A Night Adventure on the Dent Blanche.

By WILLIAM CECIL SLINGSBY.

(Read before the Alpine Club, Tuesday, March 3, 1891.)

SOON after my return from the Alps last summer, I received a letter from the Editor of this Journal in which he asked me to write a paper on an adventure which, in company with two friends, I had recently met with on the Dent Blanche. This I declined to do for several reasons. However, as it appears that a somewhat unusual interest has been awakened in our adventure, I have received what I conceive to be a positive command from the President and Hon. Secretary of the Alpine Club, not only to write, but, what is ten times worse, to read a paper on this subject. This, as a loyal subject, I obey without question.

In June last year I joined a large party of A.C.'s in the Isle of Skye, where three of us made an appointment to meet, if possible, at Zermatt early in August to attempt the ascent of the Dent Blanche without guides. Each one of us had, at different times, been defeated upon this mountain, and none of us had ascended it. This expedition was, in fact, the sole magnet which attracted me to Zermatt last year. So far as Zermatt was concerned, we faithfully kept our appointment, but the only expeditions which the weather allowed us to make together were the ascent to the lower Findelen hut, and to the Riffel Alp by way of the Gorner icefall. These we accomplished quite safely. Before my arrival at Zermatt these two gentlemen to whom I refer did indeed make a start for the Dent Blanche with their guides, but the only success which they achieved was the partial—very partial too—restoration of the hut at the Stockje which had been carried away by an avalanche in October of the preceding year. The day that these veterans left, in company with Messrs. G. A. Solly, W. P. Haskett-Smith, and E. T. Hartley, I climbed the Unter Gabelhorn, passing designedly over the little peak which masks on the east its higher neighbour, and which, as a matter of fact, has frequently been climbed in mistake for the Unter Gabelhorn, once indeed by a remarkably strong party who got no further. From this peaklet, which we dubbed the Hartley Spitze, we descended a very fine ridge to the col just below the higher peak. On this descent we met with considerable difficulty on ice-glazed rocks, and had ample opportunities of testing

one another's climbing powers. We returned very late to Zermatt and made the startling discovery that a glow-worm held in the hand does not give so good a light as an Alpine lantern.

A few days later we made an attempt on the Rothhorn direct from Zermatt, but, when we arrived at the notch, we met two other parties who had slept at the Trift hut, one of which was led by Alexander Burgener, who told us that the slabs above the notch were impracticable owing to the ice which encased them. These men were unaware that we were following them. With Burgener we made a vigorous attempt to cut across the west face to the Zinal arête, but were obliged to return because the covering of ice was too thin and therefore unsafe.

On returning from this expedition, Solly, Haskett-Smith, and I resolved to try the Dent Blanche after the lapse of a few days, provided that the weather would allow us to do so. By this time we were all in perfect training, and each of us now felt fully confident of the power of the others to undertake what we well knew to be an expedition of exceptional severity.

On Monday, August 11, we went to the Stockje with a porter. On starting, appearances seemed to be against us, for, as was often the case last summer, there was 'a southerly wind and a cloudy sky,' a combination which, though good enough in Yorkshire or Leicestershire in December, is unpopular at Zermatt in August. However, as August 12 was the last day which Solly could well spare in Switzerland, and we knew that we had at least a chance of success, we thought it worth trying for. All of us have before now started for some peak in doubtful weather, and in a few hours have been very glad that we did so. We have also, I doubt not, over and over again regretted that we have not started, because of some slight shower of rain, low-lying clouds, or distant thunder. In 1882 I missed the Dent Blanche, on a lovely day too, solely because at 1.30 A.M. there was a shower of rain at the Stockje.

During the night, notwithstanding the efforts of my friends and their guides to put the ruins of the Stockje into a habitable condition, we had ample opportunities of testing the power of the wind, which was by no means small. As we had not, however, been drawn up to the Stockje in sledges, our observations have no scientific value. Some rain and hail also fell.

Meanwhile, the weather at Zermatt had so much improved,

and altogether appeared so hopeful, that Miss Richardson decided to leave Zermatt at midnight for the Dent d'Hérens. In a letter which I received from her she says, 'I actually dressed and went out, but it had suddenly clouded over, and Emile Rey thought we had better wait, much to my grief. A little later, when it cleared again, it was much too late for us to start, and I need not say how bitterly we regretted our midnight decision. You may like to know that, during the whole day, Rey kept remarking that you were wiser than we, and were certain of your peak, and that if we had set off we should also have done ours.'

