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A DAY ON THE AIGUILLE DE TACUL.

BY H. V. READE.

FOR guideless climbers of a modest disposition there is not much to do at the Montenvers. We had crossed the Col du Géant from the Mont Fréty, fortifying ourselves at the 'hut' by a second breakfast of poached eggs, hot cutlets, tinned peaches, and coffee (shade of De Saussure!), and experiencing in the descent all the charms of a new expedition. In fact we actually took the wrong route, to begin with, by following tracks which proved to lead to the Col du Midi, and so passing to the left of the Petit Flambeau. We had returned by the Col de Triolet, getting much more amusement out of the icefall of the Courtes glacier than the guide-books promised us, but finding the descent from the Triolet hut very trying, owing to the entire absence of a path, and the three hours' grind down the Val Ferret perfectly intolerable. Future parties are recommended to order a motor car or other conveyance to meet them where the road begins. Toiling up once more to the Géant Inn, we had hauled ourselves up the ropes of the Aiguille du Géant, and given half a day to that excellent 'lady's climb' the Aiguille du Midi from the N.E. Then, driven back from the Dôme route across Mont Blanc by a snow storm, we had groped our way over the Col de Miage, and after basking in sunshine for a day at Chamonix found ourselves again at the Montenvers, with no definite plans. Putting the bigger things out of the question, we found very little left, and by a process of exclusion we arrived at the ungainly lump which is dignified with the name of the Aiguille de Tacul. The ordinary way is reputed tedious, but the 'Climbers' Guide' revealed a route from the N.E., which was called more interesting and would

give us a genuine traverse, while the time given—about six hours—was not alarming. So on August 18, 1901, we set off at 3.30 by that delusive French time. After about twenty minutes number three sadly announced that he felt too ill to come any further, and we left him. Six o'clock found us at the foot of the Capucin glacier. The left bank offered the most direct route, but ice bare and ominously steep in places warned us that the short cut would prove the longest way, and we crossed to the broken rocks of the Capucin ridge. An hour of these brought us above the icefall, and we descended easily to the edge of the upper névé. But a steepish slope intervened, first two or three inches of new snow, just not strong enough to bear one's weight, then harder stuff, of a consistency which is peculiarly baffling to the amateur's axe. You try the pick; it makes a neat round hole and remains there. You try the blade; first it flies off at an unexpected angle, then it produces a formless gash. Finally you reconcile yourself to making holes of varying sizes and shapes, content if a boot will abide in them. Once in the centre of the glacier we fared better; it was steep, but the streaks of newer snow gave a footing, and the axe was seldom wanted. Bearing towards the left bank, we consulted the 'Guide' again as we neared the rocks. 'From the bergschrund at the foot of the couloir climb up direct to the summit.' 'That's all very well,' said the leader, 'but how do you propose to begin?' Evidently one ought to take to the rocks below the said bergschrund, and we were quite ready to do so. The wise man does not deliver a frontal attack on a bergschrund if he can conveniently outflank it. But where we hoped to leave the glacier there was an ugly gap between ice and rock, and above it a wall of forbidding smoothness. Higher up the rocks looked easy enough, but the only way to reach them seemed to be the couloir leading to the Col de Tacul. With some reluctance we cut across to it and up to the bergschrund, anticipating no further trouble when once we had gained its upper lip, as the couloir above appeared to be snow. But nothing is more deceptive than a bergschrund. The leader hewed and panted; the second man, *statant guardant* on a pile of ice-blocks, gave forth words of encouragement, but progress was terribly slow. That upper lip was steep; the snow flaked off to reveal ice of the hardest; each step cost many minutes, nor could handholds be dispensed with. Above the schrund matters were little better, every step had still to be driven into solid ice, and when at last we could cross to the rocks it was midday. We had spent two hours over a hundred feet

