THE

ALPINE JOURNAL.

MAY 1893.

(No. 120.)

An Ascent of Tucuche (Trinidad).

By SIR F. POLLOCK.

(Read before the Alpine Club February 7, 1893.)

In the spring of 1892 I had occasion to spend two months in the island of Trinidad on business unconnected with the objects of this Club. Before we left England I studied the Admiralty chart (the only sufficient map of the island that exists) with my friend Mr. H. F. Wilson, the Secretary of the Judicial Inquiry Commission whereof I was the junior member. Perceiving that a well-marked range of hills runs along the north side of the island from east to west, and that the culminating point of its western part appeared to be within a practicable distance from Port of Spain, to which place our work mostly tied us down, we formed a pious wish to attain that point in the course of our stay in the colony. We ultimately accomplished our desire of ascending Tucuche, but not without considerable delays and some difficulties. I hasten to say that the difficulties were much more of a moral than of a physical kind, and that the height of Tucuche above the sea-level, as determined by the Admiralty, is 3,100 ft. If a hill of that height seem beneath the attention of this Club, I humbly submit, first, that no ascent of any kind in the West Indies has to my knowledge been reported to the Club until now; secondly, that there was nothing higher in the colony for us to go up.

It is to be understood that walking, not to speak of climbing, is an exercise by no means in fashion in the West Indies in general or in Trinidad in particular. Mr. Wilson and I, having once profited by an off-day to get what at home would be regarded as an ordinary afternoon's walk (it was an easy

four hours' round), found ourselves quite celebrated persons. Accordingly we had to wait a long time before our inquiries about Tucuche called forth any response. Divers credible witnesses, indeed, were ready to assure us not only that they knew all about Tucuche but that they had been over it themselves. It turned out in every single case that what they had really done was to take a well-known bridle-path which leads, by a low pass over the western flank of Tucuche, to Las Cuevas on the north coast of the island. They spoke in perfect good faith, but in the language of the epoch before mountaineering became an art, when it did not seem worth while to distinguish the summit of a mountain from any other part of the mass. Evidently this did not serve our purpose. We were equally unsuccessful in obtaining any definite information about previous ascents; but it seemed to be an accepted belief that Capt. Baker, formerly in command of the Trinidad police force (but now Inspector of Prisons in Demerara), had reached the summit about twelve years ago. The local information of Maracas, as we afterwards found, would not have helped us even if we could have given the time to a preliminary expedition in search of it. For when we did go there we found the local knowledge and memory a pure blank, save for some extravagant fictions delivered to me, after we came down from the mountain, by a very pleasant young Spanish creole; and these, I am apt to think, were not traditional, but invented on the spot in my honour and for my special delectation, and without any desire or expectation that I should believe a word of them. I have not succeeded in obtaining any particulars of Capt. Baker's ascent, and I do not know that any account of it was ever published. Some days after our own ascent, Mr. Shine-Wilson, now of Aranjuez near St. Joseph, informed Mr. H. F. Wilson and myself that he had been on the summit in 1863 or 1864. It is believed that one or two naturalists have been there at different times. On the whole there may have been, I should guess, some half-dozen ascents before ours, but we seem to be in a position to claim the 'first recorded.'

Thus, after being a month in the colony, we still knew very little more about Tucuche than appeared on the face of the Admiralty chart. One thing we knew beyond what the map told us, that the whole range of hills is thickly wooded up to the highest points, and therefore the difficulty of making way through tropical forest was the chief if not the only physical difficulty to be expected. The facts of the

