

NOTES OF AN EXPEDITION TO THE CAUCASUS.

(WITH REMARKS ON THE RECENT ACCIDENT.)

BY CLINTON DENT, PRESIDENT.

ON August 1 last our party, consisting of W. F. Donkin, Harry Fox and myself with the guides Kaspar Streich and Johann Fischer, reached Batoum. During the journey out we settled finally the programme we hoped to follow. From the very first we had agreed that the expedition was to be mainly exploratory, and that no undue time should be wasted in attempting big peaks if the weather were unpropitious. We hoped to ascend and traverse the highest point of the Leila chain, starting from Lentechi, in the Skenes Skali Valley. Reaching thus Betscho, we meant to try Ushba, ascertain its relation to the main chain of the Caucasus and the water-parting, and elucidate the topography of the glacier country immediately around the peak.

The ascent of Dongussorun (14,600 R.S.) was one on which we were much bent. The topography of this part of the chain seemed but little known and the point of view could hardly fail to give most valuable information. The mountain, which resembles a huge Breithorn, was not likely to be difficult, and the camera and surveying instruments would easily be carried to the top. It was this part of the exploration which was expected to yield the most solid geographical results; results which may still be forthcoming, but which will have acquired the saddest interest, and will have been obtained at a sacrifice that cannot adequately be reckoned.

From the head of the Baksan Valley (in which Urusbieh is situated) we hoped to make our way by the head waters of the Tchegegem and Urban rivers to the Bezingi district, and thus establish something like a 'high-level' pass between the Baksan and Tcherek Valleys. At Bezingi our principal hope was to lay down more accurately the minute topography of Dychtau. No part of our plan was more discussed than this. Even if the ascent should prove impracticable or unwise, we hoped to make a high tour of the peak, such as might be compared to that of Monte Rosa by the Sesia Joch, Col delle Loccie, and Weiss Thor. We were, I think, more anxious to achieve this portion of our programme than any other. It was almost certain that Donkin would find a splendid field for photography and the photographs would be likely to have much geographical value. Fox fully realised that to the surveyor who was a moun-

taineer also the district had very special attractions; while I was keen to visit a district of which we saw so little in 1886. Koshtantau, Djanga, Salananchera, and the peaks on the main chain could be surveyed from the north or south side, but Dychtau was much less likely to attract attention. To this part of our programme we turned so repeatedly that I have no hesitation in saying that we all considered it to be our main objective. Moreover, we had little hope of finding Koshtantau (our Guluku of 1886) a virgin peak by the time we reached Bezingi, or of being the first to traverse the Shkara Pass (from Karaoul by the Dychsu glacier to the upper snowfields of the Bezingi glacier). For some reason or another, too, we spoke and thought less of the actual ascent of Dychtau than of making a high tour of the peak. The possibility of ascending or traversing Malatau was also frequently discussed, for the peak could hardly fail to give a fine view of Dychtau. We took out the following instruments and apparatus:—Large camera and small 'revolver' camera, theodolite, pocket sextant, small 'Abney' clinometer, prismatic compass (used especially for the 'orientation' of photographs taken), aneroids, boiling water apparatus for determining heights, telescope, small compasses, &c.

August 2.—Reached Kutais at 1.30 p.m. Met Rieger, our interpreter (who, I may at once say, worked admirably), and rode on same evening to Djoneti, a 'duchan' 12 versts from Kutais.

August 4.—Reached Lentechi. Road from Kutais is practicable for carriages as far as Alpan, a post-station some 50 miles from Kutais. Regretted we did not drive as far up as possible. A Government order for horses and carriage desirable to save expense and delay.

August 5.—Rieger to go on with luggage *via* Latpar Pass, to meet us at Latal. We started for Mount Leila with two native porters whose services were obtained in the usual way. The request for native aid is at first scouted as one not to be entertained. After an hour or two volunteers come in freely enough.

