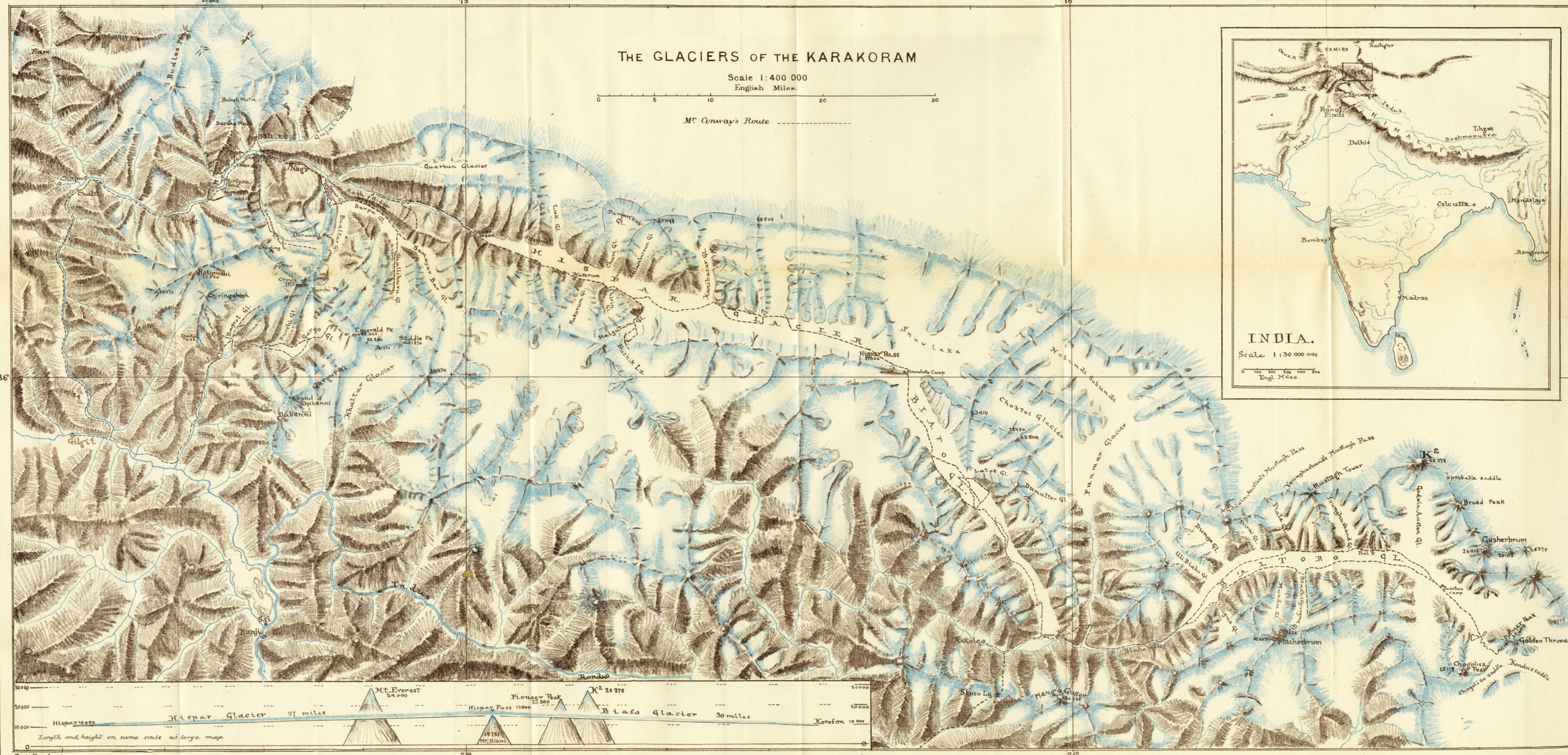
THE GLACIERS OF THE KARAKORAM

Scale 1:400 000
English Miles.

0 5 10 20 30

Mr. Conway's Route ----------



B.V. Darbishire.