We started from the Stockje at 1.40, and, as there was still a very strong wind blowing from the west, each one of us retained the extra flannel shirt in which he had slept. Solly and I wore ours outside our coats, and with our fluttering tails and red handkerchiefs over our hats we looked disreputable enough. Haskett-Smith, having to sustain the dignity of the bar, preferred to keep his shirt under his waistcoat.

We went by way of the Col d'Hérens, though I knew the route up the Wandfluh rocks. By the time we reached the col, the wind had gone down wonderfully, and, when the sun got up, the wind died away altogether, which was what we had hoped for, and, indeed, had almost expected, and now we felt almost certain of a fine day.

On the upper glacier we lost probably five minutes by making a needless *détour*, but still we reached 'the good breakfast place' below point 3,566 metres at 5.10, or in twenty minutes longer than Mr. Conway's time by the Wandfluh.

At the top of the rocks which we then climbed we had one little gully of thick ice to cut across, about 25 feet wide. Otherwise, as far as the base of the great tower on the south ridge, the mountain was in good order. The rocks on the crest of the ridge, and everywhere on the 'Schönbühl' side, were unusually good—in fact, there was not a grain or a crystal of new snow to be seen on them, and there was an unusual absence of cornices on the ridge. On the Ferpécle face the case was very different, and we saw at an early hour that there was ice everywhere on those sunless rocks. We thought that we should succeed, but not without a struggle. Fortunately, neither rain nor snow had fallen during the night on the upper part of the mountain, though there had been a sharp shower at the Stockje.

It was delightfully sunny, warm, and mild as we traversed

the long snowy ridge; there was no wind, and we could not have wished for better weather. No snow was blowing from the arête above us. We got along rapidly, and reached the foot of the great tower about 10.40, having halted 45 minutes on the way for breakfast.

According to 'The Pennine Guide' we were 'about an hour' from the top by the route which we had chosen, as the rocks on the arête—or, rather, on the crest of the arête—were 'in first-rate condition.'

Whilst halting at the tower we saw a party on the Schönbühl glacier far below us, who had just crossed the Col de la Dent Blanche from the Mountet hut.

After ascertaining that we could turn the tower by its west flank at the expense of a good deal of step-cutting, I proposed that we should try to turn it on the Schönbühl side instead, because, though the rocks on the west face were in bad condition, those on the east were in exceptionally good order. Every stone was perfectly dry, and the ridge was nowhere overhung by a cornice, as is so often the case. My companions agreed to this proposal.

We descended an easy gully about 70 feet, then crossed it by cutting half a dozen steps in hard ice, and climbed up good, firm, and pleasant rocks for about 200 to 300 feet. This brought us to a broad ledge, which tempted us to get round the tower. As we afterwards proved, it would have been much better to have zigzagged almost on to the top of the tower itself. The ledge led us to a shallow chimney, and here our real difficulties began. The rocks were steep and abominably loose; there was plenty of hand- and foot-hold; but very few of the apparently good holds could be made use of, because we had no desire of undermining and pulling down the tower itself upon our heads in order to make the ascent of the Dent Blanche easier for other climbers in the future. We found no ice at all here, and probably these rocks were in as good condition as such schistose rocks standing end up can ever be. We can certainly corroborate all that Mr. Whitwell said about the rottenness of the rocks on the Schönbühl face.

After many a shove, many a pull, and many a struggle, where we all worked together as hard as we could, we regained the ridge, some distance above the tower, two hours after arriving at its southern base.

The rocks on the crest of the ridge were still in perfect order. The day was magnificent, and there was not the remotest sign of a storm. Climbers who were on neighbour-

ing mountains on this day all speak of the fine weather. My friend Mr. Eric Greenwood, who was on the Rothhorn, told me that that peak was in capital condition, but that there was a strong N.W. wind blowing at the top. We had perfect calm. Mr. Greenwood stopped on the snow arête till a late hour in the afternoon taking photographs, and neither his guides nor he had the slightest expectation of a thunderstorm.

