

RECENT ACCIDENTS IN THE ALPS. By the EDITOR.

WE have the melancholy duty of recording two fatal accidents, which have taken place in the Alps this summer. The following letter, republished from the 'Times,' gives the fullest particulars of the accident on the Schreckhorn, of which Mr. Elliott was the victim.

FATAL ACCIDENT ON THE SCHRECKHORN.—*Times, July 31, 1869.*—*To the Editor of the Times.*—Sir,—I think it right to communicate to you at once some details of the fatal accident of yesterday, by which the Rev. Julius M. Elliott, of Brighton, was killed by a fall from the Schreckhorn. Mr. Elliott was travelling in Switzerland with my brother, the Rev. P. W. Phipps, with the object of ascending several mountains together. They were accompanied by Franz Biner, of Zermatt, Mr. Elliott's guide for the last four years, and by Joseph Lauber, of Zermatt, as porter. On Monday afternoon, the 26th inst., they left Grindelwald to sleep at the cave under the Kastenstein, taking with them Peter Baumann, of Grindelwald, as an additional porter.

Their intention was to separate on Tuesday morning, Mr. Elliott to ascend the Schreckhorn with Biner and Lauber, my brother to go over the Strahleck and back with Baumann. However, Tuesday morning proved so fine that Mr. Elliott advised my brother to change his plans, and accompany him up the Schreckhorn. This my brother agreed to do, on the stipulation that Mr. Elliott should still go as he had originally proposed, allowing my brother to follow independently with Peter Baumann, so that he might be no hinderance to Mr. Elliott's well-known rapid climbing.

The first half of the ascent was effected with comparative ease, the weather being perfect and the snow in first-rate condition.

As the rocks became more difficult, Baumann and my brother put on their rope. Mr. Elliott, however, declined to put on his, as he thought it unnecessary. He ascended very rapidly, and went on some distance in advance with his two guides.

When my brother and Baumann reached the Col at the top, Mr. Elliott, with Biner and Lauber, were about half-way up the final peak; they were just leaving the snow, and were cutting the last steps to reach the rocks of the summit; they were in great spirits at their success, and the two parties shouted in congratulation one to another.

At this moment it appears that in springing from the snow on to the rocks Mr. Elliott slipped and fell. Lauber was on the rocks, but not firmly placed, and could render no assistance. Biner caught him by the arm for the instant, but failed to hold him, and being unroped Mr. Elliott glided rapidly down the steep snow-slopes of the north-east face of the mountain, rolling occasionally over until he disappeared from their sight some 1,000 ft. below, near the Lauter-Aar glacier.

My brother urged eagerly upon the guides that some attempt should be made to descend after his friend, but it was declared by them to be utterly impossible. The only way, they said, by which the spot could

be reached was by returning to Grindelwald, and sending men thence up to the Lauter-Aar glacier by the upper Grindelwald glacier. One effort was made by joining the two ropes together and letting Baumann down as far as they would reach in the hope of his being able to see anything, but he could see only the furrow marked in the snow by the fall, and though he shouted repeatedly no answer came.

They then returned to Grindelwald as rapidly as they could, but the descent was rendered difficult by the then insecure state of the snow and by the rocks, and they did not reach it until five o'clock in the afternoon. My brother immediately applied to Herr Bohren, of the *Hôtel de l'Aigle*, who at once exerted himself with a promptitude and zeal which cannot sufficiently be praised, and which demand our grateful acknowledgment. He sent off directly six guides, under the direction of Peter Michel, to use their utmost efforts to discover the body of Mr. Elliott.

They took with them provisions for three days, and everything that could be suggested as of use, and they are to sleep at the *Gleckstein*.

Early this morning four more guides were sent, Biner and Baumann being of their number, and we may soon hope for some tidings as to the result of their exertions. My brother considers that no blame can attach to the guides for what has occurred.

