

## CLIMBS IN THE CAUCASUS.

[Herr von Meck's companion, Dr. Andreas Fischer, kindly sends us the following account of his Caucasian climbs. Dr. Fischer, it will be remembered, was one of the Search Party that visited the Caucasus in 1889 after the loss of his brother with Messrs. Donkin and Fox in the previous year.]

*Belalakaya.*

WHEN, on August 1, 1904, our caravan emerged from the woods of the Alibek valley and, as by magic, one of the finest mountain landscapes revealed its charms to us, there was among all the grand and beautiful peaks none that had, for my mind, so much fascinating power as the dark and formidable-looking Belalakaya.\* Seen from its base this peak is the 'lion' of the whole Alibek group. From the beginning of our excursions I considered it, from the *climber's* point of view, the 'best' mountain of the district, and determined not to leave the country without making at least one serious attempt on it. From the valley as well as from our camp on the left bank of the Alibek Glacier we obtained no view of the whole mountain, but only saw the Matterhorn-like obelisk, towering over the shoulders of the jagged ridges east of the Alibek Glacier, and on this huge tower we hardly discovered any weak points by which it might successfully be attacked.

On August 10 we ascended the Dchessara Pass, and now for the first time Belalakaya came into view from top to base. The mountain rises, with extraordinarily steep and unbroken walls, on the right (E.) bank of the Belalakaya Glacier ('Amanauz Gl.' in the Russian 1-verst map) and forms the culminating point of a high spur running S.N. from the main chain and watershed. S. of the peak there is a sharply marked gap from which one of the principal branches of the Belalakaya Glacier falls down in steep and broken masses. We did not see any other line of attack and decided to try the mountain by the gap and the southern ridge, the rock towers of the latter looking, not exactly easy, but possible.

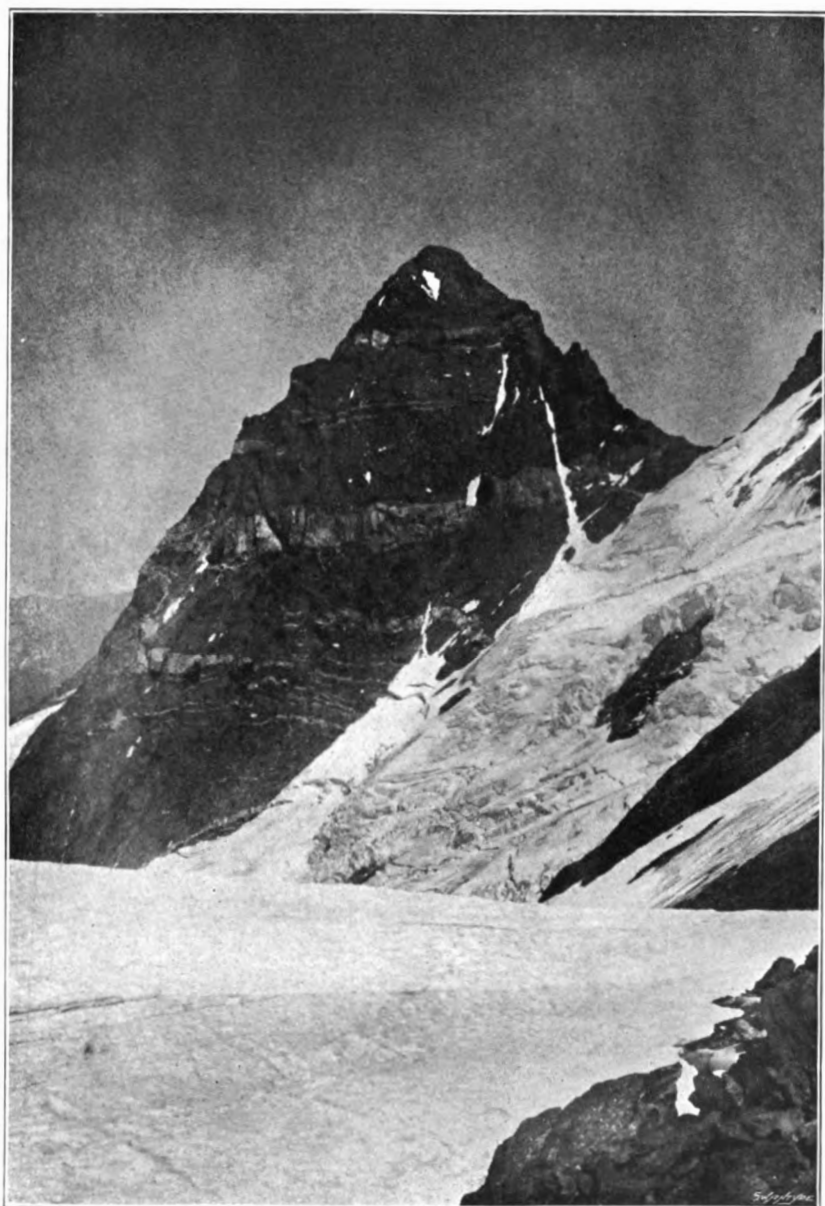
Coming down from the Dchessara Pass Herr von Meck, accompanied by Jani Besurtanoff, returned to our camp at the Alibek Glacier, whilst Jossi and I went to the foot of the Belalakaya, where we found some sort of sleeping-place.