We stuck faithfully to the ridge, and climbed up, and as nearly as possible over, each point as we reached it, because of the ice which shrouded the rocks almost everywhere on the west face.

We were forced on to the face of one little pinnacle, and had to use the greatest care.

Nowhere did we come to any place where we felt that our powers were overtaxed; still, the work was difficult, though not supremely so.

A few days later, I met Mr. Conway at Breuil, and I asked him what he meant in this case by the term 'following the arête.' His interpretation, which is rather an elastic one, is this: 'Climb over the pinnacles if it is convenient to do so. If not convenient, shirk them by passing below their western bases.' This latter method was most probably impracticable on the occasion of our ascent, which fully accounts for the great difference between Mr. Conway's 'times' and our own, as we certainly climbed at least as quickly as an average party on the Dent Blanche during the whole of our ascent.

The time sped merrily and quickly by, and the difficulties decreased as we hastened onward. Just as we left the last rocks, a light filmy cloud, sailing up from the north, hovered for an instant over the top of the mountain, and then settled upon it; otherwise, though it had then become exceedingly cold, the sky was clear and the day perfect, and we could not help comparing our good fortune with that of those early climbers who fought their way upward, step by step, against most ferocious gales.

After some tiring step-cutting on the gentler slopes above the rocks, which, like the west face, were sheathed in ice, we reached at last the south end of the little flat ridge which forms the summit of the Dent Blanche, where a small flagstaff is usually to be seen. Here there was an enormous snow cornice which overhung the eastern side. The little cloud merely clung to the cornice on the ridge, and evidently had no malice in it at all. None of us put down the time at

which we reached the top. One of us thinks that it was just after four o'clock, but the memory of the two others is clear that it was between three and four. At any rate, of this we are all agreed, that it was not so late as 4.12, the hour when the author of 'Scrambles in the Alps' reached the summit in bad weather. My watch, being out of order, was left at Zermatt.

We left directly, and in less than a minute were out of the little cloud, which was uncommonly cold, and again we revelled in bright sunshine. We were under no apprehension of danger, nor had we any reason whatever to be anxious, as our way was clear enough: there was no doubt about that. We were in capital training, and we had, most certainly, a sufficiency of daylight still left to allow us to get well beyond every difficulty upon the mountain. Moreover, Solly, with his usual instinctive thoughtfulness, carried a lantern in his pocket, and we had left another lower down. Thus we had a most reasonable expectation of reaching the Stockje that evening, and Zermatt early the next morning.

When we had come down for about an hour, we saw an occasional flash of lightning playing about the Aiguilles Rouges d'Arolla. This was the first indication that we had of foul weather. Soon afterwards a dark cloud crept up ominously over the shoulder of Mont Collon, and on to the Pigne d'Arolla. Still no cloud seemed to threaten us, but we hurried on very quickly.

On arriving at the col, just above the great rock tower, we turned down a little gully on the west face. Here, though the work was exceedingly difficult, we lost no time whatever, and undoubtedly we chose the best route. The storm, meanwhile, had crossed over the east Arolla ridge, and we saw the lightning flashing about the Aiguille de la Za and Dent Perroc, and the clouds, as they advanced, grew more and more angry-looking.

We were advancing as quickly as the nature of the ground would allow on a buttress which supports the great tower on the west. It was then about six o'clock. We had, at the most, only 150 feet of difficult ground to get over, when a dark and dense cloud fell upon us, and it became, suddenly and almost without any warning, prematurely dark. Our axes emitted electric sparks, or rather faint but steady little flames, on both the adze and pick part; so also did our gloves, the hair of which stood out quite straight. A handkerchief, which I had tied over my hat, was like a tiara of light. This was very uncanny, but still deeply interesting.

The sparks, when touched by the bare hand or the cheek, gave out no heat. There was no hissing to be heard on our axes or on the rocks, but Solly felt a sort of vibration about the spectacles which were on his forehead that he did not at all like, so he put them under his hat.

Under ordinary circumstances we should have put away our axes until the storm should have passed away. Of course we did not do this, nor indeed would any other member of the Alpine Club have done so if he had had the good fortune to be with us. We wished to get across the 150 feet which was the only difficulty yet remaining before us. Each one of us was quite capable of undertaking the work, and, in spite of the unusual darkness, we had sufficient light for the purpose.