August 5-8.—We walked deliberately into the trap against which we had been warned and, following the wrong spur of the Leila, failed to make the peak, and thus crossed the chain some way east of it. It was on this expedition that I broke down utterly. The delay must have been more than vexatious to my companions for the fine weather was slipping away and we were making no progress. Yet never for an instant did Donkin's thoughtful consideration and sympathy relax;

never for a moment did Fox's cheery brightness falter, nor did he allow the disappointment he must have felt to make itself manifest. Poor guides would have lost heart, but our men kept up the spirits of the party and vied with the native porters in attentiveness. The debt of gratitude should be paid, though there are none to receive it. Owing to the wise foresight of Streich, we did not run short of provisions. We had no tent, but fortunately the weather was uniformly fine. Our pass, which we estimated at 10,650 feet, lay considerably to the west of Mount Latpari (R.S.). This should not be confounded with the well-known Latpar Pass, which lies some 15 miles further east. Magnificent view of the Ushba during descent. This peak lies almost due north of our pass (357° by the prismatic compass).

August 8.—Met Rieger at Latal. Went on at once to Betsbo. Priestav was ill, but we were hospitably received by his secretary. Some Urusbieh men, who had just crossed from the north side, came in, and offered to act as porters if we desired to cross to the north side at once.

August 9.—Fox started early with guides to reconnoitre Ushba, while Donkin and I followed later on with tents and baggage, accompanied by Dr. Sagel, of Kutais, who wished to see something of the glacier world. Camp formed by Gulba glacier, close to moraine, at a height of 9,650 feet. Rieger was left at Betsbo in charge of the baggage. Some peaks south-west of Mount Leila, separated by a tributary of the Ingur, seem from the camp quite as high as that mountain. One point has a curving snow arête, like that of the Grivola. Heat intense. Tent made of Willesden canvas and with bamboo poles answers admirably.

August 11.—Donkin, Fox, and the guides started at 3 A.M. for northern peak of Ushba. Weather moderate, a hot wind blowing all day. Rain had fallen during night of August 9, and there was a little fresh snow. Party returned at 4 P.M. Snow was in bad order, and avalanches frequent, also falling rocks. Very high wind. All think ascent would be feasible under suitable conditions of weather. All favour the main couloir as best line to follow. Estimated height reached, 14,200 to 14,600 feet. This was probably erroneous, being too high. Rain in night.

August 12.—Natives brought up bread and cheesecakes for sale, and a regular post was kept up between camp and Betsbo.

August 13.—Same party started for southern peak at 2 A.M. Weather uncertain. But it does not answer in this country

to predict evil of the weather and act accordingly. Push on always and do all you can, should be the rule, fearing not to turn back if the elements combine against you. Party made for 'Burgener's route,' but were invisible to me after 9 A.M. owing to clouds. Rain in camp. Snow on peak. Party returned about 6 P.M. They were forced by the state of the snow to leave the couloir, and were actually stopped by some vertical rocks. All were of opinion that the couloir offered the best line of attack for the southern, as for the northern, peak, and that on a suitable day the ascent might be simple enough, though never probably quite free from some risk. Comparisons of boiling-point observations taken on highest point reached with aneroid readings led to the conclusion that highest point of Ushba (the northern peak) would turn out to be 15,600 to 15,800 feet. Donkin and Fox both reported most favourably of the guides, who worked admirably, notwithstanding that it was evident almost from the first that success was out of the question.

August 14.—Weather still unsettled; so, in accordance with previous determination, it was decided, though reluctantly, to abandon Ushba and cross the chain. My strength would not return, and it was evident that the whole expedition might result in failure if I attempted to keep any longer with the party. My own journey is of no interest, and I need only mention here that, accompanied by a single attendant—a Svan, addicted like too many of the natives to strong drink—I rode from Betsho to Alpan, over the Latpar Pass, and subsequently drove down to Kutais, without any difficulty worth mentioning. Travel is a simple enough matter now, even through the wildest part of a country to which formerly the title of 'Savage Svanetia' was not unjustly given.

