An Adventure on the Aiguille du Plan. By J. Baumann. (Read before the Alpine Club, April 5, 1881.)

THE Aiguille du Plan (12,051 feet in height), the scene of the following adventure, is an important feature in a range of rocky precipices which rise abruptly above the S.E. side of the valley of Chamonix. From a picturesque point of view they are to my mind surpassed by none in the Alps, and from the climber's point of view they possess the rare merit of having as yet resisted all attempts to scale them. All their most prominent summits have, it is true, been taken in flank, but the N.W. wall of rocks still affords a splendid field for enterprise to those who take pleasure in difficult rock climbing.

On my arrival at Chamonix, in August 1880, I found my friend Cullinan's guide, Andreas Maurer, at my disposal. Cullinan was to have come out with me, but was detained in England by the unusually late sitting of Parliament.

My guide, Emile Rey, was suffering from the effects of two nights' severe exposure during an ascent of Mont Blanc from the Glacier du Brouillard, and was consequently not yet available for active service. I had promised Cullinan not to woo any of the virgin peaks on which we had set our hearts until he could join me, so that I was rather puzzled how to employ my time in the interval. One afternoon, whilst examining the Aiguille du Midi, I recollected the great interest with which I had watched Messrs. Dent and Maund during their splendid attempt on its N.W. face in August 1879—an attempt which would undoubtedly have been crowned with success had they not been forced to take to the southern side of the final rocks in order to escape the fury of a sudden and violent storm. From the Midi my eyes wandered to the rocks of the Plan. On comparing the two peaks it struck me that the latter did not present a much more formidable appearance than its better known neighbour, although in all conscience both looked sufficiently forbidding. But the experience of all climbers proves that the effect produced upon the imagination by apparently inaccessible precipices is frequently the sole reason for their remaining untried; one cannot decide upon the practicability of rocks until they are actually within one's grasp; and as for snow and ice slopes which look almost perpendicular when seen from below, one knows that the laws of gravity fix the highest angle at which they can lie.

In short, I assumed, perhaps too hastily, that, because I had often been before imposed upon by appearances, therefore

everything was possible; and difficult though it looked, I was resolved to try conclusions with the Aiguille du Plan. Maurer, always ready for an adventure, accepted the idea with alacrity and spent a long time examining the face of the mountain through Couttet's telescope, but, unlike myself, the more he looked the less he liked it.

In order to obtain a better view of the lower rocks and to make a rough sketch, on which to mark the most likely looking line of ascent, we strolled up the slopes of the Brévent. Seen from here the range looks even steeper than it does from Chamonix. A broken wall of rock crowned with towers faces you with sharply defined outlines; here and there excrescences in the shape of icefalls and patches of snow cling to it in a marvellous way; and nestling immediately at its foot lies the hamlet of Chamonix. Strange, I thought, that, when mountaineers are sighing for fresh worlds to conquer, and lamenting that every peak has been climbed, this rock-wall lying closer to a great climbing centre than any I know should never have been attempted. Of course the summit of the Plan had already been reached by Mr. Eccles in July 1871, but he had started from the Glacier du Géant, on which side the shape of the peak is entirely different, and this fact did not in the slightest degree lessen the pleasure and excitement which I hoped to derive from a tussle with these tempting-looking crags. Having once determined to try the Aiguille du Plan, I fell into that restless and excitable frame of mind which generally accompanies the resolve to accomplish something of which one cannot precisely gauge the difficulty, and chafed at the enforced inaction caused by Rey's indisposition. He, poor fellow, was still looking the picture of misery, limping about Couttet's garden with blood-shot eyes and swollen lips.

The weather was all this time brilliant—too brilliant in fact, for the neighbouring peaks looked treacherously near, and the rays of the sun produced that biting sensation which the weatherwise always regard as an indication of sudden change.

Anxious to set at rest a doubt which had arisen in my mind as to the possibility of even reaching the lower rocks of the Plan, I started with Maurer, on August 14, for the Châlet de Blaitière, with the intention of passing the night there. The night being fine and the châlet dirty, we preferred, however, to camp out on the grass slopes a little higher up. The next morning we rose betimes, and after an hour's scramble over moraine and rock *débris* reached the Glacier de Blaitière. The pyramids of the Aiguille de Blaitière and the furrowed cliffs of the Plan now towered directly over us, descending in an almost

unbroken line several thousand feet straight to the glacier on which we stood, silently admiring their simple grandeur.

