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MISHIRGI-TAU AND AİLAMA.

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ON the morning of August 2, 1889, I stood by the wooden bridge at Balkar, watching Messrs. Freshfield and Dent and Captain Powell with their followers as they ascended the western slope of the valley on their way to Bezingi. It was not with the most cheerful thoughts that, after their departure, I turned back into the muddy, uninviting village, knowing that for some weeks I should not hear the sound of my native language, and being uncertain how our party would fare without an interpreter.

There was soon an opportunity of testing this point. It would never do to return empty-handed to Karaul; so, while waiting for a horse, I tried my skill at bargaining, and with the help of a few words of Russian and much pantomimic action on both sides soon became possessed of four chickens, a number of eggs, a small sack of bread and another of potatoes. These desirable acquisitions were slung across a small donkey, belonging to my newly-engaged native porter, Kutché Janibergoff; two other Tartars who seemed to have nothing better to do at the moment joined us; and so we journeyed up the Cherek valley to Karaul, where I had left my guides, Christian Jossi and Johann Kaufmann. Kaufmann had been on the sick list for several days; but on my return to the camp in the evening he seemed to be so much better that it was decided that Jossi and the porter should accompany me on an excursion up the Dykhsu Glacier, with the object of taking photographs and reconnoitring the district.

The next day was showery, but on the day following we

started at 5 A.M. up the Dykhsu gorge. The weather was still unpromising, and, enveloped in thick mist, we made our way up the narrow, picturesque ravine, which has no permanent path, and never can have one, owing to the ravages of avalanches and of the impetuous torrent. In 2 hrs. the snout of the Dykhsu Glacier was reached, and on surmounting it we emerged from the mist and found ourselves in a new region.

The portion of the glacier in sight was about 5 miles long and $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ mile broad, the lower part being, for about 2 miles, so completely covered with rock debris that no ice was visible. On our left—*i.e.* on the S. side—were the lofty snow-clad ridges of the main chain; further to the W. a large tributary glacier flowed in from the S.; further still was a fine snow-peak, Ailama; and, apparently at the head of the glacier, the imposing mass of Shkara.

On the N. side of the ice stream we could see only steep grassy slopes on which eight or nine 'tur,' or Caucasian bouquetin, were feeding.

Under Kutché's guidance we crossed to the N. side of the glacier, and walking sometimes on the moraine, sometimes on the hill-side up to our knees in flowers, and sometimes in the deep trough between the two, arrived at 11 o'clock at the widest part of the glacier. Close by was a hunter's 'kosh,' formed by an overhanging cliff of pale granite, and here I unpacked the photographic bag; but was dismayed to find that, in place of the camera, I had—in the darkness of the tent—packed up a spare case of dark-slides very similar in size and weight. Kutché had now to return to Karaul with a note to Kaufmann, while Jossi and I sat down to eat and to make fresh plans. Up to this time there had been no definite intention of climbing till Kaufmann was well enough to join us; but my companion, exalted in spirit by the splendid day and magnificent scenery, now proposed that, as we could not photograph, we should climb a good peak.

Ailama was rejected as being too difficult, and Shkara as being too big, so crossing the mouth of the side-glen down which the Khrumkol Glacier flows from the N., we continued on our way up the main ice-stream. At 2.30 P.M. we were in sight of the Dykhsu Pass, at the head of the glacier, and so near to Shkara that we felt strongly tempted to attack it; but I had now formed another plan.

Through a gap in the ridge to the N. the rocky face of Mishirgi-tau had appeared. As seen from the S.E. this peak, like so many of the Caucasian mountains, has two heads,

connected by a depressed snowy saddle. The western head is a massive tower of rock, while the eastern is a ridge crested with snow. Knowing that the year before (1888) Messrs. Holder and Cockin had climbed nearly to the top, and had then found themselves cut off,* I jumped to the conclusion that they had ascended the great rock tower and had been unable to get across to the eastern ridge, which seemed to us to be undoubtedly the higher. It was my impression that the peak did not greatly exceed 15,000 ft. in height, that it was fairly easy to climb and sure to afford an unrivalled view, therefore I proposed that we should attempt it.