Published for the Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society.

THE

ALPINE JOURNAL.

AUGUST 1893.

(No. 121.)

Climbing in the Karakorams.

By W. M. CONWAY.

(Delivered before the Alpine Club, Tuesday, May 9.)

AT one time, when I was interested in the study of mediæval Passion Plays, I remember coming across a passage in which a seller of ointments endeavoured to recommend them to purchasers by declaring that his stock was brought from the remotest regions—even from Ireland! My wares to-night may be, from a gymnastic climber's point of view, rather ordinary. I can only apologise and say that they come from far off. We made in the Mustagh or Karakoram range a few ascents that were difficult, but the points reached on those occasions were not high. We were, I think, wise to content ourselves with such relatively easy peaks as we could find, and to leave severer scrambles alone. The exploration of the mountain range was our first duty, and to that other things had to give way.

We made in all some sixteen climbs, to heights of 16,000 ft. or upwards. It is clear that to describe all these in a single paper to the Alpine Club must be impossible. One climb, one paper, used to be our custom. Moreover, no single member of our party was present on all sixteen expeditions. I did not ascend the Ibex peak of Dirran with the others, nor did I take part in the crossing of the Nushik Pass. My remarks about these expeditions may therefore be very brief.

The Ibex peak was about 16,000 ft. high. It was the first climb attempted by any of us. The four Gurkhas went up it with Bruce and Zurbriggen. Our guide described the climbing as difficult—harder, he said, than the Zermatt peaks. He praised the going of the Gurkhas, especially

in one place where they took off their boots and climbed some smooth slabs unroped. They traversed the mountain, ascending one side and descending the other.

The Nushik La is an ancient pass, historically similar to the old Weissthor. There are traditions that ponies used to be driven over it. This is probably untrue, for the whole north face is very steep and is now covered by ice slopes, hanging glaciers, and slopes raked by avalanches. There is a fairly safe route up to it, but it is not what should be called easy, and it is certainly difficult for laden coolies. Attempts were made at various times to cross this pass by English travellers as well as by native officers sent for that purpose by the Kashmir government. No one, however, succeeded in crossing it. They all reached the pass by gentle slopes from the south, but went no further. It was first crossed by Bruce and Eckenstein, afterwards by Roudebush and Zurbriggen. Both parties encountered difficulties resulting from the weather, the coolies, and so forth. I intended to climb to the top of the pass, but when we reached the foot of it, on the Hispar glacier, the weather was so bad that nothing was to be gained by doing so.

These, then, were the two principal expeditions in which I took no part. Of the remainder I must content myself with directing your attention, by aid of the lantern slides, to two or three.

Our journey, as you probably know, began at Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. We went a few miles down the Jhelam by boat and then crossed two passes (the Tragbal and the Burzil), and descended the Astor valley to the Indus at Bunji. A few miles further we turned westward up the Gilgit river to Gilgit. Gilgit is formed by nature to be a mountaineering headquarters. It is in the neighbourhood of several groups of high mountains and it is on the road to others. Of course, in the great mountain region of Asia there are many natural centres of the first rank, but Gilgit is for the time being pre-eminent amongst them, because British officers are quartered there and amongst them are the men to whom we must look for the foundation of an Anglo-Indian body of mountaineers.

We arrived at Gilgit early in May and found the mountains much in the condition that the Alps would normally present at that season of the year. We were too early for serious climbing. We therefore decided to explore the Bagrot valley, which descends towards the south from Rakipushi, the 25,500 ft. peak near at hand. We hoped to be

able to force a pass of 17,500 ft. over the head of the valley to Nagyr. Our three weeks of exploration were well spent, but we failed to get over any pass. We were driven back by a snowstorm from one when the saddle was within easy reach. We made the ascent of a difficult rock peak of over 16,000 ft., which we named the Serpent's Tooth, and we mounted several glaciers, surveyed the country, and shot a bear, but that was the limit of what was possible at the time. The mountains were deep in snow. Huge avalanches continually fell, and one nearly overwhelmed us. We returned to Gilgit.