But how to climb them? One thing was certain: the smooth glacier-worn rocks which form the base of the Plan were impossible. These rocks are crowned by a steep ice-wall, which is traversed by an immense gap, the result of a displacement of the whole mass of ice. To reach the actual Aiguille du Plan it was obvious that this ice-wall must be crossed diagonally, and in order to reach the ice it would first be necessary to attack the laminated rocks at the foot of the Blaitière.

We were still some distance from these rocks (at a height of about 7,000 feet), and seen through the telescope they looked as though they might 'go.' Another hour and we were on them. Good rocks they turned out to be, affording slight but sufficiently safe hand and foot hold. We crossed them transversely until further progress was barred by a smooth, almost perpendicular slab of rock against which the ice-wall abuts, and, no longer finding sufficient support, breaks up and falls in confused masses on to the glacier below.

We saw that the ice-wall above us might be reached by cutting steps up a jagged knife edge of ice, which appeared to be the only connecting link between ourselves and it. But we had spent much time in examining our peak from the glacier, and the sun was already sufficiently powerful to render the rotten ice unsafe, so, having attained the object of that day's reconnoitring expedition, and found a way from the glacier on to the Plan, we returned to Chamonix in high spirits and full of confidence. Two days later Rey reported himself fit again and ready to accompany me anywhere. We accordingly busied ourselves with the usual preliminaries for a mountain expedition, and requisitioned the tent which Dent had kindly left in Couttet's charge the previous year 'pro bono publico.' During the afternoon of August 16, in brilliant weather and under a hot sun, we slowly toiled up the grass slopes leading to the Plan des Aiguilles.

We were quite an imposing caravan. Davidson, Eccles, and Frank Hartley, with their respective guides, bent on having another try at the Aiguille des Charmoz, accompanied me as far as the Châlet de Blaitière, and besides Maurer and Rey I had two porters to carry the tent, blankets, &c., to the site I had fixed upon at the foot of the Glacier de Blaitière.

By the time we had reached the châlet the sky had clouded over; big drops of rain fell at intervals, the wind rose, and a night in the tent did not seem a cheerful prospect. Soon after

we left our companions the rain came down in torrents, and we thought it best to pitch our tent whilst still in the pine region, make a big fire, and dry ourselves if possible. After a most unpleasant night I was nothing loth to return to Chamonix for breakfast, leaving Maurer and Rey to carry the tent higher up. The morning was bright and the air crisp, but heavy clouds hung sulkily along the Aiguilles Rouges, and the wind being in the wrong quarter, I resigned myself to the prospect of further delay. During dinner, however, the wind changed to the N.W., a gorgeous sunset lit up the Mont Blanc range, my spirits revived, and life assumed rosy tints, reflected perhaps from the setting sun.

In this frame of mind I determined to go for my peak then and there. The guides were taken aback at the unusual time of day for making a start, suggested that, as we had waited so long, we might at least wait until the next day, hinted that the weather was unsettled and that the provisions were not ready. But I would not listen to their remonstrances, and announced my resolve to start for the Plan that night. On August 18, shortly after midnight, we accordingly set out by bright moonlight, and soon gained the plateau which crowns the grass slopes. At 3 A.M. we arrived at our tent; the moon had disappeared behind Mont Blanc, and it was now pitch dark, the darkness which precedes the dawn. Perhaps still chafing at the abruptness of our departure from Chamonix, or impressed by the difficulty of the task which lay before them, the guides were not in a talkative mood. After preparing our coffee and smoking our pipes in silence, we emerged from the tent at 3.30, and directed our steps by lantern-light towards the glacier, which we reached in about half an hour. It was now sufficiently light to dispense with the lanterns. We once more traversed the rocks of which I have before spoken, but this time their difficulty was increased by the slight glaze of ice which covered them.

At 5 A.M., with a shout of exultation, Maurer struck his axe into the great ice-wall which confronted us, and our serious work commenced. The first steps were decidedly nasty. The broken ridge by which we hoped to attain the main mass of the ice-slope was very narrow, very steep, and in a somewhat disintegrated condition. Having traversed this ridge, we reached the ice-slope, and found it about 800 feet wide, shelving steeply down to smooth rocks. Cross this we must, or else turn back.