Biner was Mr. Elliott's favourite guide, to whom he was personally attached, with whom he had made almost all his ascents (except that of the *Matterhorn*), and in whom he always placed the greatest confidence.

With regard to Mr. Elliott's disinclination to be tied, it must be borne in mind that there are two opinions as to the use of the rope under such circumstances; and Mr. Elliott's great experience in climbing would render him the best judge of what might be the most advisable course in each particular instance. I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

RAMSAY PHIPPS, Captain, Royal Artillery.

Grindelwald, July 28.

We add some facts from an account given in the '*Daily News*':—

On July 26, Mr. Elliott started from Grindelwald to ascend the *Schreckhorn*, usually considered the second most difficult mountain in Switzerland. Mr. Elliott had with him a porter from *Zermatt*, and another *Zermatt* man, Biner, his own guide, who had accompanied him in almost all his ascents. In this guide, Biner, Mr. Elliott had the greatest, and, it would appear, the most well-deserved confidence; and in recording in Biner's book his opinion of Biner's conduct during the last trip with him there is literally hardly an epithet of praise which Mr. Elliott has not employed. He especially describes instances in which Biner had succeeded when the local guides had failed or despaired of success.

After the accident, Herr Bohren, of the *Adler Hotel*, at once sent off six of the best guides, with three days' provisions, to cross by the upper Grindelwald glacier to the Lauter-Aar glacier, and to recover the body. Early the next morning another party of four, including the guides

present at the accident, followed in their traces. In eighteen hours this last party returned, having reached the spot where the body must have fallen, as marked by the furrow made in the slope above; but as they found no trace on the glacier, or the cave of the guides, it was evident that the first expedition had succeeded in recovering the body, and were engaged in bringing it, by some easier route, to Grindelwald. At last, fifty-four hours after the party of six guides had started, late at night, their lights were seen coming down the rocks by the side of the lower glacier. They had succeeded in finding the body at once. They had taken with them everything necessary for its transport, and had come from the Lauter-Aar glacier by the Strahleck pass. The pasteur of Grindelwald had kindly prepared a room in his house for the reception of the body, and it was placed there. It had sustained little injury, but it was evident that death must have been instantaneous. The spot where it had fallen had been quickly found; but the ice there was deeply crevassed, and it had been difficult to remove it. No sooner had the party withdrawn it to a more secure place, than an avalanche of rock and snow came down the slope on the spot on to which it had lain.

The funeral took place on the afternoon of July 30. Mr. Elliott's companion and his guide were the chief mourners, and the coffin was borne by the guides who had recovered the body. A very large number of visitors and guides attended, and the ceremony was most solemn and impressive. The Grand Duchess of Baden kindly sent a bouquet of Alpine roses, gathered by herself, to place in the coffin; and the pasteur of the village placed his church at the disposal of the English chaplain who performed the service. Before leaving the church the pasteur delivered an address in German to his parishioners, calling on them for their sympathy, and showing them the Prayer Book found on the body, with so many passages underlined, as a proof of the spirit in which Mr. Elliott had loved and sought their mountains.

Of the accident by which Mr. Chester perished on the Lyskamm we need only say that it was caused by a slip on a comparatively easy slope, which was, it seems, originally due to Mr. Chester's having attempted to save a dog which was with him at the time, and had slipped on the snow. The account hitherto given is not very easy to understand, and we shall refrain from decided comments until we receive the report of the official examinations. We may, however, remark that two things must have struck every experienced reader as singular, and that from some unpublished accounts which have been forwarded to us, we are convinced that further enquiry may throw a very different light upon the cause of the accident. It was strange, in the first place, that a gentleman slipping in an easy place should not have been easily held up by two experienced guides, to whom he was, or ought to have been, securely roped. Secondly, it is strange that if the guides fell with him over a cliff sufficient to cause his almost instant death, the guides

should have escaped almost unhurt. These circumstances may be susceptible of satisfactory explanation; but we wait for further particulars; such reports as we have heard tend to imply that there may be some important inaccuracies in the hitherto published statement.