From Gilgit we next went into the Hunza-Nagyr valley, which lies between two great ranges of mountains. All the ranges of the Mustagh lie in a W.N.W. to E.S.E. direction, parallel to one another. At the head of the Nagyr valley is the long Hispar glacier, over which it was our plan to cross the unexplored Hispar Pass into Baltistan. It is remarkable that though the valleys are all in the direction I have mentioned, the chief river flows in a general sense from north to south. It rises in the northernmost range near the Kilik Pass. It cuts through the Hunza range and then, joining the Nagyr river, flows down the Hunza-Nagyr valley for a time. It again turns south and cuts through the Nagyr range close to Rakipushi. At Gilgit it joins the Gilgit river and with it flows into the Indus. Almost at once the Indus in its turn cuts through the main Himalaya range, near the giant peak Nanga Parbat—a mountain which, I may remark in passing, invites the attention of climbers, and will, I hope, some day be ascended by a member of this Club.

The Hunza-Nagyr valley is the most remarkable I have ever seen. Hunza, I should say, is the name of the district on the right bank of the river, Nagyr of that on the left bank. The bed of the valley is about 7,000 feet above sea level. Like all the valleys in this region it is an absolute desert, except where artificial irrigation makes it fertile. The large area of irrigated land in the Hunza valley gives an unusual richness to the scene. Standing in the midst of this area one enjoys an extraordinary view, for both to north and south there rise peaks of from 24,000 to 25,500 ft. in height. North is the great peak called Boiohaghurdoanas (the likeness of a galloping horse). This rises behind the town of Hunza, and is covered with hanging glaciers. Its slope is so steep that an avalanche falling from its summit

dusts with snow-spray the houses of the town, as I myself was witness. To the south, and visible at the same time with this peak, is the still greater Rakipushi, whose north front is a kind of Monte Rosa from Macugnaga, but on more than double the scale. You may imagine how grand these mountains look on either hand of the traveller as he ascends the valley.

Arrived at Nagyr we were still too early for any high ascents, and the weather was continuously bad. Heavy falls of snow came down almost daily. We were now on the north side of the range that had stood between us and Nagyr when we were at Bagrot. I was anxious to explore the descent from the passes we had attempted to force. To this end we mounted a side valley to the Samayar glacier and camped on it, but its névé basin was cut off by a low cliff, over which all the ice fell. Its sides could not be turned in the then condition of the snow, but later in the season they might have been. The further ascent to the col would have presented no difficulty. We had to find something else to do. We accordingly turned up a side glacier and ascended to the col (17,700 ft.) at its head, which I named Daranshi saddle. A storm here caught us and we had to make a rapid retreat to camp, whence we returned to Nagyr.

The difficulty in this kind of exploring mountaineering lies chiefly in the matter of carriage. I do not refer to carriage of heavy baggage, supplies, and the like, which involves merely foresight, patience, and what they call *bandobast*. It is the carriage of the few things required for three or four nights on a long mountain, that beats one down. There are the instruments—plane table, photographic apparatus, and the like—the provisions, warm wraps, and the climbing equipment to be taken. Coolies cannot go far, and even if they could they would not help much, for a man cannot do more than carry his own things at a great height. It requires several journeys to equip a high base, and others from that to equip a higher, so that a really big mountain would call for a whole season's work. Till the mountain regions are explored the time is not ripe for detailed work of this sort.

From Nagyr we made a second expedition into the mountains to the south, and climbed a point which I called the Dasskaram needle. It was not the peak we were going for; that was again cut off from us by an impracticable ice-fall. We returned on our tracks over two marches, and

crossed a low pass into the head of the Nagyr valley, which we followed up to the village of Hispar.