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\* The name is said to signify 'steep striped wall,' several broad strata of quartz running from end to end. *Vide* illustration of Belalakaya from Dchessara Pass.

The night was cold, the weather perfect. At 4.40 A.M. (Moscow time) on August 11 we started, and, first over avalanche snow, then by the steep and crevassed branch of the glacier, we made our way up towards the gap or col. About 400 ft. below it we passed a long and steep snow couloir, the only one that is visible on the whole western face of the mountain. At the foot of this gully we stopped awhile, earnestly considering if we ought to try there. We did not like it much. It was not the necessity of cutting some hundred steps which we thought to be the worst; the couloir did not quite reach the ridge, but ended a little below it in steep and icy rocks, and this was the place we distrusted; if we failed there the day would be lost—the last one that was left for the Belalakaya! Consequently we turned to the gap, though the ‘gendarmes’ of the southern ridge looked much more formidable now than they did yesterday at a distance. The south-eastern side, perhaps, might prove to be easier. At seven o’clock in the morning we stood in the gap and eagerly looked round. At first sight we pronounced the nearest towers to be inaccessible; they looked so high and so hopelessly steep that only better men will be tempted to try them. Opposite a broad slope of névé ran up to the base of the south-eastern wall of our mountain. This looked very different from the N.W. side; it is much broken, *i.e.* a series of jagged rock-ribs emerge from it as huge buttresses, standing one behind the other like the side scenes on a stage. By one of these ribs, or through one of the steep and snowless gullies between them, we hoped to find a way. Whilst I quickly sketched the magnificent Dombai, of which it would be impossible to find a more advantageous view, Jossi went on reconnoitring, crossing the snow-slope in a diagonal direction. After a while he reluctantly shouted that ‘perhaps here’ it might be possible. Over the ribs, and when these were impracticable through some of the couloirs, we made good progress for the next two hours, being constantly forced more to the E., *i.e.* away from the southern ridge of the mountain. Overhead a series of wild, strange-shaped towers lifted their heads against the blue sky, but the summit itself remained invisible. And now to the right hand some huge pinnacles towered up, fully justifying my companion’s statement that ‘the whole Belalakaya consists of gendarmes,’ and it seemed hardly possible to go on, in such a spiral line, round the whole mountain. All the principal ‘ribs’ ended at about the same height, *i.e.* at the base of a low but nearly perpendicular wall. There we now stood, at