We will now venture to add a few observations upon the general question of Alpine dangers as illustrated by these accidents. In the number of this Journal for June, 1866, a paper appeared written by the present editor, and entitled 'Alpine Dangers.' The main conclusions at which it arrived were as follows:—First, 'that the rope should be invariably worn on all difficult ice or rock slopes where a fall is possible.' The rope should be worn, it was added, 'not merely as a security, but as a guarantee that the danger anticipated is not unreasonably great.' Secondly, it was said that a good guide should be taken as leader in all difficult excursions, and never tempted to proceed against his judgment. And thirdly, mention was made of 'the essential importance of the traveller making himself competent by practice and training to take his full share of the work.' Let us consider shortly how far these considerations are confirmed or rendered doubtful by more recent occurrences.

In the last paragraph of the quotation from the 'Daily News' it is said, that the persons who advocate the use of the rope should remember that, if Mr. Elliott had worn it, 'two more lives would almost inevitably have been lost.' The Schreckhorn is almost exclusively a rock mountain, and, moreover, a mountain where the rocks are generally firm and present good hold. The accident took place where one guide was already on rocks, and Mr. Elliott jumping on to them from (apparently) a patch of ice or snow. We are not told what was Biner's position; but it was sufficiently firm to enable him to seize Mr. Elliott's arm and make some effort at saving him. If, then, the first guide had had a tolerable hold, and the party had been roped together, there would have been two men in comparative safety employed in holding a third who was himself a very active mountaineer. It is impossible to speak positively without inspection of the place; but there is certainly a very strong probability that the accident would have been rendered harmless. It is to be remembered that though the first guide could not help Mr. Elliott, from the insecurity of his position, it is one thing to help a man by catching him with your hand as he falls, and another and a much easier simply to remain in your position and wait for the strain of the rope. Let us, however, assume that as a matter of fact the

guides were so placed that even when roped they could not have resisted the fall. What follows? Surely, that under the circumstances they ought not to have been so placed. From personal experience of the Schreckhorn we venture to say confidently, that there is no place where a party of three competent mountaineers may not with moderate care retain such positions that two at least will always be ready to support the third. Granting everything which the writer in the 'Daily News' asserts, the only inference apparently unfavourable to the use of the rope is this, that three men may put themselves in such positions on a dangerous mountain that the fall of one will entail the fall of the whole party. This is perfectly true, and is, moreover, a very important truth; though it is equally true that they may with care render an accident altogether out of the question. And the inference is simply that the use of the rope is not by itself a sufficient safeguard, avoiding the necessity of skill and care. Undoubtedly it is nothing of the kind; it may be easily rendered a source of danger; and we are anxious to express this fact as emphatically as possible, in order to draw another inference. We will remark, however, in passing, that good mountaineers are often tempted to dispense with the rope on difficult rocks on account of the extra trouble which it frequently imposes. Yet there is no variety of Alpine climbing in which it can be made to afford more security, and we could point to a case where the life of an excellent guide with a first-rate mountaineer was saved lately by this precaution, when the sudden giving way of a pinnacle of rotten rock would otherwise have almost certainly led to a fatal fall. A rope should be used on a steep ice or snow slope, but it is even more essential on difficult rocks.

To return, however, to our argument. We have admitted that the use of the rope may in some hands be made a cause of danger; and we add that in mountaineering generally, there is nothing of more importance to remember than that no system of rules whatever can by itself afford perfect security. The difficulties to which one may be exposed are so various, the expedients by which they must be met are susceptible of so many modifications, that it is hopeless to give rules capable of replacing experience and skill. No book on strategy has hitherto rendered good generals unnecessary; and, in a small way, the art of mountaineering has many points of resemblance to the military art, and requires, though on a miniature scale, a similar combination of that presence of mind and fertility of expedients which cannot be taught by any cut and dried system.