or so. A steep little chimney and a traverse led to one of those luxurious luncheon places which mitigate the rigour of the Chamonix Aiguilles. Murmuring that the hard work was over, and we should be at the top in an hour, we rested until half-past one, twice as long as we ought to have done. When at last we started we were determined, whatever happened, to find some of that 'interesting' climbing. Interest of a kind, indeed, there had been in plenty during those two hours, but not such as the guide-book intended. At first we were forced to keep near the couloir, but after a little there was room for variation. On the left were slopes of débris, and no climbing worthy the name. No one, we agreed, could call that interesting, and concluded that it could not be the proper way. So we bore steadily to the right, where big red rocks, which looked like the summit ridge, towered over our heads. Freed from the rope, each selected what he considered the most 'sporting' route from plateau to plateau, and we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves until the owner of a binocular telescope, the value of which he held to be greatly enhanced by the inability of his friends to see anything at all through it, discovered that he had left it at the luncheon place. The other member of the party graciously consented to wait while the said owner, reflecting that there are times when a guide is useful, hurried down to recover it, only to return, more than half an hour later, with the ignominious confession that in his haste he had missed the route, found himself cut off from the plateau below, and thought it wiser not to waste more time. He appeared to be much consoled by the reflection that eight years previously he had disposed of another telescope in exactly the same way. At three o'clock, after some good climbing on sound rock, we reached the summit ridge and looked over to the Mer de Glace. Then we discovered what a study of the map might perhaps have told us before, that in keeping to the right we had been bearing away from the highest point, which was now separated from us by a long stretch of the N.E. arête. The quickest route was obvious, a traverse some little way under the arête on the side by which we had ascended, over débris and broken stuff. But what rock-lover, once on an arête, will leave it until he is absolutely compelled? This particular arête, which perhaps has not been traversed before, is an ideal one, of the easier kind—sound rock, hold enough and not too much, gaps and vertical bits that have to be turned on one side or the other, and a fine drop on the right the whole way. At 3.40 we were on the top—nine and a half hours' actual

going from the Montenvers, instead of 'about six.' Two hours, we thought, should take us down to the Mer de Glace, and another two of daylight would remain to clear it. The directions of the 'Guide' for our descent by the ordinary N.W. route seemed pleasingly vague, but striking straight down the rocks we reached the little glacier on the face in thirty-five minutes, and, roping once more, began to descend it. At first the snow was good; soon it became ominously thin. We cast about, but found no escape; it was an ice-slope; steps must be cut, 'six or eight steps in one direction and the same number in the reverse . . . the turning step a little longer than the others,' as it is written in the book of Badminton. That authority does not inform one how many feet in an hour one descends when proceeding in this fashion, but the little slope seemed endless. The second man muttered that the steps were not far enough apart, and was promptly put on to lead, which wasted five minutes and was not followed by any perceptible increase in the pace; nor was it consoling to reflect that our friends were probably focussing us with the big telescope at the Montenvers. At last we were within some sixty feet of the corner where the slope eased off and rocks appeared on the left. One of us had an inspiration—why not slide? Glissading by any ordinary method was out of the question, but we remembered how Mummery and Burgener had descended the great couloir on the Aiguille Verte, and resolved to do likewise. The first man could be lowered to a strong position in a snow-filled crevasse, whence he could summarily check any hasty descent beyond his own level on the part of his companion. In the event the thing proved simple enough. As it was essential to keep one hand actually on the head of the axe, in order to drive the pick well in, it was most convenient to lie on one's side, which also had the advantage of producing the maximum of friction. It was then found that the pace could be regulated to a decorous slowness without any pull from the rope. This method of descending ice-slopes covered with soft snow is not laid down in the text-books, but is hereby recommended for adoption under suitable conditions. What conditions are suitable this history sayeth not.

In a few minutes we were off the ice, but it was 5.40; the slope had cost us seventy minutes instead of the fifteen that we anticipated. Unroping hastily we plunged down the eternal stone-slopes. If there is anything firm on this part of the mountain we failed to find it, nor could we see any semblance of a track. For an hour and three-quarters we

clattered down, and the last daylight was vanishing as we reached the Mer de Glace. The rest is a nightmare—

A nightmare labyrinthine, dim and drifting,
With wavering gulfs and antic heights.

We knew from our former expeditions the general line to be taken on the glacier, and followed it well enough all the way down, but only those who have been benighted in such places know what we endured. Crevasses, indeed, were revealed by their deeper blackness, as gulfs of unknown extent, but where and how to cross them was discoverable only by feeling. Hummocks and hollows were indistinguishable, and,

By a jealous lightlessness beset
That might have oppressed the dragons of old time,
Crunching and groping in the abysmal slime,

we staggered and stumbled like drunken men ; but, alas ! no

Tall policeman,
Flashing his bull's-eye, as he peers
About him in the ancient vacancy,
Tells them this way is safety—this way home.