This village is situated about a mile below the snout of the Hispar glacier. It was the last inhabited place we saw on our way to the great Hispar Pass. We left Hispar on July 11, we crossed the pass on the 18th, and we got off the Biafo glacier at its foot, and reached Askole on July 26, thus making the first recorded passage of the longest snow pass outside the Arctic regions. Of course we could have travelled much quicker, but the whole route had to be surveyed, and we were again delayed by spells of bad weather. Laden coolies doing forced marches might accomplish the passage in five days, I think.

From the top of the pass we saw into the névé basin at the head of the Biafo glacier—an enormous lake of snow possessing apparently no visible outlet. A storm was coming on when this opened on our view. It was not without some misgivings that I gave the word to descend. Before the clouds enveloped us and the snow began to fall we fortunately reached the level of the lake and discovered its outlet, the broad smooth river of ice called Biafo. On either side of this rise peaks of astonishing precipitousness, to which the highest Alps present no parallel. It will, I think, be long before human foot treads their points. So noble an avenue of mountains would be hard to conceive, Dr. Johnson notwithstanding. Almost equally impressive is the gorge containing the lowest ten miles of the Biafo glacier. The ice there becomes rather crevassed and heavily moraine-covered.

Askole is four miles below the foot of the Biafo glacier. There we rejoined Bruce, who had arrived from Hispar, after making the first passage of the Nushik La. We spent a day or two resting there, and on July 31 we started away again for the Baltoro glacier and our big climb.

The Braldu river, which flows past Askole, drains three of the largest glacier-basins in Asia, those, namely, of the Biafo, the Punmar, and the Baltoro.* We retraced our steps to the Biafo glacier and crossed its snout; we climbed over the ridge beyond it into the Punmar valley, ascended that for some distance to the rope bridge and returned down its other bank to the junction of its stream with that from the Baltoro. Finally, we ascended beside the latter to the foot of the ice at the camping-ground called Baltoro.

* Báltŏro: the accent is on the first syllable.

From Baltoro to Askole, as the crow flies, is about twenty miles, but the journey over it occupied us during four days of exceptionally hard work.

We expected to be absent from Askole, the highest village, for some five weeks. We accordingly had to carry provisions for the whole of that time. This required much arranging, for a man cannot carry his own food for so much as five weeks. A double number of coolies had to be taken half-way up the glacier, and then half of them sent back. Afterwards double journeys had to be made each day; a series of men had to be arranged to bring up wood from below day after day. In fact, an elaborate organisation had to be called into existence. All this took time.

We started up the glacier in high spirits, but it soon reduced us to a state of mere plodding persistence. The lowest twenty miles of the Hispar glacier had been stony, but we had been able to avoid the stones by traversing the hillside to the south. The snout of the Biafo had been stony too, but only for a few miles. The Baltoro glacier was far worse than either. We were compelled to ascend its moraine-covered surface from the very foot, as far as the lowest rocks of the Golden Throne. It is wholly stone-covered up to its *Place de la Concorde*. Above that point clear ice emerges, but only in stripes of a sort of séracs, up which there is no route. Nothing more tedious to march over can be imagined. The stone-covering is very thick, low down, and the stones are large and loose. Big ones have constantly to be climbed over. Moreover, the surface of the glacier consists of a series of huge mounds, which have to be ascended and descended in endless succession. There are many large lakes carried down on the ice, and these involve long *détours*. Five miles a day is as far as one can march up this wearisome ground.

As a compensation the scenery was throughout superb and surpassed in grandeur all that we had previously beheld. It was utterly un-Alpine. The first ten miles of the glacier lay between precipitous rock masses, terminating aloft in astonishing needles of rock. Above these is the region of the great mountains, on the whole, probably, the loftiest group in the world.

Masherbrum (over 25,000 ft.) was the first of these that we saw. It appeared to us towards sunset, as the clouds were waving brilliantly about it. Its architecture is of the first order, and the peaks that surround it yield to none in magnificence of structure. Most of them appeared almost

impossible of access. Next, right ahead of us in our march, the still greater and even nobler Gusherbrum (over 26,000 ft.) opened upon us, a superb apparition. We were on the look-out for a big peak to ascend, but neither of these seemed to offer the smallest hope of being accessible in any such time as was at our disposal.