It was for this reason that, after noticing the importance of a use of the rope, we spoke emphatically of the necessity, first, of skill in the guides, and, secondly, of a certain amount of careful training of the traveller himself. It is this last point which is most frequently neglected now-a-days, and which it is of most importance to impress upon novices in the art. For reasons familiar to every traveller, the dangers of the Alps are apt to be underrated at the first blush, and a man should not attack them till he knows how serious the dangers may be, and feels himself on good grounds competent to deal with them. Looking back upon the accidents that have occurred since mountaineering became popular, we find that they are all reducible to one of the following heads:—

Either the use of the rope has been neglected, or has been only half observed, as in the accident to the three travellers on the Col du Géant;

Or, travellers have ventured in a place where avalanches were known to fall, and resolved upon running a certain inevitable risk, much as if they had chosen to cross the line of fire at a rifle-ground when the red flag was hoisted. Such, for example, was the cause of Bennen's death and of the accident to Captain Arkwright on Mont Blanc.

And, finally, it is specially worth remarking that in (we believe) every case, except that of Mr. Elliott, there have been one or more inexperienced travellers in the party. The want of experience has either led to a neglect of established precautions, or to an accident in spite of precautions which would have been amply sufficient with moderately good walkers. If the details hitherto received have been accurate, this must have been the case with poor Mr. Chester; but it is possible that another cause of misfortune was not wanting. Experienced mountaineers have done many things which in cool blood they would find it hard to justify. There are probably few men, if the truth were known, who would not confess to moments at which they have vowed that once in a safe valley, they would never again tempt the risks of the mountains. Yet it is a fact that no accident has hitherto happened in the Alps to parties consisting exclusively of well-trained mountaineers so long as they observed the ordinary precautions. Indeed, we believe that we might almost go farther and omit the last qualifying clause, were it not for the accident on the Schreckhorn. Neither experience, indeed, nor any amount of skill can justify some of the risks which have been run by such parties, and they owe their immunity to good fortune as well as to good management; but the fact proves that the risk may be reduced to very small

proportions by a proper attention to the above-mentioned principles. We venture, therefore, to assert once more the conclusion drawn in the paper already quoted, namely, that a man ought to qualify himself, both in activity and in what may be called mountain-craft, before undertaking any difficult expeditions; but that with men so qualified the danger may generally be reduced to a trifle, especially if the command of the party be entrusted to its most experienced and judicious member.

One more remark seems proper to be made. It may be asked whether any blame should be attached to Mr. Elliott's party for not insisting upon the use of the rope. Theoretically, the guides were wrong; and the omission was an instance of a neglect of the principle just noticed, that the most experienced member of the party is entitled to have his opinion followed. But those who know the practical relations between a good walker and his guides, will be slow to censure men for not insisting upon a rule when their employer, who is an experienced traveller, distinctly objects to it. After all, the man who pays practically has the last word in a discussion, which is an additional reason for treating the opinion of guides with deference. Of Biner, we, or, to drop the awkward plural in such a case, I may say from experience that he is a thoroughly good and careful guide, though not of much physical power, nor equal in skill and experience to the first-rate men of the Oberland and Chamouni. I should be very sorry if he were injured by a misfortune, which I do not think can be fairly laid to his charge.

It is hard to blame the dead; and I should sincerely regret any severity of implied censure upon Mr. Elliott in the above remarks. The importance of the question to all mountaineers forbids me to avoid speaking the plain truth. I cannot but think that he was rash, and that the accident which we deplore would in all probability have been avoided by a strict adherence to the rules of prudence. But it must also be admitted with some degree of shame that there are few experienced mountaineers who have not at times been guilty of equal rashness, though from good fortune as much as from merit they have not had to pay the same penalty. If only those who are quite blameless should cast the first stone, few would be entitled to find fault with him; yet it is a duty to mountaineers to let it be known that in the general opinion of the most experienced climbers, such accidents as that on the Schreckhorn are not the necessary result of their favourite pursuit. If they were, the pursuit could hardly be defended.