August 16.—Donkin, Fox, and the guides started for Dongussorun, intending to join Rieger who was in charge of the baggage and train of native porters either at some point on the Betsho Pass, or in the Baksan Valley. Rieger's orders were to make his way on to Urusbieh, and there to wait. And so we parted. It seemed impossible at the time that anything could add to the bitter disappointment of leaving my companions, but what was but a wrench then is a regret now that will be life-long.

What happened subsequently must be briefly summarised. The mountaineers succeeded in ascending Dongussorun. They had fine weather and succeeded in taking observations

from the summit. They also crossed 'a new and splendid pass' between the Adyr-su and Tchegeg valleys, described by the Urusbieh people as 'used only by the mountain-goats and not by them unless forced.' The above information is derived principally from Baron Ungern-Sternberg, who met the party at Urusbieh. From the Tchegeg valley they went on to Bezingi. A note dated Bezingi, August 24, which Mr. H. W. Holder received from Donkin, furnishes the next item of evidence. The parties, though close to each other, did not actually meet. On August 25 Donkin's party left Bezingi for the Doumala glen. Rieger was sent round to Balkar. In his note to Mr. Holder, Donkin stated that they 'proposed to have a look at the Dychnsu glacier,' and remarked that if they crossed to the Bezingi side they might have an opportunity of meeting Mr. Holder's party.

The next certain information we have is that on August 28 the party were in the Doumala glen, on the north side of Dychtau. This is known from Fox's letter to the interpreter, of which part of the text is given below. We know now that the mountaineers proposed to make the ascent of Dychtau, possibly descending towards the Dychnsu glacier. In addition, or as an alternative, I think it likely that they wished to make a high tour of the peak. In conversation with Mons. N. Djukoff, a Russian officer engaged in the survey of the district, Donkin led him to believe that the ascent of Dychtau was the last item on the programme, but their actual intentions would, of course, have been determined by the weather. Then follows a great and fearful blank.

On September 26 the anxiety we had been feeling for ten days or more was brought to a climax. News came to the effect that the interpreter, telegraphing from Naltchik, had heard nothing of Donkin and Fox for twenty-seven days. The gravity of this intelligence was at once evident to those who knew the country. Instantly a request was sent to Mr. D. R. Peacock, English Vice-Consul at Batoum, begging him to instruct the interpreter to return to the mountains and organise search from Bezingi, Balkar, and Gebi, offering reward for any positive information. Through the courtesy of the Russian Embassy in London, Prince Dondukoff Korsakoff, Governor-General of the Caucasus, was instantly communicated with and requested to do all in his power to further the search, and application to the Foreign Office met with the most prompt and generous response. By the greatest good fortune Mr. Clive Phillipps-Wolley happened to be at Bezingi at the time, and with

a generous feeling worthy of an Englishman at once undertook the work of organising and leading the search, receiving the most material aid from Mons. N. Djukoff. It was no easy matter either to collect natives who could be of any use on the glaciers or to make them understand what was wanted. Still, thanks to the prompt and vigorous action of the Russian authorities and the energy of Mons. N. Djukoff, Mr. Phillipps-Wolley, Mr. Peacock, and Mr. Donald (acting Vice-Consul at Batoum), the search was soon instituted and strenuously prosecuted. From the very first there seemed little hope of any success and the information that reached England tended only to confirm the most gloomy forebodings. On October 5 a brief paragraph appeared in the 'Times,' quoted from a provincial newspaper, and the certainty now that the worst had happened seemed so absolute that the 'Times' kindly published on October 6 the following letter:—

Sir,—The wording of the paragraph relating to a reported mountaineering accident in the Caucasus, quoted in your issue of to-day, impels me reluctantly to request the insertion of these few lines. Unhappily, there exists no longer any doubt that Messrs. W. F. Donkin and Harry Fox, with the Swiss guides, Kaspar Streich and Johann Fischer, have all lost their lives by a mountaineering accident. The disaster probably occurred about September 1 last, either on the mountain now known as Shkara or, less probably, on one of the neighbouring peaks. A thorough search, furthered, as we learn through various sources, by all the local and other authorities, is in active progress. An English traveller, who happens to be in the country, and who has an intimate acquaintance with the country, the natives, and the language, is assisting in the search. While I am writing, a telegram from him comes to hand informing me that "traces have been discovered on — glacier." The name of the glacier I am unfortunately unable to decipher.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

CLINTON DENT, President Alpine Club.