Solly was leading across a difficult bit of rock, and clearing away the ice; Haskett-Smith was paying out the rope as required; I was perched firmly at the bottom end of a narrow and steep ledge round the corner of a crag above them with the rope firmly hitched. We were all working steadily and most carefully, and hoped in a few minutes to clear our last difficulty. All at once the whole mountain side seemed to be ablaze, and at the same time there was a muzzled, muffled, or suppressed peal of thunder, apparently coming out of the interior of the mountain—so much so that, if a great crevice had been opened in the rocks and fire had burst out from it, we should hardly have been more surprised than we were. Solly and Haskett-Smith each exclaimed, 'My axe was struck,' and each of them naturally enough let his axe go. Where to none knew. Solly, describing this, says, 'At the moment I was standing with my face towards the mountain, with my right arm stretched out, feeling for a firm foothold with my axe, which I held just under its head. For perhaps a minute the lightning was coming very fast; then came the noise, and I saw a curve of flame on the head of my axe. I involuntarily let it go. The whole place seemed one blaze of light, and I could distinguish nothing. The thought that rushed through my mind was—Am I blinded? the intensity of the light was so terrible. It is difficult to put such events in any order of time; but I think the noise or explosion came first, before the blaze of light, and the light seemed to flicker as if a series of flashes were coming. I hardly know whether my body or any part of my clothing was actually struck. My axe certainly was, and I think the rocks just by me were.'

Haskett-Smith said that his neck was burnt, and we

saw later that a dark-brown band, an inch and a quarter wide, had been burnt exactly halfway round his neck. I was untouched. All the sparks disappeared with the flash.

Now the matter was serious enough, as we had only one axe, and we felt that we had had a most providential escape. There is little doubt that, if this had occurred upon the crest of the ridge above us, the electric current would have been much stronger and the consequences much worse.

My two companions then climbed up to the little ledge where I was sitting, to wait at least until the storm should pass away. Whilst Solly was doing this, a tremendous gust of wind swept up from the N.W., and nearly carried him off his feet.

The storm lasted much longer than we expected it to do, and by the time it had vanished it was quite dark. All climbers will readily agree with me when I say that the storm, seen from such a point of view, where the mountain forms are so wild, and their guardian glaciers so vast and glittering, was indescribably grand—so much so that, even under our circumstances, there was a kind of grim enjoyment which we could not help feeling.

I put my axe upon a higher ledge for safety's sake. When the storm had gone by we took stock of our goods. Solly had a lantern. We each had two shirts, scarfs, and unusually warm clothing. We had plenty of food, some cold tea, and a flask of brandy. We knew well that we must stop where we were until morning. It was hard luck certainly, as there was only one narrow prison moat between us and freedom. Once over these 150 feet, we could have reached the Stockje by lantern light. Of this I am certain. But no man living could cross the moat except in daylight.

Haskett-Smith, who is a marvellous man for making all sorts of hitches, knots, and nooses, managed to get a capital hitch for our rope, and lashed us to the rock most skilfully. The ledge was steep, and varied from 1½ to 2 feet wide. As we could not sit back to back, which is the best plan when possible, we did the next best thing, and sat, squatted, or leaned, face to back. Solly, who sat at the bottom, had a loose piece of friable rock which supported one foot. I was in the middle, with my knees up to my chin, on a steep slope, but was supported by Solly's back, and by a singularly sharp little stone on which I squatted. Haskett-Smith leaned with his back against a corner, and with his knees against my back. Each of us had a rücksack, which helped to keep out the cold. We made a good meal of potted meat,

bread, chocolate, and an orange, and left a box of sardines and other food for the morning.

Several short but heavy snow and hail showers fell after the thunderstorm had subsided, but we were thankful that there was no rain. The wind got up, too, and whistled wildly through the crags above us. Fortunately, a screen of rock above our ledge partly sheltered us. We faced a grim and grisly little pinnacle on the west face of the mountain, which became, hour after hour, if possible, more ghostly. How we did hate it to be sure! A light in a châlet near Ferpécle shone like a beacon for some hours, which was a pleasant contrast to the near view of the ghost, but it seemed to be a terribly long way off. We kept up our spirits capitally, and from previous experience I, at least, knew how thankful we ought to be that no member of our party was of a pessimistic turn of mind. At the same time, we were fully aware how serious the matter was, but we were determined to get well through it, helped, we trusted, by a power not our own.

