

A FLIGHT INTO ITALY.

By R. L. G. IRVING.

THREE very weary men entered the Montanvert at the beginning of August 1914. Only their weariness, the lateness of the hour, and the compassion of the manager had procured their entrance. Montanvert had become like a withered shoot that has been severed from the tree. The sap had ceased to rise from Chamonix ; for France was at war with Germany, and an order had gone out that morning that all foreigners were to leave. The exodus had taken place by rail, motor, carriage, and on foot where other means had been unprocurable. France was going through the terrible days when England—or rather the English Cabinet—was making up its mind. The three men had seen something of her anxiety in the face of a peasant, whose son had been called up, and they had been hurt by the doubt in his voice as he asked : ‘ *Et l’Angleterre, elle va marcher avec nous ?* ’ They were not even allies, and they must go.

To find a hut unoccupied is nearly always pleasant ; to be the only party at a small hotel confers distinction as well as peace ; but to find a great centre like the Montanvert utterly deserted in the middle of the summer season is suggestive of a catastrophe. The manager himself opened the door, as all but one or two of the staff had already gone. His face did not help to dispel the impression of desolation, but he consented to parley. It is time to introduce the three men. One was an undergraduate ; one had just left school. The undergraduate had walked in the Alps, and had done a little climbing in Wales ; the schoolboy had seen his first mountains two days before, and, considering the shortness of his acquaintance with them, he treated them in a very familiar manner. The third man was not quite old enough, and certainly not wise enough, to be their father, though he received a super-filial respect from the others, whose names were Tom and Dick. The party was not yet complete, as Harry, who is a member of the Club, was to join it with another young friend a few days later. The older man has appeared several times as ‘ I ’ in these pages, and will now continue the story in the first person.

The manager offered to let us stay, if we promised to cross direct into Italy or Switzerland the following morning. Only on this condition could our presence be excused, if it became

known to the military authorities. At that moment the only things we cared about were a comfortable seat and dinner, so we accepted the conditions immediately. After dinner we had to consider the situation. The Col du Géant was the expedition we had planned for the next day; but our ideas had been modified by having to toil up the path from Chamonix on a sultry evening, instead of resting in a train. We had had a fairly arduous day on the Belvédère, and it was our second day out from England. Every sign known to the prophets pointed to bad weather; but the promise we had given disposed of the one plan that attracted us—a thoroughly slack day. A long troublesome traverse to the Col de Balme was the only alternative to the Col du Géant that could be considered. It was worked out on the map, and discussed in the knowledge that we should reject it.

We were roused, a long time after dawn, on a typically bad morning, calculated to make the most restlessly energetic climber hesitate to start on a glacier expedition. The rain was coming down steadily, the atmosphere was like a blanket. Below the grey, compact clouds the rocks stood out blue-black against the dead-white snow; but we had to fulfil our bond with the manager. He gave us a letter for Amsterdam to post in Italy, and in obliging him I hope we did not unwittingly convey information to the enemy. His spirits seemed to rise as we prepared to leave, and he was the only one of us all who succeeded in looking pleasant as he shut the door, and left us facing the wet path and the rain-washed glacier.

It looked a long way, even to the foot of the Tacul. Breaths of more than usually stuffy air met us as we walked over the ice, and checked any inclination to indulge in optimistic prophecies about the weather. By the time we reached the foot of the great ice-fall we were thoroughly wet, and only the necessity of eating something made us halt there for a quarter of an hour. The glacier here was partly snow-covered, and a variety of tracks—all of fairly recent date—were visible at intervals. We ascertained, not out of curiosity, that they did not all provide a way through the séracs, the mist making it difficult to distinguish the good from the bad.

This was the one part of the expedition that made us forget our troubles. In going through it we met with some of the compensations awarded to wanderers who have passed beyond the early stages of depression and discomfort which must be faced in setting out on a really bad day. The change from dry to clinging wet clothes is a process that is essentially

unpleasant ; it is a horrible perversion of the use of clothes. But when the rain can do nothing more to make matters worse, the compensations begin. And few scenes in nature appeal so powerfully to man's love of the mysterious as a difficult glacier on a misty day. Great towers of ice, cut off by unbridged moats, rise over you with startling suddenness out of the bewildering fog. Heights and depths, disguised in unsubstantial yet visible vapours, assume incredible dimensions. A shadowy line that has appeared on your horizon turns in a few seconds into the treacherous overhanging lip of a great chasm, whose nature is revealed by a few feet of pale glassy wall, just visible on the farther side. An eave of soft damp snow hides the wall below you ; but a probe with the axe will pierce it and leave a small dark hole, or break off an icicle, whose fall is followed by a mournful tinkle far down in the void below. It is a sufficiently eloquent warning ; and you turn back to try another way, choosing it rather by instinct than by method, and half enjoying the way the great white cold-blooded monster, on whose back you are walking, tricks you and mocks you by wrinkling up his skin.

But the enjoyment of such games demands time and superfluous energy. They are not for tired men, who have still far to go.