Alpine Club, Oct. 5.

The glacier referred to is now known as the Ullu-auz glacier, and descends from the northern flanks of Dychtau towards the Doumala glen.

It should here be mentioned that from the first the question of organising a search party from England and taking Swiss guides was most anxiously discussed. Several members of the Club were ready to start at an instant's notice, and preparations were made. Offers of assistance came also, I am pleased to mention, from Meiringen. The late period of the season would have rendered it almost impossible to do more than receive personally such information

as might have been collected. No search in the higher regions would have been practicable for any mountaineers by the time a party could have reached Bezingi. The idea was not finally abandoned until letters and telegrams from Mr. Phillipps-Wolley informed us that he was at the head of the search parties. The work could not have been in better hands. With reference to this subject the following 'inspired' paragraph from the 'Times' of October 8 may be reproduced:—

Information has been received to the effect that heavy snowfalls have already occurred in the mountain regions of the Caucasus. The higher glaciers are usually inaccessible after the middle of September. There is but very slight hope, therefore, that the search parties instituted by the executive of the Alpine Club, and now actively at work, will obtain any more definite information this year as to the exact fate of the missing mountaineers. If such prove to be the case, we understand the Alpine Club will organise a search party early next spring. Many offers of personal assistance have already been made.

Further information threw some additional light on the disaster and enabled us to condense all that had been ascertained with tolerable certainty up to date (October 13) in the following letter, which appeared in the 'Times' of October 15:—

THE FATAL MOUNTAINEERING ACCIDENT IN THE CAUCASUS.

Sir,—Letters and telegrams which have been received from Mr. Phillipps-Wolley from Naltchik and Bezingi make it possible to add some fresh facts and corrections to the intelligence that has been published with regard to the recent disaster in the Caucasus.

Mr. W. F. Donkin and Mr. H. Fox, with their Alpine guides, left Bezingi on August 25. On the 28th Mr. Fox wrote from Dounala, a side-glen of the Bezingi Valley, some four hours' walk in length, to the interpreter in charge of the heavy baggage a note, a copy of which Mr. Wolley encloses. It is written in German, and is to the following effect:—

'We have been across the mountains to (or towards) Karaoul. We start early to-morrow, and hope to be at Karaoul on the 30th or 31st, where you must meet us. If bad weather should come on, or the descent on the other side prove impracticable, we may have to return to Bezingi and ride round. But, anyhow, wait for us at Karaoul. We send back our tent and some things we shall not need on the mountain. Pay the bearer for five days.'

The evidence of this native, who was probably in the travellers' service (either as messenger or camp attendant) from the 25th of August, and who may have seen them start on the morning of the 29th of August, has not yet been received by us.

From this note and knowledge of the locality we draw the following conclusions:—The mountaineers must have crossed—perhaps twice—

a glacier pass at the eastern base of Dychtau which, so far as can be judged from photographs and drawings of both sides, is not difficult or dangerous. They must have planned, probably from what they saw on this pass, some other expedition by which Karaoul could be reached in two or three days, and from which, if repulsed, they would naturally descend to Bezingi. There are, it would seem, only two possible expeditions which fulfil both conditions. Either they intended to traverse the peak, called in maps Dychtau (16,900 feet), but by the people of the country Koshtantau, or to make the tour of its western flanks by traversing in the first instance a high pass to the Mishirgi glacier. Between these possibilities no one can as yet decide.