wet season having set in a whole month too soon, and everyone telling us that getting wet in the woods was a certain method of catching colony fever, did not tend to make the prospect more attractive. On the whole, as a wet May drew into its last week, we began to think that the ascent of Tucuche would remain a pious wish unfulfilled. But it came to pass that the Governor, as in duty bound, held high festival on the Queen's birthday, and the festival took the form of a ball. It was an admirably managed ball in every respect, and what I am about to relate will further impress on the younger members of the Alpine Club the importance of never missing a Queen's Birthday ball (or any other) if they can be there. Now at the Government House ball I fell in with Mr. E. R. Smart, a surveyor, a man of active habits in virtue both of natural taste and of his profession, and well versed in woodcraft and camping out. Mr. Smart had heard that Mr. Wilson and I desired to make acquaintance with Tucuche, and so accosted me, declaring himself willing not only to take part in such an expedition, the wet season permitting, but to organise it in detail. I joyfully accepted the suggestion, and after some further adjournments and colloquies we fixed on the short Whitsuntide holiday as the only available time. As to the weather, we had to chance it.

We had to be away from Port of Spain only one night; our preparations were therefore simple, and in no way specially remarkable. Only when I sent forth the excellent black butler of their Honours the Commissioners with a pair of boots to be nailed I learnt, to my no small indignation, that the shoemakers of Port of Spain know not nails. It will be admitted that nothing less than an application of the curse of Meroz was adequate for the occasion, and I inwardly (and in unofficial confidence to the secretary) relieved my feelings in some such words as these: 'Maledicite Portui de Hispania, dixit angelus Domini; maledicite sutoribus eius, quia clavos non habuerunt in auxilium Domini, ferrum clavorum in auxilium famulorum Domini qui montem eius Tucucem ascendebant.' But this was by no means the only occasion when it was needful in Trinidad to console oneself with a variation on the words of the Preacher which certainly would have been found in the book if the author had lived in the West Indies: 'Creolitas creolitatum, omnia creolitas.' However, nails in one's boots are a luxury and not a strict necessity in walking through a

wood, even when the ground is fairly steep and pretty wet.

Accordingly, on the afternoon of Whit-Monday, June 6, two travellers of modest appearance, but occasionally saluted by a constable, with one pair of nailed boots between them, might have been seen alighting at the St. Joseph station of the Trinidad Government Railway. Here Mr. Smart met us, having driven out by road with his own buggy, and put us in possession of the one vehicle which St. Joseph offers for hire. Our first step was to drive up the Maracas valley to our night quarters. This drive, though not long, is in some ways curious. The valley is a charming tropical valley, with a kind of far-off sub-Alpine air which I cannot explain, though it constantly haunted me in Trinidad. I can only say that it would at no moment have surprised me very much if, instead of a brown coolie or a black policeman, a Piedmontese carabiniere had come round the next corner. However, the Maracas river has to be crossed eight times by eight several fords, the uppermost ford being the deepest. We were informed, and therefore believed, that in the dry season the river is a quite shallow stream. We could see that in the wet season the water just washes over the floor of the carriage at the deeper places, and we were further informed, and could perceive it to be highly probable, that after a heavy rain flood two or three of the fords are not passable at all, and people who happen to be up the valley must stay there till the river goes down. At one time it appeared as if this was not unlikely to be our own case.

We arrived without any accidents of flood, though in most doubtful weather, at the house where Mr. Smart had secured the party a lodging. This was an old Spanish dwelling, by no means without a certain stateliness in the plain solid woodwork of its interior. It is now used by the manager of a cocoa estate, whereby hung the neighbourhood of a drying-house, which proved most useful next day. The manager was on the spot, and showed us all the hospitality in his power. There were still about three hours of daylight to spare, and we occupied them in visiting the Maracas waterfall, which is one of the recognised sights of the island. It had come on to rain heavily, and I count this walk as one of the two wettest in my life. The other was on Dartmoor, ten or twelve years ago, when the rain and mist were so thick that my companion, though he knew every inch of the ground, could not hit off Plym Steps when we were within some quarter of a mile of that freak

of nature or prehistoric 'old men's workings.' Not that one has much business to complain of the way to Maracas Falls being wet. For the nature of the Falls is such that in dry weather there is no water in them. Consequently tourists who wait for dry weather to make the excursion do not really see the Falls, but only the place where they ought to be. The situation is certainly a very beautiful one: an amphitheatre of rock nearly 400 ft. high, and covered with luxuriant ferns and mosses that would be precious in an English hothouse. Over this rock-face the water comes down, a spray rather than a waterfall, but less tenuous than most falls of that type. I cannot in conscience advise anyone to go to Trinidad on purpose to see the Maracas waterfall, but if you are in Trinidad the Maracas valley and falls are well worth giving a day to.