Our greatest trouble during the night arose from the consciousness that Mr. Schuster, Herr Seiler, and other friends at Zermatt would be very anxious about us, and we often spoke of it with regret.

We were most careful to keep moving our hands and feet all the night, and, though the temptation to indulge in sleep was very great, we denied ourselves this luxury. After two o'clock an increased vigilance was necessary, as the sky became clearer, and the cold much more intense. Mr. Aitkin's guides, who were then bivouacking above the Stockje, 'complained much of the cold.' We probably suffered less than they did, as, at our great altitude, the air was doubtless much drier than below. At the same time, gentlemen who were occupying comfortable beds in luxurious hotels in the Vispthal thought the night was unusually warm. Haskett-Smith imagined the whole night that Solly was another member of the A. C., and invariably addressed him by the wrong name. This hallucination was no doubt the result of the electric shock.

Shortly before 5 A.M. we opened our sardine box, which was no easy task, as our outer gloves were like iron gauntlets. We made a good meal of petrified fish, frozen oranges, and bread. We avoided our brandy flask like poison on the whole expedition.

We soon discovered the lost axes below us, half embedded in hard snow. Then we began to move. Solly took my

axe, and with much difficulty, and at the expense of a good deal of time, cut down to and recovered one of the missing ones. We found, however, that it was then far too cold, and we were too benumbed to work safely, so we returned to our ledge again until eight o'clock. Long before this hour the ghostly pinnacle was gilded by the morning sun, and, if possible, we hated it more than ever, as no warm rays could reach the place where we were for hours to come. On telling several of the leading guides in Zermatt about waiting until eight o'clock on the ledge, they all said that it was quite early enough for us to move after spending a night out in the cold, and that they had done exactly the same under similar circumstances. We were sure we were right; still their testimony is valuable. Messrs. Kennedy and Hardy, when they had their 'Night Adventure on the Bristenstock,' say they were 'obliged to stamp about for some twenty minutes in order to restore circulation, or we should not have had sufficient steadiness to have continued our descent in safety.' Well, these gentlemen had neither waistcoats nor neckties, and had only a lump of bread and one bottle of wine. We were at least well fed and warmly clad, but we had no room to stamp about. Having now two axes, we were able to work again with renewed confidence in our powers. We saw the third axe lying half imbedded in the snow a long way below us, and about a rope's length from some firm rocks. The hail and snow, which had partly covered the rocks, increased the difficulty, and the ice in which we had to cut steps was unusually hard. In fact, our 150 feet were gained with much difficulty, and by the exercise of great caution and severe labour, at last, after much time and manœuvring, we recovered the third axe, and were indeed happy.

Two minutes later we stood in bright sunshine, and such was its invigorating power that in ten minutes all our stiffness had vanished. My hat blew off here, and rolled on its stiffened brim at a tremendous pace down a couloir of ice. Fortunately I had a woollen helmet which Miss Richardson had knitted for me. We hastened on very quickly in order to relieve, as soon as possible, the anxiety which we well knew our friends at Zermatt were enduring.

When on the snow ridge between points 3,912 m. and 3,729 m. we heard voices far below us on the west, and soon saw what we knew afterwards to be Mr. Aitkin, Imboden, and a porter. They had abandoned their intention of climbing the Dent Blanche 'on account of bad weather.'

Indeed, Miss Richardson, who had spent the night at the Stockje, was told by Imboden that 'in such weather it would be impossible, and probably would remain so for a day or two; therefore, they might as well go to Ferpécle and do another col the next day.'

Seeing that the party were above the route to Ferpécle, we knew at once that they were looking for us. Imboden shouted out to us, 'Where do you come from?' We pointed to the Dent Blanche, and they immediately turned towards Zermatt, and we only missed them by about five minutes at the usual breakfast place.

Now, as we knew that there was no need for us to hurry, we rested, and made a most hearty breakfast, as we had left on the rocks a whole chicken, some ham, bread, plums, and a bottle of white wine.