It is further clear from Mr. Fox's note that the party carried with them all they had, and that there is no prospect of any records being recovered at their last camp. The traces or tracks found by the search party on a glacier we now know to be that at the head of the Doumala glen may equally well have been left on the 27th or 28th as on the 29th or 30th of August. It seems certain that the accident, of whatever nature it may have been, happened at a great height in a region where at this late season no search could be prosecuted with reasonable hope of success. Had it been otherwise there would have been no lack of volunteers ready to start from this country. But we have every reason to hope that all that is at present possible has been done by Mr. Phillipps-Wolley, acting in conjunction with the Russian officials and with the fullest powers from home to offer rewards or to take any other steps in his judgment likely to lead to the obtainment of precise information as to the catastrophe.

Mr. Fox's letter leads us now to conclude that the accident cannot have happened on Shkara (about 17,300 feet), as we at first supposed. Moreover, that peak has since been climbed by an Englishman with Alpine guides without any traces of predecessors having been found. In the district where our friends disappeared travellers run no risk whatever of detention or robbery, and this supposition must be entirely dismissed. The storm that has been referred to did not occur until eight days after the party left Doumala, and they could not have carried with them provisions for so long an absence. The weather in the last days of August and first days of September was, as we know from Englishmen who were in the same district, favourable for mountaineering. The idea that the climbers committed any imprudence in not taking 'local guides' can only be entertained by persons little acquainted either with the Caucasus or with mountaineering. There are no guides among the natives of the Caucasus capable of taking part in difficult glacier explorations, and it is for this reason that the snowy range has remained so long unexplored.

It is, of course, deeply to be regretted that the interpreter should have so long delayed giving any information of his employers' disappearance. But there is no ground for supposing that his silence was due to anything worse than an error of judgment or that it can have had the slightest influence on a disaster which was in all probability instantaneous.

It may perhaps be a satisfaction to some of the travellers' friends to learn that no pains have been spared to secure the safe transmission of

any records, observations, or photographs that may have remained among their luggage.

Anyone who desires to know more of the local topography will find a map of the district either in the June number of the 'Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society' or in the August number of the 'Alpine Journal.' There is a woodcut of the glacier of the Doumala Valley in the latter journal. Some idea of the topography may be given to your readers by saying that, if Bezingi is put in the place of Zermatt, Karaoul will correspond roughly with Mattmark and Dychtau with the Dom. All the places referred to are north of the main chain of the Caucasus.

We are, Sir, your obedient servants,

CLINTON DENT.

DOUGLAS W. FRESHFIELD.

Alpine Club, Oct. 13.

Since the above was written the evidence of the native, Beslau Betaieff by name, has been received through Mr. Phillipps-Wolley. All his statements appear to be thoroughly trustworthy. He reports that on August 25 Donkin, Fox, and the two guides started from Bezingi with a baggage horse. They camped in the Doumala glen about 12 versts from Bezingi. On August 26 the party proceeded up the glacier in the direction of Dychtau. The party remained in the mountains during August 26 and 27, and returned to camp about 10 A.M. on August 28. August 28 and 29 were spent in camp. On the evening of the 29th Betaieff noticed that the party were preparing provisions for apparently a long expedition. On August 30 (*not* August 29), at 3 A.M., the party started off by lantern-light in the same direction as before. Betaieff was instructed to take the letter and the baggage back to Rieger, who was waiting at Balkar. He set off as soon as it was light, and in due course met Rieger, who paid and discharged him.

The camp was formed on the true left bank of the Ullu-az glacier close to its termination and, whatever the expedition contemplated, it was necessary to proceed up the left bank towards Dychtau. (See illustration in No. 101 of the 'Alpine Journal,' facing page 10.) The Doumala and Ullu-az glaciers are identical, the latter being the name now adopted by the Russian survey. The party very possibly ascended Dychtau or Malatau on August 27. They returned in high spirits on August 28, and had evidently made a successful expedition. The existence of a cairn on either of the peaks would determine this point. It is not unlikely that the first sentence of Fox's letter, 'Wir sind über die Bergen nach Karaoul gegangen,' was anticipatory. He

would not have informed Rieger of any expedition made. If this supposition be correct it would modify the views expressed in the fifth paragraph of the letter in the 'Times' of October 15 to some extent, for the travellers might have met with an accident on one or other side of the glacier pass over the eastern flank of Dychtau.

