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THE LATE ACCIDENT ON MONT BLANC. By J. STODDON.
A Paper read before the Alpine Club, on Tuesday, March 7,
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THE accident on Mont Blanc last September, though probably as fatal as any two other Alpine accidents put together, has attracted a wonderfully small share of attention, even after making every allowance for the absorbing interest taken in the war. I suppose Alpine accidents are beginning to lose the factitious importance they have possessed, and to take their place among what may be called the specially recognised English misfortunes, such as accidents in hunting or shooting, or crossing the streets. The luxury of abusing us too, is, I fancy, not quite so delicate as it used to be, for no one, however little his soul, can possibly say anything properly abusive and at the same time new. Still to mountaineers the facts about a terrible calamity like this, and the lessons to be drawn from it, can never be without their interest. My own ascent may be useful as an illustration, which is my only excuse for offering it. I was at Chamouni with my friend Mr. Marshall last August, in the peculiar weather with which we had been favoured all the month. Though we never once had to turn back from an expedition, we were always concealed in mist and snow-storm long before we had finished, which involved us once or twice in some rather exciting adventures, and we always had reason to congratulate ourselves, that if such or such a vile atmospherical condition had set in some few minutes earlier we must have beat a retreat. We had brought with us Moritz Andermatten, of Visp, for the sake of his admirable knowledge of the high-level route and his experience of the

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Mont Blanc country, sufficient, we hoped, to save us from an experiment on the Chamouni guides. Old Peter Taugwald was our second man. The former had been up Mont Blanc sixteen times, the latter once. We set off on the 25th, taking with us, from the Pierre Pointue, Johann Graf, who made his first ascent with us, and was so soon to make his last. I suppose no man ever had a more surpassingly glorious afternoon and evening at the Grands Mulets than we had, a level floor of clouds below us stretching away, as it seemed, to infinity, gilded at first, and then tinged with the finest rose colour by the setting sun, the top of the Fys or some other peak breaking through here and there. Fine weather for the next day was voted an absolute certainty. I had had slight misgivings caused just about sunset by a rim of distant vapour, of a colour something like burning zinc, which I had only once before seen on an otherwise faultless evening, and which then proved the precursor of a most maniacal wind and snow-storm. My burning zinc was soon forgotten in the perfect glory of the evening, and I slept without misgiving. The morning was, if possible, finer than the night had been, there was not a cloud nor a breath of wind, and as we rose higher and higher, pounding through the deep snow, the distant views opened out in more absolute perfection of form and colouring than any I remember ever to have seen. Owing to the complete absence of wind, we chose the Bosse arête, as more interesting and exciting, and reached the depression on the right of the bosse in the highest good humour.

At this point splashed into our cup the first drop of bitterness. Mr. Ruskin tells us of a certain cloud that is seen only on the top of Mont Blanc, hovering over the summit, adapting itself to the shape of the top without ever actually touching it. This scientifically interesting cloud had now presented itself; none of us saw it come, but there it unmistakeably was, like a night-cap, the recognised space intervening between it and the top. We comforted ourselves with the idea that the intervening space was constant, and that there would be plenty of room in it to look about us. Miserable fallacy! the top was presently covered, then came the well-known chilly sensation, as if the sun were going out, and gloom settled down upon us. By this time we were looking over the Miage, and on the glorious arête of the Aiguille de Bionassay. On our own arête, too, steps had become necessary, for the snow had been swept away by the constant winds, and hard ice was exposed, when, without any warning except the night-cap and a few whirling mists in the caldron of the Miage Glacier, we were smitten

by a blast which brought us to our faces on the slope. The mists closed over us, and till we saw the Grands Mulets again, our vision was limited to our dear selves and the bit of snow at our feet. I suppose we ought to have at once turned back, and something was said about it, but the remark met with no attention, and we struggled on, now lying down for a gust to sweep over us, now advancing again to the charge. We only knew we were at the top by finding there was no more to get up, and the only thing I saw there was a perfectly flat piece of greenish ice, like a thick window-pane, sticking out of the snow.