the foot of this wall, and saw that only the next 20 to 30 ft. would be difficult, and though at several places we came quite near the edge of what we believed must be the gentle roof of the summit, nowhere could we find any sure handholds to conquer the last bit of the wall. Several times we had to descend again, once by the aid of our fixed spare rope. Jossi was unwilling to give in, but I insisted on traversing another rib to the E., the last accessible one, as it seemed, and once more we reached the base of the steep terrace. Here it proved more broken, and a salient edge of light grey stone looked rather encouraging. But the next step proved to be very hard. We stood on a narrow sloping ledge and the wall above was somewhat overhanging. It was quite impossible to get on to the next ledge above without at least one good handhold. Standing on Jossi's shoulders I grasped at something that might hold, but in vain; I had to come down again. We then exchanged parts, but Jossi's hard labours too were lost. Our hopes of success were nearly gone, for the hour was too far advanced to allow of any considerable variation of route. Besides we could think of none with the exception, perhaps, of the snow couloir on the W. face of the mountain. Once more we examined the wall in detail and discovered a prominent block. 'If we throw the spare rope over it?' We both tried and at last my comrade succeeded. 'Will it hold?' We pulled vigorously. Yes; the block did not move in the least. Again I mounted on Jossi's solid shoulder, and, with no more help from the fixed rope than was absolutely necessary, got up to the next small ledge. Higher up the handholds were no longer so scarce, but many of them were loose and I took a long time to find the good ones. These, however, still proved to be numerous enough for safe climbing, and with a feeling of happiness hardly to be described I reached the top of the wall. Jossi followed with rucksack and axes, the latter proving to be very inconvenient companions. The victory was not yet quite certain, as we were standing only on a large terrace at the foot of another rock wall which had not been visible from below. But being much more broken and less steep than the first one, this second wall offered difficulties of no unusual quality. Climbing up a most romantic chimney just behind the last and highest tower to our right (E.) we gained the middle of the wall, then turned to the left (W.) and by some narrow ledges, covered with rubble, at last reached the edge of the true roof of the summit. There for the first time since we left the col we had a good halt; the Belalakaya



*A. von Meck, photo.*

*Swan Electric Engraving Co.*

**BELALAKAYA, (12,636 ft.)**

was won, and we were tired with five hours of hard and exciting climbing. On the gently rising roof (slabs of considerable size, quite free from snow and ice) we met with no difficulty whatever, and in the best of spirits walked up to the top, which was reached at 12.40 P.M. A small patch of snow on the N. side furnished the water so much longed for.

The sky was cloudless, the view wonderful. From the Aksaut and the black 'aiguilles' in the west to the snow giants of the Central Caucasus what an army of noble and defiant peaks! Again—and even more than on the Djalovtchat—I was struck by the *number of valleys* and *ranges* (spurs), the *variety of forms* (snow pyramids and impossible-looking aiguilles), and by the beauty and extension of the numerous glaciers of the *Western Caucasus*. In its structure and the number of its peaks this district reminds me very much of the Dauphiné Alps, but it surpasses them greatly in the beauty of its ice-streams, whilst the luxuriance of the vegetation, the abundance of forests in the valleys both north and south of the main chain, exceeds anything to be found in the Alps. The best features of the panorama are a group of aiguilles between the Amanauz and the Ptysh glaciers (the highest of these, a fine snow pyramid, is probably the wrongly so called 'Belalakaya' of the new Russian map), the double-headed *Dombai* and *Elbruz*, which, in spite of the distance, looks quite what it is, the monarch of the Caucasus. Towards the N. the eye looks down on the dark blue forests of the nearer valleys and follows the line of the Teberda River to the northern Steppe. The sun was warm and we stopped an hour and a half on the top. Jossi is an excellent mason, and, as the materials were at hand, he built a stone-man, such as probably no other Caucasian summit can yet boast of. Some critic, indeed, may possibly consider it too pretentious for the Belalakaya.