Jossi, still hankering after Shkara, did not favour the idea. He had never heard of Mishirgi-tau, and did not appear to admire either its name or its appearance; but of course he agreed to my plan, only stipulating that I should choose my own route. Accordingly we turned northward up a snow-slope, and at 5.30 P.M. found ourselves on a snowy ridge, on the N. side of which a rocky escarpment fell away abruptly to the western arm of the Khrumkol Glacier. Mishirgi-tau, now visible from base to summit, lay to the N.W., at the head of the glacier, so that our next day's route was perfectly simple and straightforward.

For want of a more comfortable place we halted for the night at a tuft of rocks some distance along the ridge, at a height of nearly 12,500 ft. If the situation was somewhat unsheltered it was picturesque in the highest degree. We were surrounded by some of the noblest peaks in the Caucasus; the air was so clear that we could recognise the outline of Kazbek, seventy miles away; and the view at sunset of the tremendous precipices of Koshtan-tau was something to be remembered. As we ate our supper all the summits in sight glowed as if on fire, then faded one by one, Koshtan-tau and Mishirgi-tau keeping the glow long after the others.

After some hours of wakefulness I fell into so sound a sleep that when I awoke, with a start, it was broad daylight and already half-past four. As it was a splendid morning we made a hasty breakfast, and leaving our sleeping bags and some of our food on the rocks, went down to the glacier, and began to ascend it in the direction of Mishirgi-tau. The mountain now presented to us its broad south face of dark-coloured rock, while from the gap between the two peaks a great couloir filled with snow and ice swept down to the névé below.

* *Alpine Journal*, vol. xiv. p. 192.

By 8 o'clock we had reached the foot of the couloir, and, in order to avoid the steepest rocks, began to cut steps up it; but before we had risen more than two or three hundred feet we were startled by the humming of a stone whirling past us from above. Then came a second and a third. These stones probably flew at a safe height above us, but their velocity was so great that we could not see them, and they made a most demoralising noise; we therefore lost no time in leaving the



MISHIRGI-TAU FROM THE SOUTH-EAST.

gully for the rocks on its eastern margin. Turning round at this point, we were struck with admiration by the superb appearance of Ailama, now no longer foreshortened, and made a compact to climb it before leaving Karaul.

After taking some food we began the ascent of the rocks, which proved to be of the slab type, with occasional patches of snow. Though uniformly steep they were fairly firm and not particularly difficult, except at one place, where a smooth upright face almost baffled us; but it was eventually

surmounted by means of a well-known acrobatic feat supplemented by vigorous propulsion from Jossi's ice axe.

When the aneroid pointed to 15,000 ft. I was surprised to find that we were already higher than the top of Ailama, and it was now certain that our peak would prove to be much loftier than we had supposed. As we climbed nearer and nearer to the gap the rocks became steeper and the step-cutting in the snow patches more tedious. We now noticed, with some slight misgiving, that the great rock pinnacle towered above us to an unexpected height, and for the first time I began to feel a vague apprehension lest, after all, it should overtop the eastern peak. The saddle was gained at 1 o'clock, and, after a short halt, we turned our backs on the tower and began to walk eastward up the broad and easy snow ridge, our doubts increasing with every step. The weather had now completely changed, and thick clouds from the S.W. were drifting through the gap and enveloping all the surrounding mountains.

At half-past two—9 hrs. after leaving the sleeping-place—we arrived at the highest point of the ridge, a short, narrow crest of the snow about 16,350 ft. high; but our hopes of a view were disappointed, all the peaks around us, except Koshtan-tau, being quite hidden. By this time the western rock tower was also invisible, so we sat down on the snow, and had to wait about 10 min. before a break in the clouds came. Then I saw at once that its top was—to make a guess—40 or 50 ft. above us. At first Jossi maintained that our point was higher, but when the clinometer had decided the question he was profoundly disgusted, and looked at me as reproachfully as if I were in some way responsible for the shape of the mountain.

We now returned to the saddle, to see if there were any possibility of climbing the tower. None whatever from this side. We were separated from it by a sharp edge of snow not more than 100 yds. long, but at the further end of this rose a perpendicular face of rock which we considered absolutely unassailable. Our only chance seemed to be to cut steps in steep ice round the northern base of the tower, and so to get behind it. There was an hour's work in sight; what lay beyond we could not tell. But it was now after 3 o'clock, our food was almost finished, and the weather most unpromising. In the end we allowed our discretion to prevail, swallowed our disappointment, and turned to go down.