There is no occasion now to enter into all the details of the search. Yet many will be interested to learn of the scale on which it was carried out. Mr. Phillipps-Wolley was first in the field, with Mons. N. Djukoff and a party of seven natives. Another party of nineteen natives, headed by a Russian official, started about Sept. 29 and went over the same ground. But the heavy fall of snow that had taken place rendered it impossible for them to gain any further information than Mr. Phillipps-Wolley had already acquired. The wording of the published translation of the report of the second party made it appear that they had ascended the actual summit of Dychtau in the pursuance of the search. This, of course, was an impossibility.* Tracks of nailed boots were found on the moraine situated on the left side of the icefall of the Ullu-az glacier, and close to the upper level of the icefall. The tracks were made in ascending, and consisted of a single line of footsteps. The moraine is steep, and it is almost needless to point out that all would have trodden in the same places. Mr. Phillipps-Wolley crossed in deep snow over to the right side of the glacier above the icefall, but without gaining additional information. The icefall is well shown in the woodcut already referred to. In addition, another search party started from Balkar and explored the Dychnu glacier, while on the south side of the chain an expedition was organised from Gebi. To the energy of M. Veeruboff, Governor of Naltchik, the speedy organisation of the search parties was largely due. The thanks of the Committee, acting on behalf of the Alpine Club, have already been tendered to all who were directly and indirectly concerned in the search. But it will not be out of place here to express with less formality, though with no less sincerity, the grateful recognition of all the efforts made to learn the fate of our friends. To those who have travelled in Russia and the Caucasus the action taken was

* Readers may be reminded once more that the natives do not attach the same signification to the name of a mountain that we do. They would naturally describe, for instance, an expedition up to any part of the mass or range of Dychtau as an 'ascent' of Dychtau.

no matter of surprise. To others it may be pleasant reading: It is not merely the official aid, however generously given, that we should acknowledge. There is something beyond this, deeper even than a friendly interest. For we are conscious of that touch of sympathy which is as potent as the touch of nature to make the whole world kin.

It should be added that on October 15 a telegram from Mr. Peacock announced that further searches were impossible, owing to heavy snowfalls in the mountains. With this telegram the last vestige of hope and the last trace of doubt, if any existed, were done away with.

As to the precise nature of the accident it is perhaps idle to speculate. No clear evidence on the point can be hoped for before next year; none, perhaps, will be obtained then. Yet one or two considerations may be offered. It is certain that the accident happened high up. The entire party were lost, assuredly at a moment when they were roped together. They might, therefore, have been overtaken by bad weather. This possibility is disposed of at once by the reports we have of the weather at the time. The first serious storm after August 28 occurred on September 5. Again, one of the party might have slipped on an ice-slope and dragged all the others down. To those who knew the mountaineering skill of the party, one and all, the supposition appears hardly credible. Thirdly, one or more may have broken through a snow bridge, and all may have been lost in a crevasse. Possible, but most unlikely, for a more careful party never went on the mountains, and the guides were excellent at snow work and were known for their thoroughness and caution. A fall of stones or the toppling over of a sérac does not sweep away an entire party on a long rope.

There remains but the danger arising from some form of avalanche, either the sliding away of a huge layer of snow loosely adherent to an ice-slope beneath or the fall of an ice-cliff or heavy cornice. Mr. Phillipps-Wolley saw the blue ice-blocks of a recent avalanche which had fallen across the natural route to the pass to Karaoul, but there is no evidence as to the date at which it fell. Such risks are undoubtedly greater in the Caucasus than the Alps, and constitute a source of danger against which the very best mountaineer cannot wholly guard, any more than the very best navigator can prevent his ship from striking on an unmarked reef. To some such cause I believe is due the disaster which has occasioned a widespread sorrow almost unparalleled in the history of mountaineering.