On crossing the glacier to the Wandfluh rocks our axes and rücksacks hissed like serpents for a long time, while we saw in the distance the storm which overtook Mr. Macdonald on the Lyskamm that very morning; and none of us liked the renewal of electric energy, which may well be believed. A heavy mist also threatened us. Mr. Aitkin had a similar experience to ours.

We descended by way of the Wandfluh, and above the Stockje untied the rope which we had had on for thirty-eight hours; and such is the virtue of the Alpine knot that we were as firmly tied at the end of this time as we were when we first put on the rope.

On the Zmutt glacier we bathed our hands repeatedly in the glacier pools as a safeguard against possible frost-bites with entirely satisfactory results. On the glacier we were delighted to meet Mr. E. T. Hartley, who welcomed us most warmly, and told us of the anxiety of our friends; he, however, and one good lady in Zermatt said all the time that we should return safe and sound again. Just off the glacier we met three porters provided with blankets and provisions sent by the kind thoughtfulness of Mr. Schuster and Herr Seiler.

We rested at the Staffel Alp, where we had some most refreshing tea, and reached Zermatt in the evening. Never shall we forget the hearty greeting which we received from Mr. and Mrs. Schuster, Herr Seiler and his family, Messrs. Aitkin, Alison, Newmarch, Groves, and many other friends, as well as from the leading guides, who congratulated us very warmly, and, I believe, sincerely. I take this opportunity of expressing, on behalf of my companions and my-

self, our most sincere thanks to all those who, at considerable trouble, organised the search party which was to have started to look for us at midnight in case we did not turn up, and our deep regret for the anxiety suffered on our account. Also, on my own account, I am glad to have this opportunity of stating, that the success which it was our good fortune to gain was due to the fact that during the whole expedition we worked together with the greatest unanimity. Each had his share of real hard labour, and each did it most willingly. I never heard one single word of complaint from either of my companions during the whole of that most trying time, which speaks well for the good tempers of these two gentlemen. In fact, no party could have pulled better together than we did, and as a proof of this I can truly say that we would gladly climb the Dent Blanche together again if the opportunity should present itself.

It may be thought that, because we were so long a time on the arête, we went slowly. This is not the case, as our pace throughout was quite up to the average. The real reason is that the mountain was unusually difficult on account of the old ice which was present everywhere below the crest of the arête on the west side. For all that, I can most conscientiously say that we ran no unjustifiable risk whatever, and we never advanced imprudently. We were prepared to retire at any moment if an advance seemed to be foolhardy. We were later on the top than we expected to be, but felt fully assured that we had sufficient time to clear every difficulty upon the mountain before nightfall. Though we were late, others have been later, in bad weather too. We were undoubtedly in great peril, but solely on account of the thunderstorm. But for this we could and should have returned to the Stockje.

I have been asked how it was we did not notice that a thunderstorm was coming on. What I stoutly maintain is that, during the whole time of our ascent, and for at least one hour on the descent, there was no cause to make either us or any one else to suspect that a bad thunderstorm was going to pour down its wrath upon us, nor was there anything whatever to make us believe that during some twenty-four hours there would be the extraordinary state of electric tension throughout the whole chain of the Alps which followed. The President of the Alpine Club had no private warning during his ascent of the Dent Jaune, one of the peaks of the Dent du Midi, nor had Mr. Macdonald on

the Lyskamm. Even the Editor of 'The Alpine Journal' had no special messenger to warn him that Tyrol was to be the scene of unusual electric energy. Many other climbers were caught in the storms which attacked the mountains on August 12 to 14 last year, and none of them were able to predict their coming.

In the pages of past 'Alpine Journals' are many records of adventures in thunderstorms—notably that charming paper of Mr. Tuckett's in vol. vii. p. 191; also Mr. Clayton's experience in Tyrol in 1878.*

Prior to last summer, my strangest experience of a thunderstorm was in 1879, when I climbed the Weisshorn. Whilst on the mountain, we noticed that the whole Visp valley was shrouded with a heavy pall of clouds nearly the whole day, whilst we had a clear blue sky. When we reached the valley in the evening, we found traces of recent heavy rains. Alpine friends whom we met in Zermatt told us that there had been a severe thunderstorm in the valley most of the day. Strange to say, we on the Weisshorn neither saw the lightning nor heard any of the thunder below us.