The descent of the rock face was made in thick mist, but the great snow gully on our right was a sufficient landmark.

At the awkward pitch Jossi lowered himself with some spare cord which we fortunately had with us. We found that stones were still humming merrily down the lower part of the couloir; and the névé was reached as it began to grow dark. I at first led the way down the Khrumkol Glacier, but Jossi did not approve my route and changed places with me. He, however, deviated too much to the S., and we soon became pounded in a network of crevasses, where the darkness increased our difficulties, and there was much step-cutting and loss of precious time before we got back again on to the even surface of the glacier.

It was now my turn to contribute to the evening's entertainment. Seeing some rocks on the S. side of the glacier, I insisted that they were those below our bivouac, and by the time steps had been cut up to them it was after 9 o'clock. The rocks proved difficult; the ice below was broken, and the night was now so dark that we decided to remain where we were. I lay down on a sort of terrace and fell asleep; but my slumbers were not unbroken. Once or twice every hour sounds as of the stamping of feet disturbed me. Each time the same weird vision—a gloomy hollow, fantastic peaks and ridges faintly shadowed in the mist, while a yard or two away, seated on a ledge, was a dim and dusky spectre warming its hands at a candle in a Vienna lantern. Perhaps we should have been more resigned to our situation if it had been possible to know that on the following night Mr. Freshfield's party would also be taking their pleasure under very similar conditions on the Shaurtu Glacier, ten or twelve miles away to the N.W.

At 4.30 it was light enough to move, so stretching our stiffened limbs we began to climb—as we hoped, up to our bivouac. Another delusion! The rocks were iced and difficult. The higher we climbed the higher we had to climb; but at last we gained the snow-ridge above, and were able to see the sleeping-place about 500 ft. below us.

We reached it at half-past seven, and fell eagerly on our reserve of food. After breakfasting and packing up we varied our route by following the course of the Khrumkol Glacier to its termination, and had a most interesting walk close under the lofty precipices of the southern ridge of Kosh-tan-tau. But our troubles were not yet over. The evil genius who seemed to be conducting this expedition beguiled us down to the very snout of the glacier, where it was impossible to get off, and another hour was lost in retracing our steps.

Below the apparent snout of the Khrumkol Glacier the ice

seemed to extend as far as the main Dykhsu ice-stream ; but its surface was loaded with a most extraordinary accumulation of rock fragments of all sizes from that of a cottage downwards. We named this spot 'Das Felsenmeer.' It was uncertain whether the debris had been brought down by the side-glacier, or was the result of a great fall of rock ; but, as the higher level of the main ice-stream formed an effective barrier, this vast rocky chaos, extending right across the mouth of the side-valley, lay wedged in behind and before, fretting, crushing, and grinding as the ice-bed melted or moved beneath it.

At 11.30 we regained the Dykhsu Kosh, and found Kutché there with the camera, and, to our great joy, a kettle boiling, just ready for making tea. The rest of the day was spent in taking views and returning to Karaul. At the end of the Dykhsu Glacier Jossi, who was some distance behind, appropriately finished the excursion by mysteriously disappearing. Fearing that some accident had happened, I went back on to the glacier to look for him, and it was not till three-quarters of an hour had been thus wasted that the Tartar's sharp eyes discovered, from the guide's footprints on the moraine, that he had taken another course while we were waiting for him. The gorge looked so beautiful in the evening light that my annoyance at the last episode soon abated, and the rest of the walk was attended by pleasant anticipations of supper and blankets.

On August 14—eight days after the first visit—Jossi and Kutché again accompanied me to the Dykhsu Kosh, our object being to climb Ailama. Kaufmann was to come up a day or two later, with more provisions, for an attempt on Shkara. We found the kosh fairly comfortable. Inside the low wall built up to the cliff there was room for four men to lie down, and the rocks overhung so far that when it rained no one got wet except the outside man. But it would be an ideal sleeping-place at which the outside man did not find something to grumble about. As firewood was very difficult to obtain we brought up with us, this time, a small oil stove, which proved most useful and added greatly to our comfort. During our stay we had many visits from Tartar chamois-hunters, who used to drop in at all hours of the day or night ; indeed, we never knew on lying down what our number would be in the morning. Having seen the oil stove at work, they appreciated it more highly than was convenient, and did not bring a stick of firewood with them on their next appearance.