It rained all that night with slight intermissions, and when the tardy dawn of a tropical May broke, things looked about as bad as they could be. To go through with the walk in continuous rain, in that climate, would have been mere foolishness. Contrary to all expectation, however, the rain abated about seven o'clock, and presently the local guide engaged by Mr. Smart appeared, and pronounced the weather not bad (as the wet season goes). This guide was named De la Rosa. It turned out that he had never really been to the top. His chief uses were, first, to guide us through the higher cocoa plantations, where there was a trail of some sort, and then, where there was no longer a trail, to direct the operations of two assistants, armed with the universal cutlass or *machete* of the West Indies, in clearing a way through the bush. In a tropical walk off beaten tracks the cutlass is not only an excellent substitute for the ice-axe before breakfast, but quite as necessary in its way. As I did not feel that at my time of life I could afford to spare any fingers or toes, I did not make any attempt to learn the use of this instrument myself. Our party was completed by a mute person—a black boy of Tobago, by name Philip, who was Mr. Smart's personal attendant. If he could speak any language, we did not discover what it was. His other distinctive character was an unlimited capacity for carrying things on his head.

We left the road, or rather 'trace,' leading to the gorge of the Maracas waterfall on our right hand—i.e. the east, our general course being northerly. For a short distance we followed the comparatively frequented bridle-road to Las Cuevas, but soon turned off into the plantations, and

forded the Maracas river for the ninth time. Not long before we got out of the plantations we met an inhabitant of venerable appearance, being much the biggest toad I have ever seen or expect to see. So far as I could judge, it would just have sat comfortably in a soup-plate. This toad holds a cherished place in my memory of the fauna of Trinidad, together with the land-crabs of the Caroni river, a charming green and gold whip-snake seen in the early part of our stay, and a hairy spider, the observation of which *in situ* we owed to the kindness of Mr. Hart, the curator of the Botanic Garden. From a mountaineering or physiographic point of view the ascent of Tucuche is absurdly simple. The main line of the hills runs east and west. Maracas lies at the foot of a spur running from the summit of Tucuche a little west of south. In order to ascend Tucuche one has to strike the ridge of this spur and stick to it. Certainly there is no other way up from Maracas, and apparently there is no other way at all. The north face of the chain, and the western face of the Maracas spur, are precipitous. In all other directions the ground is not only covered with forest and bush, but much broken. It might be physically possible, though very long and laborious, to force a way up along the western ridge from the Las Cuevas pass, or from some point on the road; but it would be much like those alternative routes in the Alps which look practicable until the amount of step-cutting is estimated. Going would be somewhat easier in the dry than in the wet season, but there is nothing in the woods of Trinidad to correspond to the exceptionally good condition of snow that sometimes rewards the patient mountaineer. The cutlass-work must be about the same all the year round.