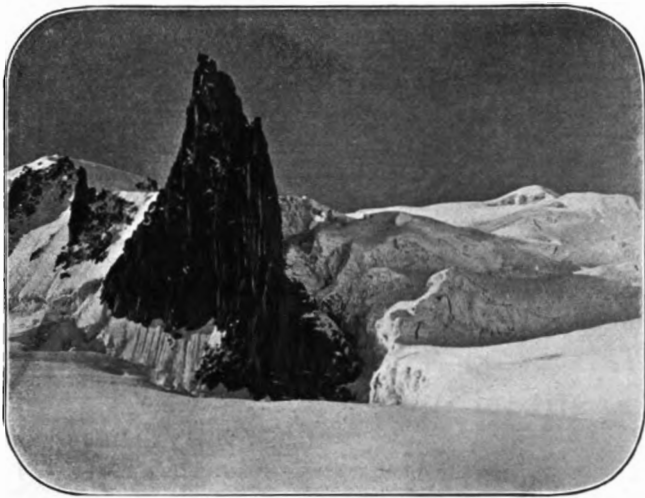
As far as I remember it was between one and two o'clock when we emerged above the ice-fall into a deep track, visibility being low—less than a score of yards. We had been wet so long that the exertion of plodding through the soft snow produced no feeling of warmth. I had little doubt about Dick's stamina ; but Tom's strength had given out one rough winter's day near the top of Crib y Ddysgl, and he had had to be helped down the zigzags. A meagre supply of sandwiches was the cause assigned for his exhaustion—a theory which may have been true, but which did not prevent the memory of the incident suggesting a breakdown in our present and far more serious situation. As a matter of fact he stood the strain as well as any of us.

After we had pushed on doggedly for an hour or more, the slopes became steeper and the snow worse. For the first time a voice from behind me asked, 'Is it much further ?' The imp who was to reveal the future was caught before he escaped from Pandora's box ; but a near relation of his, Anticipation, flies about freely, and when he is in a gloomy mood he is a most mischievous little fellow. In this mood he is very ready to attach himself to travellers who are crossing a wide expanse

of deep snow, if they are sufficiently exhausted and can see nothing beyond a monotonous white circle of a few yards' radius. The presence of one or two experienced men behind you on the rope will generally keep him quiet, and the solitary man, when he gets accustomed to him, can coax him into a fairly good temper. If, however, the men behind you are in your charge, and are tired, and of uncertain resisting power, this imp, Anticipation, is at his worst and lets you feel his pull on the heavy swollen rope. How hard he can pull I realised when the rain turned to snow and the tracks became invisible. We must have been nearly level with La Vierge when this happened. For a short time we managed to pick them up, till we lost them completely in getting past some newly opened crevasses. After that the outlook was grim. The point was already passed beyond which an attempt to return to Montanvert, and a failure to strike the Col would equally certainly be the end of us.

There is a line familiar to climbers which separates definite risk, deliberately taken, from the ordinary unforeseeable chances of a climb. Members of the Club have often crossed it. They have crossed it on difficult rocks, and on ice and snow, especially where there is a danger of falling stones or ice. The crossing is made on rock during a period—necessarily a short period—when the issue is uncertain; it is followed by a relaxation of muscular and, in most cases, of nervous tension. But in the difficulties of the rocks there is an element of personal resistance which rouses a man's pugnacity, and the tactics required to achieve victory absorb his attention. In deep snow the period is long, and becomes steadily more trying. The forces opposed to us are intangible and mysterious; we struggle, as we do in a nightmare, against a clinging grip that holds our legs, while we are conscious of the unseen pursuer stretching out his hand to grasp us. There is no distraction for the mind or eye, save an occasional effort to keep the right direction. Each step is like the last: the same heavy pull to disengage the leg, the same effort to advance the foot and transfer the balance, the same depressing loss of height as the boot sinks with a succession of jerks till the thin treacherous stuff is packed tight enough to bear the full weight. And we know that each step is accompanied by a loss of strength.

After the tracks were lost the voices from behind came more frequently—'Are we nearly there? Pretty cold now, isn't it?'—followed by the usual would-be-cheerful reply. The snow-field had already exceeded all estimates of its extent, when



LA VIERGE—COL DU GÉANT.



NEAR THE COL DU GÉANT.

the clouds parted for a moment behind us and I got a glimpse of the base of La Vierge, and saw that we were still very near the right direction. They closed up again, and we went forward with halts required at frequent and diminishing intervals. We shouted two or three times, and into my shout I threw the exasperation that is so useful a disguise for anxiety. There was no answer, but it seemed to relieve our feelings. Then, suddenly, the mist darkened in front of us, and we saw the rocks. We had reached the edge of the glacier, but where? We groped about for a moment or two, and then within a few yards of us I saw the old hut. I doubt whether we could all have kept going for another half-hour. We stumbled down along the short stretch of easy snow-covered rock to the Rifugio di Torino. For once I did not care how full it was. We could hear the voices, male and female, of an Italian party talking and laughing in the big sitting-room, and a goodly curl of smoke from the chimney showed that the kitchen stove was busy. As we pushed open the outer door, one, at least, of us said 'Thank God!' And I am very certain he was not breaking the Third Commandment.