For the descent we agreed to follow the southern ridge as far as the first big 'gendarme,' and to examine the long snow couloir from above. If the latter proved impracticable we proposed to descend the steepest part of the 'muraille' with the aid of our spare rope. The true path-finder interest got hold of us again, and a most pleasant climb brought us to the first considerable gap in the ridge, whence the couloir is visible. We saw that in its highest part it is bifurcated; the nearer branch lay now directly below us, but neither of us felt disposed to go down the steep and iced rocks to the safe snow. The other branch was hidden by the first high tower of the ridge. Climbing round (on the E. side) we got to

another gap, and found that *this* part of the couloir was better. However the descent from the ridge was the most careful piece of work we did that day, as the rocks were far from being safe. We had not yet quite done with them when two very stately 'turs' (capricorns) appeared at our feet, and, with enormous bounds, leapt from ledge to ledge up to the jagged ridge. No doubt these animals knew and managed the Belalakaya much better than we did. Once safely landed in the couloir all difficulties ended; we soon got to the snow, and this was deep, and by this time soft enough to allow pretty quick going without much step-cutting. But falling stones might be very dangerous at any time when there is not such a quantity of soft snow in the gully. The lowest part was done by glissade, and about five o'clock we were down on the glacier. Hark, a piercing whistle—and again! This time, however, it was not a 'tur,' but Jani Besurtanoff, who, though heavily laden, came very quickly across the Belalakaya Glacier. At the same time we arrived at the sleeping place. Herr von Meck, having observed that we reached the top some hours later than was expected, and thinking the descent must be difficult too, so as to make a second bivouac indispensable, had sent the ever willing Ingush to meet us with a most amiable letter and a lot of other good things to comfort the tired and hungry wanderers. But, preferring the camp fire to the 'belle étoile,' we only rested an hour, and then started for 'home.' Jani had discovered another route to the Alibek Glacier, 'less dangerous,' as he thought; unfortunately it proved to be much longer than mine (found some days previously), and night overtook us on the terrace of the Alibek Glacier. Neither Jossi nor I will easily forget that descent over rocks, across brooks, through rhododendrons, and over 'Geröllhalden,' following our Ingush porter, who seemed to have lynx eyes and bones of steel! By lantern-light we crossed the Alibek Glacier, for the last time stumbled down the side moraine, so fatal to shins and boot-nails, and about 9.30 p.m. arrived at camp. Herr von Meck rejoiced heartily at our success. It had been a 'well spent day,' our best climb in the Western Caucasus, and now, seen from our cheerful camp fire, the outline of Belalakaya had gained a new and particular charm.

#### *Mount Nakhar.*

After a pleasant day's walk over the Klukhor Pass (the finest mountain road I ever saw) and a night spent in a 'sea

