

THE DENT DU GÉANT.*

I.

By ALESSANDRO SELLA.

[The following extracts translated from a letter of Signor Alessandro Sella addressed to the Editor by the kindness of Mr. R. H. Budden, will be read with interest by all Alpine men, as they narrate the conquest of the last great peak in the Alps, which had hitherto defied all attacks.]

WE made the ascent July 29, 1882, starting from the hut on the Col du Géant. In two hours we found ourselves at the foot of the peak, at the spot where an attempt had formerly been made to throw a rope over the summit by means of rockets. Here we remained some time to allow the rocks to get warmed by the sun. At this spot we left all our traps with our provisions.

A short distance from here we reached the face of the peak, which overlooks the Montenevis. The difficulties begin at the point at which Mr. Mummery stopped, and which is about a hundred mètres from the summit, and not twenty or thirty mètres, as this gentleman says on a visiting card which I found at the foot of the Dent.

With the aid of ropes we got up the terrible slippery wall of rocks which had hitherto stopped everyone, although we were obliged to excavate (or mine) the rock in two places in order to gain the edge (*spigolo*) which overhangs a terrible vertical wall of rocks of about five hundred mètres in height. At times we were suspended in mid-air with a hold for our feet only on small ledges of rock. We then traversed the whole of this face of the peak, where we were obliged again to excavate the rock in order to gain the ridge overhanging the spot from which we had started; at this point we found three steep gullies in succession, so that in order to fix the rope (which was double for better security) we were forced to form a ladder by means of our ice-axes. We then gained the crest which leads to the summit without much difficulty, where we were obliged to sit astride.

I think it right to mention that having employed all the rope which we had with us in order to facilitate our descent, by leaving it on the rocks, our party of seven persons was so pressed together through want of space that from prudential motives we thought it better to divide it. Two of us mounted

* The lithograph accompanying these papers has been made from a fine photograph taken by Signor Vittorio Sella. The routes taken have been marked by Signor A. Sella and Mr. Graham. For a view of the N.W. face of the peak, see *Alpine Journal* for February 1872.

Summit reached the 29th July by Signori Sella.

Summit reached August 20th by M^r Graham.

Point reached by
Burgener and Mummery

Towards the
Col du Géant

Photographed by S. Vittorio Sella in 1881.

THE DENT DU GÉANT
from above the Col du Géant.
..... Signor Sella's route.
- - - - - M^r Graham's route.

Fred^l Dangerfield Lith, Covent Garden London 4584

first with two guides, and the others awaited our return with the third guide, and then completed the ascent by the aid of the other two guides. The ascent from the foot of the peak took us about three hours, and the descent about two.

I should likewise mention that the guides worked altogether four days in driving iron stanchions in the rocks for fixing the ropes and excavating (mining) the rocks, which was possible only in places where it was brittle (*sottile*). We left 100 mètres of rope: it is impossible to descend without it.

Our guides were Jean Joseph Maquignaz of Valtournanche, with his nephew Daniel and his son Battiste. Their conduct was above all praise, and to judge of it rightly you should have seen them at work.

I was accompanied by my brothers Corradino and Alfonso (the latter only seventeen years of age), and my cousin Gaudenzio.

The ascent is certainly very difficult, but not dangerous. At a single point the slope is 60° , generally from 75° to 80° , and in some parts absolutely vertical. The last ridge which leads to the top is, however, not extraordinarily steep.

It was impossible for us, owing to lack of time and rope, to make the ascent of the point nearest the Jorasses. The guides, however, the day before had almost conquered it (*l'avevano quasi superata*). I understand that later a party from Chamonix succeeded in scaling it. Additional ropes were placed by the Maquignaz in their two subsequent ascents—with two Italian officials three days after us, and then with a Signor Trombetta. Thus the time taken in making the ascent has been much shortened.

II.

By W. W. GRAHAM.

From the time I first saw the wonderful rock tower of the Dent du Géant, I had a secret wish to attempt the ascent, but the repeated failures of so many first-class climbers and the reputation of inaccessibility which it had thus gained, made me postpone the attack in favour of some more easily climbed peak. Then, too, the chaffing advice of more experienced mountaineers, 'Oh, if you've got a spare week, go and try the Géant,' was a damper to any slight sparks of enthusiasm left. However, when the news arrived at Zermatt that the much-tried peak had been done, I determined to make use of M. Sella's staircase, as it was somewhat unkindly termed, the report being that he had festooned the peak with rope, not to mention iron stanchions and other aids to climbing.

Accordingly, when next at Chamonix, I engaged Alphonse Payot and Auguste Cupelin, whom I found very keen on going, it being a new excursion for the Chamonix list, and on August 14 last we left the Montenvers early in the morning. Our start was delayed by a heavy shower, but we got off at last, and taking the left side of the séracs, which we found to be quite an hour shorter than the other route, easily reached the snow field at the foot of the peak. Then, however, it began to snow very hard, which put climbing out of the question, and a rush was accordingly made for the cabane in hopes of its clearing up before the next day.