Our ascent was a straightforward upward march through tropical forest, and I have no pretensions to improve on the descriptions of tropical forest which have been published by many eloquent authors. No more serious accident was to be apprehended than catching one's foot in a liane or making the too near acquaintance of a prickly palm. Underfoot the ground was always muddy and often slippery. I regretted, at times fervently, that the resources of civilisation as understood in Port of Spain did not include boot-nails, but the regret was idle. It is to be mentioned that when we arrived at a certain salient point in the ridge, which masks the true summit from the head of the Maracas valley, De la Rosa declared that he had never been farther, did not believe that anyone had, and did not see the good of

going on. We explained to him, not without difficulty, that we had engaged him to come with us to the top of Tucuche, and expected him to come there: and the cutlass-men went to work again among a close and rank underwood. Luckily the rain-clouds had saved us from anything like great heat all through the morning, and, after a height of about 2,000 ft. was attained, we felt a real mountain freshness in the air, a feeling as pleasant as it was strange to men who had been at work six weeks in Port of Spain. It was a very damp coolness, which might perhaps have struck inward with ill effects if we had halted there for any length of time. As it was, the change of temperature was pure gain and refreshment. About three-quarters of an hour from the false summit brought us out on a kind of little natural clearing, where there was no more wood in front. Five or six paces forward, and we were looking right down upon the north coast of the island and Las Cuevas. After taking a little time to consider, we were satisfied that there was not any higher point in the ridge to the east or west of us. We might with a safe conscience report to H.E. the Governor that we had visited the summit of Tucuche, the reputed highest point of his dominions. To do De la Rosa justice, he seemed rather pleased that he had come on. The view, of which we could get only intermittent glimpses, must be a very fine one both seaward and landward in clear weather. At our feet lay a broken bottle, without any card or other mark of identification that we could find. We enclosed a note of our own names and the date, in the orthodox form, in a handy tin, and wedged it into the fork of a small branch, where we trust the next party may find it. Our time up from the house where we slept at Maracas had been a little over three hours. I nearly forgot to mention the absence of mosquitos among the merits of an elevated station on a tropical island. It is not the least. On the way down our local guide stopped at a point some way below the false summit to fix a red flag to a tall tree, which was done by the cutlass-men with an air of great importance. We never knew whether the flag was seen by anyone, and we had our doubts whether it was visible. After this our guide took us down by a variation (not a time-saving one so far as we could note) which brought us out on the Maracas waterfall road. No sooner were we fairly in the open than the rain, which had left us alone for seven full hours, a long respite in the wet season, came down again heavily. That same afternoon our St. Joseph cab-

man took us down across the eight fords to the railway. When we alighted at the Port of Spain terminus we were not sorry that the rapid dusk of our low latitude concealed the rain-beaten and muddy state of our garments from public view. But we were happy in having accomplished our quest. As I have said, the mountain is not an exceeding high one, but it was the highest thing we could get at.

Every one here knows how much more muscular work one can put into the day without inconvenience in the Alps than in England. In the tropics one is at the other end of the scale. Roughly speaking, it may be said that ordinary walking, except in the cool of the morning and evening, counts in fatigue fully 50 per cent. more than in Europe. On Tucuche we were actively exerting ourselves for nearly six hours, with about the same halting-times as we should have given ourselves at home, and I fully expected that we should feel as one does in the Alps after a long day's work. We were agreeably surprised by the actual result. Whether it were due to the comparative coolness of the day, or to the refreshing quality of the higher air, or to the variety of exercise afforded by scrambling through the woods, neither of us felt any more fatigue than is usually incident to the same amount of rough walking at home; and, so far from taking any harm by the expedition, we were all the better for it when we returned to our surfeit of pens and ink. Of course we had not omitted the precaution, a vital one in the West Indies, of having a complete change of clothes with us, and changing forthwith when we came in wet.

It is not very likely that any of the present company will desire to walk or climb in Trinidad or other West Indian islands. But I may say that, both from my own observation and from what I heard on all hands, the tropical sun, so far as the West Indies are concerned, goes near to be a fraud. It may be disagreeable to be out in the sun in the heat of the day, but there is no such danger as in the East: in fact sunstroke is as rare as in England. Wet, not sun, is the enemy to be seriously reckoned with. And if there be two more things especially desirable besides having one's own boot-nails, I should say they are a good strong waterproof, and (if such a thing really exists, and can hold out in tropical wet) a damp-proof matchbox.