After journeying a few days up the Baltoro glacier, we became tired of being always at the bottom of so deep a trough, and, in fact, experienced in an acute form the emotion that first set men mountaineering. We determined to make a push for some minor point on a ridge to the north of us, hoping thus to obtain a view of the giant K. 2, the second highest measured peak in the world. Accordingly we encamped by a small pool at the foot of a side valley, and prepared for an early start on the following morning (August 10).

We left camp in the dark, and struck up a slope covered all over with big *débris*, to all intents and purposes like the surface of the Baltoro glacier, only tilted up at a considerable angle. We stumbled up it with much discomfort for an hour or two, and then turning round observed with delight that the dawn was coming, and that a huge peak was glooming beside it. This peak was the Golden Throne. It stood at the true head of the glacier, or rather at the head of the central arm or tributary of the Baltoro glacier, which swept grandly down from it towards us. This mountain differed greatly in form and, as we afterwards discovered, in geological structure from all the others in the neighbourhood. It resembled Monte Rosa in its upper parts, but was cut off in many places below by ice-cliffs and precipices, over which ice-avalanches fall. Branch glaciers descended on either side of it, and sundered it from the two ranges, north and south. Of all the mountains we had seen it was the one that offered the best chance of an ascent, and we almost at once made up our minds to go for it.

We had not as yet beheld K. 2, and we turned to push on for a view of it. The *débris* slope narrowed, and led us to an arête, which we followed for many hours over tooth after tooth. Rather behind us, to the right, the Golden Throne remained visible and became continually more attractive to our eyes. Away to the left, peering over a neighbouring rib like the one we were ascending, rose an astonishing tower. Its base was buried in clouds, and a cloud-banner waved on one side of it, but the bulk was clear, and the right-hand outline was a vertical cliff. We afterwards dis-

covered that it was equally vertical on the other side. This peak rises in the immediate proximity of the Mustagh Pass, and is one of the most extraordinary mountains for form that we anywhere beheld.

Upward we tugged, experiencing as we rose a new and disagreeable sensation. When 18,000 ft. had been passed, we found that it was well to look to our breathing. The action could not be left to look to itself. A long stride had to be taken, and one went at it as usual with a momentary holding of the breath. The penalty was instantly exacted, a giddiness supervened, and had to be puffed and pumped away. It is extraordinary how often in the actions of movement a man tends to hold his breath. Almost every sudden attraction to the eye is marked by a change in the rate of breathing. You hold your breath when you look through an instrument, focus a camera, take a long stride, balance yourself in an unusual position; you do it in the act of sitting down or getting up. Above 18,000 ft. a new habit must be formed. The breath must be taken with perfect regularity and a deep inspiration. Giddiness is the penalty of the least infraction of this law—giddiness slight at first, but above 20,000 ft. severe.

As we advanced we perceived that the peak where the ridge we were mounting joined the main ridge was not within reach. It would require a second day to get to it. We decided, therefore, to be content with the highest point on our buttress, and the more willingly because clouds were coming down, and the Golden Throne was already blotted out. But away to the south the view remained superb. Two mighty rocks enframed it, and between them stretched a side glacier to a snowy saddle. Beyond that rose a vaster Lyskamm, and far, far away other nameless and magnificent peaks, all whitened with that mass and exuberance of accumulated snow to which the lightly burdened Alpine slopes present no parallel. The top of our peak came at last. It was nearly 20,000 ft. high. We rested on it for an hour or more, then started to return. We went down by another route, descending at once to the side glacier on the north, and going down it and the horrible *débris* slopes to camp.

Two days later we made another climb, taking a direction parallel to our previous ridge, but this time going up the glacier of a side valley to the col at its head. We started from White Fan camp, went up the Fan glacier, and reached the Fan col. This time we did catch a glimpse of K. 2 from

the pass, but only of his hoary old head sticking up above an ugly snow ridge. Southwards we enjoyed lovely vistas in the same direction as before, only less encumbered with clouds.