I now found myself face to face with the problem how to kill time till to-morrow morning. Of course we might have returned, but by sleeping at the cabane we hoped to gain some hours the next day. Well, I carved my name on the walls, I ate as slowly and I fear as much as I could, I discussed exhaustively every possible subject with Payot and Cupelin, till they went to sleep—the average guide's command of sleep is very remarkable—I smoked innumerable pipes, and 'still I was not happy.'

It was only 4 o'clock, and the snow was falling in that slow heavy way in which only snow can fall when you want to do something and it doesn't intend that you shall; I could not sleep, and at last I was driven to study the visitors' book. Strange to say, I found a good deal of amusement in turning over its pages, the entries being quite a study of national character. English entries were almost always short and gruff, 'So and so, Montenvers to Courmayeur (or *vice versa*), time —, guides —.' German and Italian notices are more florid and make more of the difficulties, and the enthusiasm culminates in the French accounts. One man describes his guides, two of the least capable men of Chamonix, as 'les plus braves gens du monde'; another commends himself to 'le bon Dieu' before daring the 'perilous' descent to Courmayeur, while a third entry, too long for repetition, is quite a gem in its way. A previous notice by his friend described the author as having 'reculé.' 'True,' he says when succeeding on the third attempt, 'j'avais reculé, mais —pour mieux sauter;' and proceeds to chant quite a Nunc Dimittis over the accomplishment of what he calls his 'long-cherished vow.' Almost the last entry in the book was signed by the Sella family, who stated, with some prefatory flourishes to the glory of Italy, that they had made the first ascent of the Dent du Géant, and hoisted thereon the Italian flag. As, however, I knew that they had not reached the highest pinnacle, and the accounts of

later ascents made no mention of going farther, I concluded to my great relief that I still had first chance of finishing off the peak.

Sleep came at last, and next morning the weather was worse than ever; fully eighteen inches of snow had fallen, and we were obliged to return damp and disconsolate to the Mont-envers.

For the next two or three days the weather was only suitable for small excursions, but Saturday proved fine, and in spite of the protest of the guides that there was too much snow, believing that 'the better the day the better the deed,' I determined to start early next morning. We did not intend to be again half frozen, so carried quite a small stack of wood and engaged as porter a youth whose sole name, christian or sur, was Pierre.

We started before two on August 20, a pitch-dark moonless night, the natural result being that we lost the track on the Mer de Glace almost immediately; owing to this delay, and to our taking it very easy, it was eight o'clock before we reached the col. Here we intended to send Pierre to the cabane with our 'impedimenta,' but he wished to join the ascent 'comme volontaire,' so after breakfast and a rest we started at nine to attack the mountain. The snow was in beautiful order, so that we were able to kick steps up a steep couloir, and before eleven we had reached the summit of the rock arête, where it abuts against the peak itself. Here was a beautiful shelter from the wind, which was very cold, and we discussed the probable route. The peak is, roughly speaking, a triangular wedge, the three faces looking N.W., S.W., and S.E. approximately. The S.E. face is as nearly perpendicular as possible; in fact, overhangs in at least one place, and consequently may be speedily dismissed. The N.W. face is practicable for a considerable distance, but, looking down from above, is nearly perpendicular for the last 200 or 300 feet. Finally there remained the S.W. face. By this and by its left-hand edge the Italians had ascended, and we could see about 200 feet of rope very near the top, but no others. Here Pierre's courage evaporated, so leaving him with our axes and provisions, we climbed a great slab of rock and worked our way straight upwards, our course lying along the right edge of the S.W. face. About half the ascent was accomplished without stopping and in silence only broken by a pant as one by one we raised ourselves up what may be best likened to a great staircase with very high narrow stairs; and I must say that it was the hardest climbing, from a muscular point of view, that I ever tried. Then, however, the

character of the peak entirely changes. It becomes a surface almost as smooth as if it had been planed, whilst the rock, being a close quartz, offers no welcome cracks as hand or foot hold. This face has an inclination of 65° to 70° at least, and in most places more, and is only broken by two vertical clefts and a few very narrow ledges. We climbed three of these with the greatest difficulty, and reached the level of the rope we had seen, though we were still separated from it by the whole breadth of the face. We crossed very gingerly, the ledge being very narrow, and in most places there being absolutely no hand hold. Fortunately the face is not very wide, and we crossed in safety. Then we saw what we ought to have seen before, that the ropes stretched away below us for quite 300 feet, but, being laid in a cleft which was half full of frozen snow, they had been quite hidden. We now mounted merrily, the rope being a great assistance, and indeed in one place necessary, as there is a smooth slab quite fifteen feet high, and which could only be climbed by a ladder or by nails driven in. The ascent of this cut our hands very badly, as the rope was a mass of ice. Then the way led round a large smooth slab on to the N.W. face; there the rope had become loosened at its upper end, and was hanging down useless. We hoisted Payot up and then he had to work along, hanging from the ledge by his hands till he reached the arête. We then passed him the rope and he fastened it more securely for the benefit of future climbers. We turned the corner, crept along a narrow ledge which overhung a magnificent precipice, and the difficulties were over. The rope was frozen to the rocks, but we were independent of it, as the slope decreased to about 40° , and we were able to go up, partly climbing, partly crawling. About 100 feet of this and we reached a rock step on which was cut the letter 'M,' doubtless the point to which Maquignaz had ascended before bringing up M. Sella. With a jump we were up this and on the lower of the two little teeth on the summit ridge, the point which had been previously reached by the Italians, as was attested by a stone man and a tattered flag. Straight in front of us rose the other tooth, about twenty feet higher, but separated from us by an extremely awkward notch. The most obvious line of descent was blocked by a huge loose slab which vibrated, and we consequently had to let ourselves down a vertical drop of about fifteen to twenty feet, and then found ourselves on the little arête between the two teeth. This was of rock topped with ice and gradually narrowed from a foot to a few inches, with, on the right hand, an overhanging precipice of quite 1,200 to 1,500 feet, on the other, a slope of 70°