of flowers' at the S. foot of the Nakhar Pass, our caravan reached the top of the latter at 10 A.M. on August 20. The view is very disappointing. The Abkhasian Alps, though close at hand, are hidden by the spurs running S. from the Klukhor Pass, and to the E. there seems to be neither Minghitau (Elbruz) nor Central Caucasus. But there is to the N.E. a striking group of red-coloured 'aiguilles,' the highest of which—a double-headed peak it looks from the pass—we take for 'Mount Nakhar,' and this certainly must be a 'belvedere' of rare quality. Jossi agreed to accompany me, whilst Herr von Meck with the Caucasian train continued his way down to the stony wilderness of the Nakhar valley. We left the pass at 10.40, and quickly traversing the nearest slopes of névé and some small branches of glacier to the E., reached a conspicuous spur of shattered crags running N. from the watershed. On climbing it we discovered a big glacier at our feet (E.), and opposite, on its right bank, rose the steep rock walls of our mountain. We had to descend, and lost all the height already gained (about 600 ft.). The ice stream (not, or very badly, marked on the 5-verst map, and visible neither from the pass nor from the path in the main valley) is nearly level, but covered with numerous boulders which find their way through a broad and very steep ice couloir between two of the principal towers of the mountain in front. This couloir would be the most direct line of attack, but looks unsafe enough to be avoided by every man who holds that falling stones are no more pleasant in the Caucasus than elsewhere. We crossed the glacier from W. to N.E., partly by running, and in 20 minutes arrived at its right bank. We then ascended a considerable moraine, and by a brook and a steep grass slope got round to the N. foot of the peak. The N.E. face proved to be less steep and snow-covered as far as to the base of the final summit, and as the snow was in excellent condition and some rock ribs in the midst of the slopes all that could be desired, we made rapid progress for the next hour and a half. But now the mountain began to develop: the two aiguilles seen from the pass are only the western buttresses of the main building, separated from the principal summit by a gap, from which one of the upper branches of the great couloir falls to the glacier. More to the S.E., and considerably higher, towered a fine and sharp pinnacle, but the rocks looked very tempting, and the climb could not be a long one. At the south-eastern end of the summit ridge there appeared a white, snowy line—the highest point, as we thought, although we had some doubts as to the further development

of the mountain. The slopes got steeper, the snow disappeared, and we had to cut a hundred steps in hard ice (on our left, E., there was a huge cornice); then we stood at the foot of the pinnacle. It rises as steeply as any *aiguille* enthusiast might wish for, but there were staircases and chimneys, and scanty but excellent handholds where most wanted, *i.e.* at some places where we had to traverse to the right or left. The 'turs' seem to be very fond of this peak. We found their tracks (and their smell!) everywhere. In short, it was a charming, at no place difficult, climb. At 3.10 P.M. we reached the top, to find that the snowy crest to the S. was another and distinctly higher summit than that on which we were standing. A gap of about 80 ft. separated the two. The opposite snow slopes of the higher one are no doubt easy enough, but the southern 'face' of *our* needle looked most serious, and the 'landing-place' was a sharp *arête* covered with ice. It was too late to spend some hours in going back and making a (perhaps useless) circuit, so we tried the face. The descent (20 min.) proved not nearly so bad as we had expected, but two corners may perhaps be noticed as rather uncomfortable ones. Then turning to the S.W. we cut some steps in the ice wall (N.) of the gap, and by a short and easy snow-slope and some broken rocks gained the second summit at 3.50, and this time there was nothing but air and blue sky behind it. The top, formed by an *arête* of big, broken granite boulders, is about 150 ft. long and runs due E.W. The S. face, a formidably steep and broken wall, bears hardly any snow, and seems to rise immediately out of a considerable ice stream that, like a second one almost parallel to it, flows W.E., then a little to the N. The view was one of the grandest and most varied I have ever enjoyed, and Jossi's admiring exclamation, 'Eh, was Bärge!' (What a lot of mountains!), was fully justified. Central Caucasus and Western Caucasus—it was no easy matter to decide which, as a whole, was the more striking and wonderful. To the E. the form of Elbruz had grown up to overwhelming grandeur; S. of it appeared the snowy giants of the main chain and of Suanetia, somewhat isolated in their quiet and majestic serenity, and contrasting strangely with the dark masses in the W., where jagged ridges, one behind the other, looked like a storm-beaten forest of numberless wild and threatening *aiguilles* and towers. Of course the light contributed to this contrast. The E. appeared to us in the full glory of the sinking sun, whilst to the W. we now beheld the shadows on the sun-abandoned sides of the Abkhasian mountains; but the hour

only accentuated differences which nature had made. I do not know if the terms 'classical' and 'romantic' are appropriate, but if I say 'Bernese Oberland style in the E. and Dauphiné style in the W.' the characteristic qualities will at least be shortly expressed, although the comparisons will do no justice to either portion of the Caucasus in view.