We had provided ourselves with three Club ropes, each ninety feet in length; these we joined together and roped our-

selves. A very unusual length of rope to use in traversing a long steep slope, you will say, but we wished that one at least of the party should always be in as safe a position as circumstances would allow, and the longer the distance between each man the greater the chance of attaining this end. Rey planted his axe almost up to the head in a friendly fissure, and wound the rope round it, whilst Maurer commenced the arduous task of hewing big footsteps in the ice. Each step took several minutes to cut, which gave me ample leisure to admire the magnificent rock masses with which we were about to do battle. At length we reached the bergschrund, and great was my relief when Maurer's broad features expanded into a smile, and with a cheery 'Es geht' he swung himself into its depths. In about ten minutes he reappeared on the other side. Had the schrund proved impassable our expedition would have been nipped in the bud, but this barrier overcome, we with overweening confidence considered our peak as good as won. Our assurance was based on the observations we had made from below, which left us under the impression that the greatest difficulties of the expedition would be encountered at the outset. The rest appeared to be merely a matter of hard climbing and step-cutting. After events proved how delusive were our hopes. The difficulties steadily increased as we ascended. So confident were we of success after the passage of the schrund, that we went the length of sacrificing some of our wine in order to lessen our impedimenta. Before resuming the work of cutting up the ice-slope I took the opportunity of having a peep at Chamonix through my glasses. Our friends at Couttet's had moved the telescope from its customary perch to a more convenient spot for observing us, and little knots of people had assembled round the big telescope in the streets of Chamonix, evidently watching our movements. We must have afforded them plenty of amusement and mild excitement.

The art of climbing was represented in all its phases by our acrobatic performances, some of which were, I feel convinced, not of a very graceful nature. At the head of the ice-slope is a long knife-like ice arête, which had to be passed by a sort of straddling process. The first man, Maurer, received a helping shove with my ice-axe from behind; the second a pull and a shove; while Rey's ascent, much to his disgust, was deprived of all dignity by the vigorous hauls of Maurer and myself. At the end of our cold ride we found ourselves at about 9 A.M. on a big knob of smooth rock, up which we wriggled, only to find a succession of similar knobs, varying in size and

steepness, all of which required much sprawling, hoisting, and striving before they were topped. Rather stiff work this, but what next? Utterly impossible precipices to the right, walls of ice to the left, and rocks immediately facing us, split up into a number of gullies running parallel to each other, and mostly coated with ice, reminding me of the big couloir on the Dru. None of these looked inviting, but by shifting our position slightly we caught sight of a *cheminée* deeper than the rest, up which Rey volunteered to go. Fine cragsman though he is, he found it no easy task. The *cheminée* is perhaps forty to fifty feet long, its sides are unpleasantly smooth, and scarcely the width of a man's shoulders. He 'kneed and elbowed' his way up in grand style. In the event of a slip we could have done nothing to break his fall. Maurer looked on approvingly, and when it came to his turn to swarm up did not disdain to make use of the rope which Rey dangled down to him. Out of breath from our exertions, we welcomed a friendly ledge of rock, which afforded us the last opportunity for resting and eating which presented itself. But little wine remained to us. The tin which Rey carried had been broken on a sharp projection of rock. 'Vorwärts' was now again the word.

More difficult rocks, more steep ice-slopes, until at two o'clock in the afternoon we reached the foot of a big triangular rocky mass, which is a conspicuous feature on the face of the mountain. From this point we could see the sharp outlines of the Blaitière still high above us, proving to us that we were much farther from the summit of the Plan than we had imagined, and that our expedition would, therefore, be a much longer one than we had bargained for. This conviction came upon us all of a sudden. Hitherto all our energies and thoughts had been concentrated to such an extent upon overcoming the successive difficulties which we encountered that no one asked, 'How far may we be from the top?' Besides, none of us could tell, and our one absorbing idea now was to attain some point from which we could effect the comparatively easy descent down the southern slopes of the Plan. This appeared an imperative necessity. To retrace our steps would, we thought, involve a considerable amount of danger, and it was still far from our thoughts that we might have to incur this risk. Yet with the fact staring us in the face that it would take at least another three or four hours to reach the summit, I for one began to have an unpleasant suspicion that matters were taking an awkward turn. The question now arose as to the direction which we ought to take. Maurer asserted that he had noticed from below a ridge to our left

which appeared to lead to the top, but Rey and myself felt convinced that our route *must* lie to the right, and that we had better strike off in that direction. Maurer's confident attitude prevailed, however, and bearing to the left we continued our toilsome climb. Looking back, I am still doubtful whether we should have fared better or worse by bearing to the right. If the Aiguille du Plan is ever climbed by its N.W. face, the route will undoubtedly lie to the right of this rock, but if we had started in that direction so late in the afternoon, the probability is that we should have been compelled to pass the night in a thoroughly exposed position, possibly with disastrous consequences.