falling almost to the Mer de Glace. Boots had been previously removed, but we were compelled to bestride the arête, which was fortunately short. The other tooth rose perfectly smooth for about ten feet, after which it appeared fairly easy. I as the tallest and lightest mounted on Payot's shoulders, he being astride the ledge. Fortunately there was a small vertical crack by which to steady myself, but as I gently raised myself on Payot I felt very like a man about to undergo the 'long drop.' Then with a pull I was up, and with the aid of the rope raised Payot, and in a minute or two more we were on the top. We promptly set to work to raise a stone man, and in doing so found a splendid crystal, of which I took possession. We hoisted our flag, having borrowed a portion of the Italian flag-staff and utilising my handkerchief. The view, though very fine, is limited on the Grandes Jorasses side, but the position, which resembled nothing so much as standing on the top of a huge pillar, was unique. On the east and south fell enormous cliffs, as I proved by lying down and dropping stones which fell without striking the face, while on the other two sides fell precipices which would have been called perpendicular anywhere else. In short, there was a far greater sense of isolation and out-of-the-worldness than I have ever felt on any of the loftier peaks. However, the wind was too cold for any stay, so after a dram and a yell, at 1.30 we started on the descent. This time we took care to follow the ropes, and the descent was quite easy in consequence. We soon reached the more broken rocks, where the ropes ceased, finding on one ledge quite a sackful of crystals, which, legend saith, were left by Alexander Burgener on his memorable attempt. We found another short rope behind a projecting rock, and creeping under this found ourselves once more at the spot where we had left our axes and Pierre. Time, 3 P.M. After a short halt we resumed the descent. The sun, however, had been hard at work, and our couloir was impracticable, every step starting an avalanche. We had to descend by the rock arête, which was very rotten, and covered with loose stones under the snow, which came down in showers at any false step. Pierre was very unsteady, nor was I much better, and we gave the guides plenty of trouble. 'Encore une chute de Pierre' (pierres), exclaimed Cupelin as Pierre slipped for about the twentieth time, a witicism which he repeated with a chuckle as often as occasion offered. At last we reached the foot of the rocks, and a grand glissade brought us once more down to the col. It was now 5.30, and though I wanted to go on, the guides said it would be dusk before we could clear the séracs, so we took up our

quarters once more at the cabane. This time Morpheus was propitious, and I slept the sleep of the just. Next morning we reached the Montenvers without any other adventure than the fall of a snow bridge, which brought us all in a heap into a shallow crevasse. For the last mile or two I could see that Cupelin had something on his mind—a joke, I knew, and I waited patiently for its appearance. Just before entering the hotel, he pointed to the now distant Dent du Géant, and exclaimed with a perfect storm of chuckles, ‘*Nous aussi, nous avons reculé, mais—pour mieux sauter.*’

THE ALPINE OBITUARY. By C. E. MATHEWS.

SOME time since, when I had the pleasure of addressing my colleagues of the Alpine Club on the growth of mountaineering, I ventured to remind them that our obituary was a sad one, and that probably few of our members ‘had any idea of the number of lives lost in the Alps since Edouard de la Grotte fell into a crevasse on the Findelen Glacier twenty-five years ago.’ I did not then enlarge upon the subject; it seemed to me that to do so would serve no useful purpose. But the terrible accidents which have recently occurred, and the facts that two of the victims of the last season were members of our own Club, and that all of them were men of ability and reputation, whom their friends or their country could ill afford to lose, have convinced me that the time has come when the Alpine death-roll should be looked fairly in the face.

It is lamentable that whenever a serious accident occurs in the Alps, there is generally an outburst of ignorant and foolish criticism. The public are warned against the folly of mountaineering; they are informed that we wilfully run unnecessary risks; that we climb almost impossible peaks from a pure spirit of bravado, from a desire to brag of our exploits, or from some other motive of equal silliness and stupidity. Criticism is good for all of us, but it is only really valuable in proportion to the knowledge of the critic. There was a time when climbing was regarded by some people as a proof of lunacy, but as the taste for mountaineering became more widely spread and the climbers better known, the wiser critics have admitted that we were men whose pursuit, whether dangerous or not, ‘it would be impertinent to treat otherwise than with serious and rational respect.’

Under these circumstances it is no longer necessary to