But we saw other things, and *one* observation we made perhaps may, for the climber, be of no less interest than the panorama. About two miles (as the crow flies) to the E.N.E. we observed another mountain, a dark, isolated obelisk (quite snowless from this side). Several times during the ascent we had looked at it—more with distrust than admiration. First we felt quite sure that *our* peak was the higher (as well as that it was the finer), but the more we advanced the more imposingly did this strange rival lift its head, and when we stood on the top and tried to examine more closely we could not help acknowledging that the 'dark one' was the higher. The difference is very slight, but there it is, and if by the name of 'Nakhar' the Russian topographers meant to denote the *highest* peak of the 'district,' this name would be due to the unclimbed mountain in the N.E., although this one is further away from and has nothing to do with the Nakhar Pass. 'Mais à quelque chose malheur est bon;' and, as for the view *our* peak was undoubtedly the much better of the two, we did not feel so very unhappy as an ambitious climber may imagine.

We left the top at 4.30, and descended by the same route as far as the glacier we had crossed some hours before. Two good glissades allowed quick going. From above we had every reason to believe that the glacier would lead us, without any difficulty, down to the side glen, through which we hoped to reach the main valley of the Nakhar. But the tongue of the ice stream proved to be very steep and much broken, and there was no other issue than by a most interesting gorge, filled with melting séracs and water and stones of every size, between an indescribable moraine on the right and a steep rock wall to the left. Then we descended with a stone avalanche to the first terrace of the glen, and after some step-cutting across the huge moraine got to the easy grass slopes on the right bank of the river. Night was falling when we came down to the Nakhar valley, but Herr von Meck had sent Nanu (one of our Tatars from Teberdinsk) to meet us, and thus we lost no time in path-hunting, as otherwise might have been the case, for the five-verst map (and there is no other issued for *this* part of the chain) is wrong here, and

marks the path (if 'path' it may be called) where it is *not*, i.e. on the left bank of the Nakhar River. A two hours' march through a most desolate stone wilderness brought us to a bridge and a sort of oasis on the left of the torrent, where Herr v. Meck had pitched his tent. Opposite (S.W.), in the background of another short side glen, we again discovered our enemy, the dark obelisk. A very bold and threatening mountain it looks from here, and when we saw it again next morning we all thought the climb would be very difficult. The (invisible) S.E. face, perhaps, may offer better chances. From a shepherd who came to the camp fire we learnt that by the natives this mountain is called *Tschidägolu-Mingen*; he told us that a man (as I understood, a hunter) had been killed there, and that they all were very much afraid of dark *Tschidägolu*. When staying on the Nakhar Pass Nanu (who had been there before) had told us similar stories, but he connected them with the mountain we were just going to climb, which, in his opinion, was the 'lion' of the country. I think the shepherd was right; *Tschidägolu* really looks a forbidding mountain. What *our* peak is to be called I do not know; but this seems certain: there is *no* 'Mt. Nakhar' \* in this district. And if, *quand même*, that name is to prevail, it ought to be given to the mountain which towers over the Nakhar Pass, and is nearer it than *Tschidägolu*.

(To be continued.)

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## A DAY ON THE GRAND COMBIN.

By J. J. WITHERS.

ON August 22, 1904, the weather at the Concordia Inn was bad. At 2 P.M. it had been snowing heavily for some 18 hours, and showed no sign of ceasing. The guides, Adolf Andenmatten and Andreas Anthamatten, were sleeping their almost everlasting sleep in the mysterious recesses behind the kitchen. Robert Mayor and I had discussed numerous possible and impossible expeditions for the morrow. He was at length driven back to the visitors' book, and I began to

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\* No native (shepherd) in the valley knows 'Mt. Nakhar'; when the name was pronounced they all would point in the direction of the *pass* and the peak we had climbed, but I doubt if they meant to denote also the latter. The case may be compared with those of Mount St. Gothard and Mount Simplon (or St. Plomb!), found in old maps.