I will not weary you with the details of our ascent from this point. The line we took will, I think, never be followed by anyone. Suffice it to say that after three more hours of almost continuous ice-cutting, varied occasionally by nasty bits of glazed rock, we arrived (seventeen hours after leaving Chamonix), tired and cold, at the end of that day's labours. Further progress was impossible. Maurer's arête, leading straight to the top, had no existence except in his imagination. In its stead we found ourselves stranded at the foot of a lofty tooth in the N. ridge of our peak, with a long line of utterly impossible crags between ourselves and the spot where we now knew the summit must be. Those amongst you who have ever, under similar circumstances, found themselves suddenly face to face with the crushing conviction that all their exertions have been in vain will sympathise with the bitterness of my disappointment. The whole position flashed upon me. We must spend the night where we were. But what a prospect! We had attained a height of about 11,500 ft.; shelter there was none; our stock of provisions was low; we had with great imprudence drunk the small quantity of wine we had left, reckoning upon finding water during our descent on the other side. The weather looked threatening, and if it should become really bad, I shrank from deliberately measuring what might follow. 'C'est une jolie position!' said Rey. 'Teufel!' muttered Maurer. My own expression was not parliamentary. Strangely enough, at the very moment that we were cowed by the hopeless aspect of affairs, a volume of heavy clouds rolled down, and hid Chamonix from our view. The sound of the bells tolling for vespers was very weird, and seemed of evil portent. For a few moments we stood irresolute, then crawled to the brink of the ridge and peered over. Our last hope was gone, for the rocks descended in sheer smooth precipices many hundreds of feet down towards the Glacier du Géant.

There was fortunately a cleft in the rocks on the other side, into which we packed ourselves. We then cut three flat places in the ice on which to stand, fixed the end of our rope to a projecting knob of rock to prevent ourselves from slipping over the edge of the precipice, and tried to resign ourselves to circumstances. To be benighted high up on a mountain is not an unusual occurrence. It is a contingency which one ought to be prepared to face, specially on the occasion of a first ascent; but in our case the situation was aggravated by well-grounded fears, and I must confess that I felt despondent. All sorts of gloomy forebodings forced themselves on my mind. If fresh snow fell, which the state of the sky warned us was by no means improbable, our steps would be obliterated, the rocks would be glazed with ice, and our retreat would be cut off. Cloud-like mists were chasing each other with fantastic energy, chilling us to the marrow, and I feared that we should not be able to withstand their numbing influence through the long watches of the night. There we stood back to back, our teeth chattering with cold—ceaselessly stamping our feet and clapping our hands until the movement became almost mechanical. We rarely spoke; each was too much occupied by his own thoughts, and when we tried to cheer each other up, our voices had an unnatural tremor, due to our chilled and exhausted condition. I lost count of time, but I think that it must have passed more quickly than one would imagine. The one feeling which prevailed above all others was an intense desire for warmth. The mind seems to lose its proper balance when the body is subjected to severe physical discomfort; and instead of preparing for my end, and recalling my past sins, I found myself regretting that I had not managed to extract more enjoyment out of life whilst it lasted. I am afraid that I did not rise to the gravity of the position. 'Pigmies, though perched on peaks, are pigmies still,' and, try as I would, I could not fix my attention on serious subjects, but strayed away into aimless speculation as to whether the guides reproached me for bringing them on such an expedition, or into computation of the number of steps we had cut to reach these grim solitudes. Then I believe I dozed occasionally, and awoke every now and then with a start out of pleasant dreams, perhaps of some cosy fireside, to find myself still on that infernal ledge. But all things must have an end. The dawn came at last, and our spirits rose again. After all, were we not still safe and sound?