From the White Fan camp we now struck right up the glacier towards the foot of the Golden Throne, which was two marches away. We camped at the end of the first march, at a point where the three great branches of the glacier join crosswise and together flow away with their united burden of stones. We could now look up the Godwin-Austen glacier to the base of K. 2, but all the height of the giant tower—we always spoke of it as the 'Watch-tower'—was hidden in clouds, and we had to wait four days before the great pile stood out clear against the sky, a single wall from the level glacier to the top, 2,000 ft. more in height than is Mont Blanc above Courmayeur.

Our halt at this 'Junction' camp was miserable enough, for we were snowed upon and frozen and blown about, and (worst of all) afflicted by sympathy for the discomfort of the coolies. At last we got away, and walked up the moraine to the foot of the Golden Throne. At the moment of our arrival it began thundering its ice-avalanches at us, eighteen of them, one after the other—an angry defiance.

It was pleasant enough, at the time of the delivery of this paper, to describe with the help of the photographs the stages of our ascent of Pioneer Peak (22,500 ft.), but to re-write the story again from the report of such disjointed chatter is an indescribable bore, from which I entirely revolt. Readers must await the book, which will be in their hands next year if they care to buy it. Suffice it now to say that we struggled round the base of the Golden Throne, up 2,000 ft. of ice-fall, to a plateau, where we camped; that we forced the camp on to a second, and again on to a third platform; that we got daily weaker as we ascended; that we finally reached the foot of the ridge which was to lead us, as we supposed, to the top of the Golden Throne. It was an ice ridge, and not, as we hoped, of snow, and it did not lead to the top, but to a detached point in the midst of the two main buttresses of the throne. Nine hours of hard work carried us up about 2,500 ft. to the point. We rested there about 1½ hr. and then descended, with the glories of sunset before us and the consciousness that the best we were going to do was done.

Two or three days of travel took us down the left side of the glacier to a camp opposite the side glacier leading to the

Mustagh Pass. We meant to cross southward over a traditional col to Khapalu, but there was no possible passage, so we returned to Askole. After a day's rest we crossed the Braldu river, mounted to a col in the ridge south of it, the Skoro Pass, and descended to Shijar and Skardo, where there were apricot trees, and vegetables, and other delights.

We bundled off our baggage over the Deosai plains to Srinagar, and ourselves took ponies and rode day after day up the Indus by a horrible path to Leh, the capital of Ladak, or Little Tibet. There we visited Buddhist monasteries and the like curiosities, but these have already been described in earlier volumes of the 'Alpine Journal.' From Leh we rode the eighteen marches to Srinagar at a forced pace, and, on October 11, I re-entered the place after an absence of exactly six months in camp.

Two Days on an Ice Slope.

By ELLIS CARR.

(Read before the Alpine Club, June 6, 1893.)

In venturing to write an account of our attempt on the Aiguille du Plan, I have felt myself somewhat handicapped by the necessity of describing a failure, and by the fear that, in the opinion of some, the fact that we did not reach the summit of our peak might deprive me of my chief if not sole justification for putting pen to paper.

In undertakings of all kinds it has been admitted that success often covers a multitude of sins in the methods adopted to attain it, while failure as often tends to emphasise those sins and bring them into relief; and it seems to me that mountaineering offers no exception to the rule, but, on the contrary, frequently affords striking examples of its application. Accepting, therefore, whatever risk there may be of the latter contingency in the present instance, I have endeavoured to record the details of an expedition which, though unsuccessful in the ordinary acceptation of the word, was, to myself at least, instructive, not only as a test of endurance, but as a lesson in that self-reliance on the mountains which can only come by experience.

Before leaving England Mr. Mummery and I discussed the possibility of making an ascent of the Aiguille du Plan from the Chamonix valley. The mountain excited our interest in the first place from its having received but little