Our first assault on Ailama was unsuccessful. The beautiful snowy cone of the mountain rises behind a huge rocky buttress, which separates it from the Dykhsu Glacier; and the crest of the buttress seemed to us to present the most likely route up the peak. But we had underrated both its length and its difficulty. On the day of our arrival at the kosh we crossed the glacier and bivouacked on the buttress at a height of 11,500 ft. Next morning, after sending the native back, we started up the ridge; but it proved to be cleft repeatedly by deep chasms, and after three or four hours of the toughest work encountered during that summer we were compelled to abandon the attempt. Yet our toil was not entirely fruitless: we had learnt that the western arm of the Ailama Glacier curved round behind the buttress and sloped up to the very foot of our peak.

Two days later Kaufmann, Kutché, and another native came up, as arranged, from Karaul; but they brought so little bread that I was forced to send Kutché at once to Balkar for more. Having already walked to the camp and back that day, he was naturally disconcerted at this additional duty, and muttered something in Turkish, of which only the word 'Shaitan' was intelligible. He soon, however, recovered his composure, and trotted contentedly off on his double journey.

Next day both the guides started with me, in very doubtful weather, for the long-intended attack on Shkara. A walk of 4 hrs. up the glacier brought us to the lowest rocks, and then the flood gates of the heavens opened on us to such purpose that we lost all interest in the peak. About 4 o'clock that afternoon three drenched and demoralised individuals, carrying three saturated sleeping-bags, might have been seen stealing unostentatiously into the Dykhsu Kosh, where they partook freely of hot tea, lighted their pipes, and spent the evening in silent reflection.

The result of this excursion was that Kaufmann again broke down, and had to return next day to Karaul, while Jossi and I, anxiously awaiting bread, went up a hill of about 12,000 ft., near the kosh, and obtained some more photographs. I cannot speak too highly of my guide's unselfishness during this and one or two other periods of short commons. At these times he would economise the provisions by pretending that he had no appetite, and would limit himself to little more than thin soup and tea.

Fortunately our trusty porter arrived in the evening with bread and two chickens, and at 7 next morning (August 19)

we all set out again for Ailama. This time we walked down the Dykhsu Glacier for an hour, and then turned southward up the Ailama Glacier; but as the great ice-fall was quite impassable it was necessary to take to the cliffs and grass-grown ledges on its left bank.

About 9.30 we had to cross a wide gully filled with hard avalanche snow. The native, though well laden, had climbed so well on the rocks that we had not yet put on the rope. Jossi, after chipping small steps in the slope, had gained the rocks on the far side, and I was just about to leave the snow when a noise behind made we look round just in time to see the Tartar shoot down the slope and disappear from view. Hastening back a few steps I got a full view of the slope. Two or three hundred feet below was the glacier, and at its margin were some large stones and a longitudinal crevasse, but no Kutché. 'He is in the crevasse!' I exclaimed to Jossi.

It is a true saying that 'nothing is fully appreciated till it is lost.' Kutché's value in my eyes rose immensely during those few moments. Instantly the woeful consequences flashed through my mind. How should I explain the catastrophe to the Starshina at Balkar? What could I say to Mrs. Janibergoff and her little bullet-headed Tartars? The situation was too dreadful; but just as I had lost all hope I was inexpressibly relieved to see a small figure pick itself up from behind a stone and begin to look about for something. His alpenstock had fallen into the crevasse. Jossi glissaded down to him, and having put on the rope descended into the crevasse, and in about five minutes recovered the staff; but it took more than half an hour to bring Kutché up to the rocks again. He was happily uninjured; but his comical face wore an unusually serious expression, and his demeanour was noticeably quiet and subdued during the rest of the day.

After passing the ice-fall we returned to the glacier, and skirting its true left margin were soon in sight of our peak. Its precipitous N.E. face, cased in snow and hanging glacier, did not look easy; but two ribs of rock ran for some distance up the mountain, and we decided to make our attempt by the western rib, which was less steep than the other.

