few hours. The storms of summer are quite frightful on the Himalayas.

But, strange to say, on many mountains the winter seems to be not only calm and safe, but much warmer than is supposed. On February 11, 1869, I reached the summit of the Grand Vignemale, in the Pyrenees, with two first-rate guides of Gavarnie, Henri and Hippolyte Passet. It was, I admit, extremely fatiguing, as we walked in soft snow for sixteen hours. But dangers there were none, although this peak is almost 11,000 feet. Avalanches do not fall in winter. The eastern glacier, so fearfully crevassed in July, had quite disappeared under snow-hills, undulating all over it like some monstrous waves on an ocean of milk or cream. Both heat and light became intense. The peak itself, which rises from the glacier like an island upon the sea, was free from snow, save a few specks here and there, which melted in the sun, and fell on the hot slopes with all sorts of murmurs and whispers. On the very summit (10,820 feet), my thermometer marked 50° in the shade at 3 o'clock P.M., a temperature higher than any observed on that day at Tarbes, on the plains. In fact, the two guides wanted to sleep, and suffered from the heat, which felt like summer.

As for beauty and majesty, nothing ever surpassed or equalled them in the finest days of July.

Winter ascents appear to me to be especially a question of fatigue, the snow being generally softer than might be expected.

Now, before ending this very long paper, my friend Packe tells me I ought to say something of my last summer's encounter with the brigands in Aragon. But I hope the Pyrenees will not suffer from it, as such an accident never happened before in any part of them, and they are just as safe at Regent Street, by night or by day.

It was in July, after the hottest days I have ever experienced in Europe, and a little after midnight. We were four:

M. Lequentre,—a Parisian gentleman of almost unlimited mountaineering powers—myself, and two young guides of Gavarnie, Henri and Célestin Passet. As the night before we had bivouacked, rather than slept, on the top of the Coteilla, at about 10,000 feet, and without fire or shelter, we were very tired; so after midnight, after admiring for hours the exquisite grandeur of the whole scenery, the lofty old pines which stood in thousands all round us, and the full moon which sent streams of silver on the glaciers of Mont-Perdu in the distance, M. Lequentre and myself went to sleep in an empty cabane on the edge of the lawn, where, most fortunately for us, the two guides remained outside, near the fire. We had not slept for half an hour, when I was seized convulsively by Célestin, who, in an agony of most excusable terror, told me to go out at once and look, as four hideous Spaniards were just before the door, armed to the teeth, with glittering daggers round their waists, an axe and a rifle. Let it be remembered that none of us was armed. I went out, looking, but not feeling, very composed, and shall never forget what I saw. There were four men standing like statues on the other side of the fire, one behind another, and at not more than about a dozen yards from the cabane. They did indeed look like four wild beasts, ready to spring forward; or like four demons, as the red flames of the fire threw strange and angry glares upon their bronzed faces. We stood with our backs to the cabane, and resistance or threats being plainly useless, I simply asked them why they were so armed; I told them they had nothing to fear from us, that we were honest men, and that I promised to pay for the cabane if it was theirs. I also offered them wine and provisions. . . . At that moment, that is, after a few seconds, the one in front levelled his gun at us most deliberately, and, aiming well, he fired. I think his hand shook; for the bullet, grazing the right ear of my friend Lequentre, struck with a hiss the wall of the cabane.

I need not tell you that, as we were not there to fight for honour or country, and we had no weapons but alpenstocks, we ran away, and all vanished in one second, I however, saving my knapsack, but leaving behind my boots, sleeping bag, alpenstock, etc. etc. Shooting across the lawn, which was about 300 yards long, with the full moon upon my back, I most luckily managed to reach the woods before the savages had reloaded their gun, and there I went on, running madly down, upon loose stones, and slopes almost impossible, until at length my lungs gave way, and I had to stretch myself under a dark pine, then under another, and so on, until I

chose one, and rested there. Then it was I began to shudder, as I thought of my three companions, not knowing in the least what direction they had taken, and having no doubt that they were all either murdered, or lost without hope in those immense pine-forests and solitudes, where none of them had ever been before. No words could possibly express my anguish and agonies during that terrible night. But it became worse still, when, a little later, I heard the brigands, now more numerous, approaching me on all sides with hideous yells. Thinking the last moment had come, like eleven years ago on the New Zealand peaks, I recommended my soul to God. But the shadow of my pine, and Providence especially, saved me. Not one of the brigands saw me; and the moment daylight came, hearing nothing, I most cautiously crept down to the little village of Plan, four miles below, where, awaking almost everyone, I at once despatched to the fatal forest the strongest man I could get, being myself barely able to stand, after such emotions and two consecutive nights without sleep. At length, after two long and cruel hours, I saw my three unhappy companions emerge from the forest, silent and ghastly, but, thank God! alive. Célestin had escaped through the pines, and was not touched. But not so with Lequentre. Caught on the lawn, and knocked down by seven bandits, with three huge blades upon his breast, and the muzzle of the gun on his face, he probably owed his life to his coolness, but lost his purse, his rings, his watch, etc.—in all 18*l*. Henri Passet, his guide, seized, as he came down too soon from the branches of a pine, had to bow his neck under the axe, and felt the edge of it for several minutes at the root of his hair. But they did not kill him either, and Lequentre, once sure of his life, and utterly overpowered by fatigue, not only smoked, but fell asleep whilst they were still there! They were even civil enough to give him back one of his shirts!

Nevertheless, my escape had made them so furious, that, in a fit of exasperation, they bombarded the poor cabane with an artillery of stones, hoping I might still be hidden under the roof, of which the beams soon broke down with a great crash. Daylight having come, they disappeared at length, yelling like demons and cannibals; and, I fear, not half of them have yet been arrested. Justice in Spain is as slow as railways.

Excuse these long and personal details. If they interest you, I sincerely hope they will deter no one from visiting the Pyrenees, where crimes are almost unheard of, and where Nature itself is not more pure and innocent than man.