Axe *versus* Alpenstock. By the Rev. H. B. George, M.A.

It is now nearly three years since anything appeared in the columns of the Alpine Journal on the most important topic which a mountaineer preparing for a Swiss tour has to consider—with what sort of weapon he is to arm himself for the coming campaign. The last notice of the subject was a letter from Messrs. Tuckett and Kennedy, stating their views, from which I do not presume to dissent widely, as to the points mechanically important in the construction of an ice axe. But they incidentally stated the opinion, from which I differ *toto cælo*, that an axe is unsuitable for a beginner in mountaineering; and it is partly because every year's experience adds to the strength of my convictions on this point, partly because I believe that men are apt to make the fatal mistake of trying to attain several rather inconsistent objects at the same time, and so fail to attain any of them perfectly, that I am anxious once more to call attention to the question. It is a common thing to say that the alpenstock is enough, and therefore best, for the ordinary mountaineer; that the axe is only suitable for those who undertake very ambitious expeditions. If by the ordinary mountaineer is meant the man who is content with the Cima di Jazi, or the Tschingel Pass, I not only admit that an alpenstock is sufficient, but I would go further and say that it does not matter a farthing what one carries on such an expedition; personally I should choose an umbrella, in order to enjoy with the least inconvenience from heat a very delightful walk. But if among ordinary expeditions are included the Strahleck, for instance, and Mont Blanc, easy ascents enough from the point of view of the trained climber, then I maintain an axe to be by far the wisest implement to carry. If one slips on the Mur de la Côte, or the Strahleck wall, of what use is an alpenstock? I admit that such a slip is not common, but at any rate an axe is a safeguard, an alpenstock is none. If one wants to help oneself up a steep slope, an axe-head gives good support with very little exertion—an alpenstock none, unless driven in with far greater labour. On rocks, whether in ascending or descending, the axe is far superior to the alpenstock; for in climbing up rocks the axe-head may be useful as a claw, the alpenstock must be a mere incumbrance; while in descending, besides the possible advantage of serving as a claw to let oneself down, the axe-head gives something firm to hold by, if a man has to plant the pole below, and let

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himself down trusting to its support. It is commonly said that the axe-handle is too short for glissading, and the axe-head dangerous in that case in the hands of novices. My answer on the first point is that the grip of the crutch-handle formed by the axe-head is better than an extra foot of length, and that the man who cannot glissade with a five-feet pole (or what is on this principle an equivalent, a four-feet axe) won't do much better with a longer one. Moreover, genuine glissades are very rare things, so that it is bad economy to sacrifice any real advantage for the sake of a little extra convenience when one does meet with them, even if that convenience be real, which I do not believe. The second objection is partly answered already; it is so seldom that a novice gets a glissade, that the chance of his hurting himself or others on one is infinitesimal. Besides, the first thing a novice does if he loses his balance glissading, is to let go his pole; the mountaineer's instinct to retain his grasp of his axe, whatever happens, is not natural, but rather slowly acquired.

This brings me to the chief question which I am anxious to discuss, namely, whether an axe is good for a novice or not. With a thoroughly clumsy man, there is a considerable chance, I allow, of his making a bad use of an axe, and injuring himself or his neighbour. But he has a fair opportunity of doing mischief with a well-shod alpenstock, unless those who have the misfortune of his company keep a careful watch on his movements, as they are pretty sure to do. And after all, the species is a rare one, thanks to the great variety of athletic pursuits prevalent among young Englishmen. Most men learn how to wield an axe readily enough, probably as fast as they learn to walk in ice-steps. It is not in manual dexterity that a novice falls behind an experienced mountaineer, but rather in mental acquirements which are the growth of time—such as the habit of being constantly on the alert for whatever may happen, the instinctive preparation to meet a jerk, the knowledge how to move so as to gain the maximum of effect with the least effort. And if, as is universally admitted, an axe is a most valuable aid in any emergency to the skilled climber, who is prepared by previous education to meet danger, *à fortiori* the same assistance ought to be in the hands of the novice, who is less able to do without it. For instance, if anyone slips on the most likely place of all for a slip, a slope of snow not hard enough to need step-cutting, but too hard to let the foot sink in, an alpenstock may possibly, by a vigorous and skilful effort, be made to serve as an anchor, but is most probably useless, while an axe-head gives instant and certain hold. The novice who slips, or has

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to meet the jerk of a companion's fall, may very possibly make no effective use of his axe, it is true; but with it he has at least a chance, with an alpenstock he is totally helpless. All that has before been said about rock-climbing applies to novices with even greater force; and obviously it is they, who have not yet learned to balance themselves at each step instinctively and without a conscious effort, who especially want the support of constant anchorage in traversing a steep slope, such as an axe alone will readily give.