Cold, stiff, and thirsty, it is true, but the weather had held up through the night, and with care and patience we hoped

to be able to retrace our steps. At 5 o'clock A.M. we nerved ourselves for a start, and began our descent. One never knows what one can accomplish until one is put to it. We were obliged to descend places which the day before we had pronounced impossible to descend, and the impossibility vanished. About eight hours after leaving our uncomfortable night-quarters, the recollection of which will not easily fade from my memory, we eagerly clutched the rocks of the Blaitière once more. Our dangers were over, and, what was of even greater importance to us at that moment, we could slake in long, copious draughts of water the burning thirst which we had endured for twenty-one hours. One of the many charms of mountaineering consists in the sharp contrasts which it affords; sudden changes from hope to despondency, from privation to luxury; light and shade alternate quickly and frequently. A voluptuous languor stole over my senses as I threw myself down on a mossy bank outside our tent, amply rewarded for all the privations I had undergone by the delightful repose which comes only to those who have earned it.

Before concluding I should like to add a few remarks about the ascent of the Aiguille du Plan from the southern side.

The first and, up to the year 1880, the only ascent of the Aiguille du Plan was made in July 1871 by Mr. James Eccles, with his guides Michel and Alphonse Payot. No account of the ascent has ever been published, and under these circumstances the following short note of his expedition (with which Mr. Eccles has been good enough to favour me) will doubtless be interesting to members of the Club.

Mr. Eccles says:—

I have no memoranda on the subject of the Aiguille du Plan, and have to rely entirely on recollection. I do not even remember the exact date, but I believe it was early in July 1871. In 1869 I made an attempt, but lost my way and found myself wandering near the foot of the Aiguille du Midi, having gone a great deal too far up the Glacier du Géant.

In 1871 I passed the night on the Glacier du Géant near the Petit Rognon (possibly from a wish to make myself unnecessarily uncomfortable), and next morning started about 3 A.M. We kept as much as possible along the spur of which the Petit Rognon is the extremity, and, after passing the second ice-fall of the lateral glacier which descends from the Aiguille du Plan, arrived at a moderately steep snow slope which led to a curiously curved snow arête, at the further end of which appeared our Aiguille. On arriving at its base, we passed over to the Chamonix side, and after five or ten minutes' easy climbing arrived at the summit, as far as I can recollect, a little after six o'clock.

Certainly the time from the Rognon was not more than 3½ hours, and there was not the least difficulty during the ascent.

It is difficult to account for the fact that so fine an expedition remained not only unrepeated, but unattempted (so far as I am aware) until the early summer of 1880, when Mr. Yeld slept out upon the slopes above the Lac de Tacul and thence attempted to reach the summit. He was, however, defeated by the uncertainty of the weather in the morning and by the unfavourable state of the snow on the final slope of the mountain, which rendered further progress dangerous. The next attempt was on September 2 in the same year, when a large party, consisting of Messrs. H. Seymour Hoare, W. E. Davidson, Frank Hartley, and myself, with our respective henchmen, Von Bergen, Jaun, Maurer, and Rey, left the Montenvers at 4 A.M. to make the second ascent. But we, too, were on this occasion doomed to failure, for, owing in the first instance to a serious misunderstanding between Davidson and Mieulet's map, we entirely missed the proper route, and were eventually obliged to return to the Montenvers 're infectâ,' after many hours of most exciting though fruitless climbing up a steep couloir, in the course of which the whole party narrowly escaped a violent death by the displacement of a huge boulder, ending up with a race against nightfall through the séracs of the Géant. Our many and various adventures on that memorable day are well worthy of more lengthy mention, but I have already trespassed too long upon your indulgence and must therefore leave that task to abler hands. Two days later we again started from the Montenvers, about an hour before dawn, and on this occasion, profiting by our previous experience and favoured by most magnificent weather, we reached the summit of the Plan at noon. The expedition when taken from the Montenvers is undoubtedly a long one, though the difficulties—once the proper route is hit off—are small. The magnificence of the ice scenery above the Petit Rognon more than repays the monotonous toil of the early hours of the morning, and the view from the summit on a cloudless day will not be easily forgotten. In fact, the expedition can confidently be recommended to anyone with a stout pair of legs and a long summer's day at his disposal. An early start from the Montenvers is advisable, unless, indeed, the rather alarming alternative of sleeping on the bare ice beneath the Petit Rognon be adopted.