The lights of the hotel mocked us ; absurdly near at first, they seemed to recede as we toiled on. But what was that solitary light on the hillside ? Earlier in the evening we had uttered fervent hopes that, at the worst, we might be spared that last insult that fate can inflict on the guideless climber, a search party. But now it was 10 o'clock ; we had been out eighteen hours altogether, and had spent more than two in this howling wilderness. What was more, we had confessed to grave doubts whether we should find the way off the ice, even if we hit the right place to try for it. In the morning—somewhat hurried by a guided party just behind us—we had taken a devious route, and had crossed at least one place, a narrow ridge between two chasms, that we shrank from in the dark. It was not until two days later that we were shown the high-road. We watched the light eagerly ; assuredly it was moving towards us. Trampling upon the last remnants of our pride, we shouted in unison, and did our best to make wax matches serve as rockets. Then with renewed vigour we plodded on. It was half an hour before we caught an answering shout. By that time we were not far from the bank, and found our further descent blocked by a maze of gigantic crevasses. One of us vowed that we had never been on that part of the glacier before, and must have passed the beginning of the

path. To confirm him there came a cry from the bank, 'You're too low down.' We shouted back that we would come up again, and did so, concluding that the third member of the party, filled with regret at missing so attractive an expedition, had come to join it before its finish. Presently the lantern descended, then advanced slowly towards us. A ray was cast across an abyss at the edge of which we had halted, and we realised, not without some satisfaction, that we were at the very ice-bridge which we had crossed in the morning. In a minute we had joined our rescuers, who proved to be (alas for our dignity !) the hotel guide and the hotel boots. 'But where is the English gentleman ?' we asked, and heard with astonishment that he had never left the hotel. What they had shouted to us when we heard those English words we did not discover. At the time the illusion was complete.

Our twentieth hour was ended when we reached the hotel. But the adventures of the party were not yet over. The deserter had come a little way in the dark to meet us, and having ascertained that we were safe and sound hurried back to announce it. The result was a tumble which seriously damaged his best clothes—the one accident of the expedition. At midnight began a feast that lasted until more than one party had started for the next day's work, reminding us of the classical explanation that 'we were dining in yesterday, while they were breakfasting in to-morrow.' Finally it has to be recorded that the last of the party was found by the sleepless waiter vainly endeavouring to extinguish the lamps before going to bed.

Many morals for guideless climbers might be drawn from this truthful record. Some critics might suggest that crampons would have saved us much of our step-cutting, others that it is well to find out where the top of your peak is, and how many hours you have to spare, before you begin looking for 'sporting' routes. But the moral which is most deeply engraven on our hearts is both simple and of universal application. It is, 'Always take a lantern.' That slight addition to our burdens would have saved us much time, and infinite discomfort, on the glacier, would have been visible at the hotel to relieve the anxiety of our friends and spare us the search party, and would have ensured our getting off the ice and returning by ten or thereabouts instead of just before midnight.

Some might raise the wider question whether, if guideless climbing leads to this sort of thing, it is a game worth playing.

If it be granted that the object of mountaineering is pleasure, the present chronicler at least has his answer ready. Three days later the same party was taken up the Little Dru. That has been called the finest rock-climb in the Alps. It was certainly the finest that we had ever done; it was entirely successful and—except for the inconvenience caused by Joseph Simond (on the plea of economising weight in the sack which we carried throughout!) taking no provisions for the actual peak but a little dry bread—thoroughly enjoyable. Yet neither of us has any doubt that we found more real pleasure in our twenty hours on that third-rate peak the Aiguille de Tacul.

THROUGH THE TARENDAISE AND BEYOND.

BY WM. ANDERTON BRIGG.

NAMES, as Mr. Shandy observed, have more importance than is usually credited, and I must confess, for my own part, that peaks, like ladies, lose nothing by having a pretty one. And so when, in 1899, I drove up the valley of the Arc from Modane to Bessans, and afterwards when looking westward from the summit of the Levanna, the names rather than the looks of the Tarentaise and Maurienne peaks—Dent Parrachée, Granta Parei, Tsanteleina, the Great Glaciers of the Vanoise, and the rest—wove a spell which only a nearer and early acquaintance could break.

And though my holiday in 1900 was spent in far off Tirol, where the tourist, like the outlaws in Arden Forest, finds ‘sermons on stones and good in everything,’ including mountain huts, I determined in 1901 to go back to my French loves, and accordingly sketched out a three weeks’ trip in the South-Western Alps striking into Savoy at Modane and emerging by peak and col at Chamonix. There was only one fixed point—Courmayeur (where all good climbers hope to go) and one ‘general idea’—not to sleep twice in the same bed.

After this it is perhaps unnecessary to add that we (I mean Frank Ellis, my brother, and myself) are humble but convinced disciples of our President’s ‘excentric gospel,’ and what follows may be taken as an unauthorised but parallel version of chapter iv. of his ‘Alps from End to End.’

We reached Chambéry on August 24, 1901, by the morning train from Paris, and not relishing the idea of a night in a chalet after one in the train, broke the journey there and spent a pleasant day in visiting the monastery of the Grande