We now turned into the western bay of the glacier, and when nearly at its head crossed it in a S.W. direction to the foot of the peak. Here, in place of the usual bergschrund, was found a great heap of freshly-fallen avalanche ice, by means of which it was easy to gain the foot of the western rib of rocks, and by 3.15 we had selected as our sleeping-place

a somewhat sloping platform of rock at a height of over 12,000 ft.

We had barely finished afternoon tea when it began to snow, and for two hours the weather looked quite hopeless; but at 6 o'clock the clouds rolled away, and a good sunset promised well for the morrow.

There was very little sleep that night, as in our exposed position we felt the low temperature keenly. The unhappy Tartar having no sleeping-bag, but only his burka, fared worst, and from time to time uttered lugubrious moans of 'Kholodnui! Kholodnui!' ('Cold! Cold!'); but having neglected to make any provision for shelter during the afternoon he was left to his own devices. Indeed, towards dawn the cold became so piercing that my own extremities claimed all my attention.

Although we were up at 3 A.M. damp firewood and other causes delayed our departure till a tender rosy flush was creeping down the slopes high above us. At 4.45 we left Kutché behind and started up the rocks; but knowing that the clothing of every Tartar is a more or less congested district, I could not help speculating as to which sleeping-bag would be colonised during our absence.

The rocks were of good, firm granite and free from difficulty, though painfully cold to the hands. After an hour and a half's climbing they ended, and we were confronted by a smooth ice-wall of more than ordinary steepness, but fortunately it was possible to avoid this by cutting steps up a ridge of ice which branched off to our right. As the ice was exceedingly hard our progress was slow, but in about an hour we gained a small platform of snow at the point where the crest of the great northern buttress joined the face of the mountain.

After leaving this spot I do not think that we touched a single rock; yet there was not much laborious step-cutting. Luckily for us, the cold night had left the snow in excellent condition, and we were able to take an almost direct course up the N. face towards the summit. Jossi made no mistake this time, but led splendidly throughout. The only obstacle which delayed us was a schrund with its upper edge thrown forward in a high overhanging cornice. This was turned by walking along the lower lip and smashing a passage through a fringe of icicles till a weak place could be found. Two or three higher schrunds were passed without difficulty, and a few minutes after 10 we walked on to the broad, almost level snow plateau which formed the summit.

It was now a splendidly fine day without a breath of wind.

As there was no stone of any kind near it was impossible to build a cairn, so that there was nothing to do but to eat our cold chicken, bask in the sun, and enjoy the wonderful panorama. Within a radius of seven miles were the three giants of the central group. Shkara's massive shoulders concealed all the great western mountains except the twin peaks of Ushba, while on the north Koshtan-tau and Dykh-tau completely dwarfed everything around them. The air was so unusually clear that we could easily discern the bands of purple, red, and white rock on the S. face of Dykh-tau, and our view extended beyond the volcanic hills of Piatigorsk, far away into the northern steppe. A bewildering multitude of snowy summits stretched away, group after group, to the E. and S.E., and behind them all rose the familiar shape of Kazbek. The view on the S. side was a peaceful contrast. Directly below us were smooth green downs. Two streams wandered away to the S. and S.W., soon losing themselves in a labyrinth of wooded hills, while the still more distant Georgian valleys were filled with sleepy-looking clouds.

Nearly 2 hrs. had been delightfully spent on the summit, when shortly before noon we began to descend. The snow was now so soft that on the steepest slopes great care was needful, and I could not resist the impression that the N. face of the peak should be left to itself when the conditions are at all unfavourable. Soon after 2 o'clock we regained the sleeping-place, and found our porter quite ready to be released from the solitude of his shelf of rock, where he had waited patiently for more than 9 hrs. In returning down the glacier the superiority of nailed boots over the native sandals was most marked on the wet snow and ice; but on the loose moraine of the Dykhsu Glacier Kutché, who had now quite recovered his spirits, simply walked away from Jossi and myself.

Following at a more sober pace, we reached the kosh as the evening shadows were stealing up the mountain-sides, and our last view before turning in was of the snowy cap of Ailama, gleaming with a strange, unearthly lustre against the darkening sky.

This was our last climb in the Dykhsu district. Next day we somewhat regretfully left the kosh and returned to Karaul, on our way to Urusbieh.