If authority be worth anything, I can quote frequent cases of good guides giving their own axes, or borrowing those of the more skilful travellers, for the use in awkward places of the less experienced; if personal observation be worth anything, I have seen very clumsy men in the high Alps get on decidedly better with an axe than with an alpenstock.

I have always believed in Mr. Stephen's principle, that one's axe is not *primarily* intended for cutting steps, which is in general the guide's work; and if this be true, greater length than is compatible with the maximum of cutting efficiency is clearly admissible. Exact length every man must decide for himself, according to his fancy or experience. The rough rule commonly given is that the axe ought just to stand under a man's arm, but practice will certainly make a shorter one suffice, and if so, the gain in cutting power is obvious. My own axe is just up to my elbow, or some nine inches shorter than the common rule would prescribe. Shorter than this it cannot wisely be, for a mechanical reason: if the fore-arm slopes *downwards* from the elbow to the axe-head grasped in the hand, when the axe is being used in the ordinary way as a walking-pole, the leverage is very much less than if the arm be horizontal, and so the same work costs a far greater muscular effort. The size and shape of the axe-head are also, as it seems to me, matters in which no important principle of mountaineering craft is involved, however great may be the difference in mechanical efficiency between one shape and another. Personally I do not object to a slight extra weight, or at least believe that it is amply compensated by a gain in length of pick and consequent power for anchorage; but this is no answer to those who take the opposite view, and wish to save themselves every ounce of weight.

I have only one more remark to make, and that is, to bear strong testimony to the value of a ring round the axe-handle, to give something to grip when it is sliding through the hand. The Committee which reported to the Alpine Club in 1864 were the first to suggest this. They recommended a band of

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leather round the pole, about a foot from the spike; a better plan is to have enough of the wood left projecting, in shaving the pole, to form a ring round it, say an eighth of an inch in depth. I have used one ever since it was first recommended, and cannot speak too strongly of its value. It eliminates the single danger that the handle may slip through the hand, while the axe-head holds firm in the snow, and so renders the anchorage of an axe-head, wherever it will bite at all, perfectly trustworthy.

[During a tour in the Alps, made since writing the above, another reason for preferring an axe was forced on my notice. It occasionally happens that one has to go over a steep slope of grass, and here an axe is invaluable. If the grass be long and wet, or short and dry, and it usually is one or the other, the further one goes the more slippery one's boots become; and a fall on short dry grass may lead to a very dangerous slide. But an axe-head pulls one up in ascending, and anchors one in descending or traversing such a slope, where an alpenstock would be of no service whatever.]

A Chamois Hunt in the Oberland.

By the Rev. W. H. Hawker.

THE season of 1865 was, as most seasons seem to be in Switzerland, an exceptional one; indeed I have never known two alike. I spent the entire summer there that year, and having taken a house at Interlaken for my family, made that place my headquarters. Unfortunately the clouds did the same, and appeared to have secured permanent lodgings on the surrounding mountains; so that the fine weather, which in other districts of the Alps enabled an unexampled number of mountain-tops to be carried about in the knapsacks and luggage of members of the Club, was wholly wanting in the Oberland.

I had fondly hoped to do a little exploring on the main chain about the head of the Valley of Lauterbrunnen; and so often did I start in that direction at the first break in the clouds, only to be repulsed wet through after a mere botanical scramble, that I too, like Messrs. Hornby and Philpott before their fearful expedition on the Silberhorn, became a sort of standing joke to the inhabitants, whose enquiries Ulrich Lauener ever calmly answered with the quiet chaff that we were practising for the passage of the Tschingel Glacier. This probably was the cause of the same severe object being attributed to those gentlemen. Even that blind nuisance who

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