There are trials whose ending can be greeted with a jest, and, as a rule, they are the most exciting to read of and to experience. It is *de règle* to seize on the comic element in a critical situation on a difficult pitch, and it is a good way of maintaining morale when one is hard pressed. The wonderful Tommies Bairnsfather has depicted for us greet the results of a hellish bombardment, and the miseries of trench warfare, with a jest. It is a defiance of the author of their troubles—the Boche. But set one of these same Tommies in his home by the bed of a sick child, to watch the tide of death creeping hourly closer, he will not greet the ebbing of the tide with a jest: his heart will be too full of gratitude to the Power that has held it back; a silent gratitude, for the Englishman shrinks from the expression of deep feeling. The climber, who has barely escaped losing his party through cold and exhaustion, may tell you of the warm drinks and the dry clothes that furnished such an acutely pleasurable sequel to their trials. He finds it difficult to analyse his impressions further. But thus he can mark the way to other memories, memories that prove he has a treasure that will not fail, drawn for him out of his own heart.

Our flight was over, in so far as we had crossed the political frontier. But Italy has another frontier, abhorrent though it be to all good Irredentists. It is not crossed till you look for a refuge from the sun instead of from the storm. We

reached this second frontier early the next afternoon, near the village of Entrèves. The first fifteen hundred feet of our descent was unexpectedly full of incident, as one of the party abused his freedom from the rope by trying to glissade on legs that were unsteadied by the strain of the day before. The shaking up that resulted therefrom, and the long jog down past the Mont Fréty, gave a meaning to the word repose that Tom and Dick had never known before. They lay down at the edge of a green pasture, under the brown boles of some larches, which made an island of shade in the flood of sunshine that surrounded them. There I shall leave them, and it is there that I like to picture them now.

Our party was never completed. War was a certainty before the other two expected members of it could leave England. Harry, in spite of a shattered leg of which he has lost some inches, will not abandon our pilgrimages to the Alps, though some of the former ways may prove too rough for us to follow. The other three have accomplished their last pilgrimage. They occupy the shrines that pilgrims honour on their way.

One of them never saw the Alps ; but a single short visit, in January, to Pen-y-Pass revealed how he loved to feel the mountains round him. His was one of the first of the Territorial Divisions to go out, and he fell in the second battle of Ypres. May England be left some few like him to be her future governors ! But they are in haste to die for her.

Tom lies in Gallipoli ; Dick in the desert east of the Suez Canal. They would one day have been members of the Club. No one who had been with them the evening we came down from the Matterhorn could have doubted they would uphold its best traditions, not even the cynic, whoever he may be, who once described the route we took as the 'line of bottles.' For their sakes I have recorded this modest expedition, because it would have given them such pleasure to read of their doings in the *ALPINE JOURNAL* ; and because their mountain romance, short and simple though it was, is worthy of a small place among its records. And I have written for my own sake, too ; lest I should one day be found to have forgotten the weariness that is turned into joy, or the greeting of those who, side by side, have seen the day born and die upon the hills.

I have been asked to give the names of the three young soldiers referred to:

William Humphrey Hollins, Second Lieutenant, Notts and Derby Regt., 8th Batt.; won the Brackenbury Scholarship for History, at Balliol, December 1913; killed near Ypres, June 1915.

Thomas Darwin Overton, Lieutenant, Lincolnshire Regiment, 6th Batt.; Scholar of New College; killed near Cape Helles, July 1915.

Richard Thomas Cyril Willis-Fleming, Second Lieutenant, Hants R.H.A.; killed at Romani, August 1916.

IN MEMORIAM.

ALEXANDER RIVINGTON.

1837-1917.

WE regret to announce the sudden death on February 17, from pneumonia, of one of the oldest members of the Alpine Club in the person of Mr. Alexander Rivington, of 'Hollydale,' Tarring Road, Worthing. Mr. Rivington was the second surviving son of the late Mr. Francis Rivington of the well-known publishing firm of Waterloo Place.

Mr. Rivington had been wonderfully active up to within the last few days before his fatal illness, and though he would have reached the age of eighty in March, he still greatly enjoyed walking for many hours a day.

He was elected a member of the Alpine Club in 1861, and in his early days had done much climbing in Switzerland, and has written many articles, etc., on the subject. He was the author of a book (now out of print) entitled 'Notes on Travels,' published in 1865. He still took a great interest in the Club and all matters connected with climbing, and it was only lately that he had been in correspondence with his friend, Mr. Arthur O. Wheeler, Secretary of the Alpine Club of Canada, on various points.

Mr. Rivington leaves a daughter and three sons, one of whom, Lieut. Kenneth Rivington, is at present invalided home. Mrs. Rivington, his widow, we regret to say, only survived him nine days.

FREDERICK WALLINGFORD WHITRIDGE.

MR. FREDERICK WALLINGFORD WHITRIDGE was elected a member of the Alpine Club in 1884, after some seasons of active work in the Alps—chiefly, I believe, in the Oberland, with Christian Almer as his leading guide. He married a daughter of Matthew Arnold, and always maintained a close relation with England, which he visited at least twice a year. After his marriage, he exchanged