A few days after this, Mr. W. W. Richmond Powell had a remarkable experience on the Unter Gabelhorn. He gives me leave to make use of the following most interesting account of this adventure, which I extract from a letter which he wrote to me:

Regarding the Unter Gabelhorn thunderstorm, I left Zermatt with Hutchison and Peter Taugwalder on a brilliant morning in August, 1879. We reached the base of the rocky peak at about 8 A.M., breakfasted there, and lay basking in the sun for a full hour—for we had the whole day before us, and there was no need to hurry.

At last Taugwalder, looking back over his shoulder, said, 'The weather is going to change; we must get on.' I turned, and saw at the back of the Matterhorn and over the Dent d'Hérens a dense black mist rising against the blue sky—a mist that had no defined edges, and bore no resemblance to an ordinary cloud. We packed up our things quickly, and started climbing the easy rocks. The mist advanced rapidly, and by the time we had nearly reached the summit we were enveloped in it. Taugwalder was first on the rope, Hutchison came next, and I was at the tail. When about 40 or 50 feet below the top, I heard a curious hissing or buzzing sound, and, as it was one unfamiliar to me at that time, I halted a second or two to seek the cause of it. Finding nothing (I half expected to see some novel insect), I called to Taugwalder, asking if he heard it, and knew what it was. 'It's the wind; come along quickly,' replied he. I obeyed the injunction, but the explanation failed to carry conviction. I was in

* See *Alpine Journal*, vol. viii. p. 449.

the act of catching hold of a knob of rock just above this when, to my increasing perplexity, the knob also began to hiss. I examined it, and still could see nothing. But the next moment the ice-axe in my hand joined the chorus, which was now giving tongue on all sides, and I then comprehended the state of the case, for I remembered a description of Professor Tyndall's of similar hissing on a snowfield. As soon as I realised the situation I shouted to Taugwalder to turn back; but he, thinking perhaps his full tariff fee might be at stake, answered, 'We must just touch the top.' It was quicker to do this, I thought, than to stop to argue, so we scrambled up the few remaining feet, and the moment I touched the summit I bolted down again as hard as I could. I did not like the situation, and by this time every jutting point of rock was adding its own particular hiss to the general clamour. The rope was not long, and, getting quickly to the end of my tether, I turned and called to the other two, who still stood on the summit, urging them to follow at once. Just then I saw them both throw their hands up to their heads and cry out together, 'I'm struck!' 'Ich bin geschlagen!' Immediately afterwards came a flash of lightning and a report like the firing of a big gun. But the word 'flash' is insufficient to describe the awfulness of the fire that instantaneously pervaded the whole peak. Every crag, little and great, seemed to have its own tongue of flame; it was around us, above, below, and everywhere; and the terrific explosion-like report that accompanied it was most appalling. My first feeling of horror was, 'They are both killed!' But directly afterwards I saw that, whatever might have happened, they still had power of motion, and then I hauled at the rope, bringing them tumbling down the rocks, careless of bruises or other injury. A hurried word of inquiry, 'Were they hurt by the lightning?' and an equally hurried reply, and then we all bundled down at a pace I have never seen equalled before or since.

After the echoes which followed the first fearful flash had died away, I noticed that all the hissing had ceased; but it soon began again, and then came a second report, far less violent than the first, but accompanied by no lightning. A little later a third and much milder thunderclap was heard, and then heavy rain set in. We still raced down the rocks, and never stopped to speak till we reached our breakfasting place, drenched through, but, thank God! safe and sound. I then learnt that both my companions had sustained an electric shock—not, apparently, very severe, and both had escaped more serious injury. This shock occurred at a distinct interval of time before the great flash. I myself experienced no shock. The storm was a very severe one throughout the whole of the neighbourhood; and I think I am right in saying that Mr. Passingham found it both unpleasant and inconvenient on the Weisshorn that day.

In conclusion, I will merely say that each one of us was fully conscious of the fact that, under the most favourable conditions, this expedition must always be a formidable one; but I claim, too, that we were not acting unwisely in ascending so noble a mountain as the Dent Blanche.