We didn't stop an instant, but began walking down one of the other sides—if a roundish thing like the top of Mont Blanc can be said to have any sides at all—the guides laying down the axiom that we should be infallibly blown away if we attempted to go down the steps we had cut in the icy part of the Bosse arête. In about half a minute from the top we unanimously pulled up; the guides evidently had not the remotest idea where to get down, and we went back in our tracks to the top again. By this time the wind had got so terrible that we were utterly dazed by it. It required the greatest effort not to be blown bodily away. It was almost impossible to speak, as the wind seemed to numb one's jaws and block up one's mouth and ears. The cold, too, was intense, and I remember vividly the way in which everyone by walking round me had coiled the rope round and round my legs. Old Peter meantime had got himself let down a few feet with the rope, and was actively engaged in cutting steps apparently straight down to the Grand Plateau, in spite of Moritz's abuse. At this time I felt if we were ever to get back to Chamouni again, it must be by the way we had come, taking our chance of being blown away. I yelled my opinion at the top of my voice, though I seemed scarcely to hear myself, and everyone immediately started off, old Peter first, on what seemed a kind of forlorn hope. Off the top, however, the wind got sensibly less, and we really had no serious difficulty beyond the difficulty of keeping our feet in ice-steps under every disadvantage. Some rocks crop out some way down; here the wind was much less, and we fell almost helpless against them, our fingers in an agony with the cold, which was so great that our wine was frozen into lumps in the bottles. From this point our only difficulty was steering properly through the thick mist, but as Moritz and Peter are neither of them deficient in the instinct of returning in the afternoon exactly where they have been in the morning, our difficulties were soon over, and

after a dismal walk in deep snow, and a cutlet at the Grands Mulets patiently waited for and ravenously eaten in soaking garments, we got back to Chamouni about 8 o'clock, thankful to find ourselves once more in the haunts of men. The only apology for this description is that it seems to have been the experience of the unfortunate party so soon to follow us with such a different result, and I will now state the facts of that expedition so far as I know them myself, or have been able to collect them by enquiry.

It was the night of our return that an American gentleman, named Randall, asked me to let him come into our sitting-room and talk over Mont Blanc. The consequence was, I didn't get to bed till two, and I found in Mr. Randall, in spite of his fifty years, the most intense mountain enthusiast I ever had the pleasure of meeting—fed, too, before this year, not on the mountains themselves, but entirely on books. To see, not necessarily to climb, Mont Blanc had been the dream of his life, and he had come over at last to fulfil it. Poor fellow! just after I had left Chamouni, driven to England with much undone by the continued bad weather, he was induced to become one of a large party for the ascent of Mont Blanc. They left Chamouni on Monday, September 5, for the Grands Mulets, taking with them as guides Jean Balmat, Joseph Breton, Edouard Simon (of whose capabilities some member of the Club will probably know more than I do), and five porters—Albert Couttet, Alphonse Couttet, Albert Cachat, Fred. Tairraz, Alphonse Balmat—and an Oberland servant of the Pierre Pointue named Johann Graf, a most promising lad, who had made his first ascent with us. The next morning they started from the Grands Mulets in fine weather, leaving behind them their only compass. It is not clear what time they set off. Mr. Bean, in his diary, mentions an observation taken at 2 A.M., but probably, considering the time of year, they did not start till 3.30, or 4; and 2.10 is about the mean of the various statements made as to the time at which they reached the summit—not, as has been stated, by the Bosse arête, but by the usual route up the Mur de la Côte. They had only just reached the top, when the same species of furious storm burst upon them without warning, as had before upon us, and we know absolutely no more about them till their death, except what we can gather from the disjointed and unsatisfying diary of poor Mr. Bean, found subsequently in his pocket, and from the conclusions we may draw from the positions of the bodies. None of these were recovered till September 17, twelve days after the expedition had started,

several attempts having been previously stopped, the first actually at the Pierre Pointue by a continuance of the same terrible weather. The wind was from the east, called apparently by the natives the Vent de l'Aiguille de Dru.

By the 17th the weather was perfect, and five of the bodies were found, first of all a little way above the Mur de la Côte; but quite out of the right track were the bodies of Mr. Mac-Corkendale and two porters, lying near together, all with the head uppermost, and apparently, though on this account testimony differs, with their clothes more or less torn, as if they had slidden—but at any rate, there was no bodily injury whatever. They were quite unattached, and, so far as I can make out, no rope was found near them.

Higher up, at about the same height as the Petits Mulets, lay the bodies of Mr. Bean and another porter, in the same positions as the first three, and with all the baggage about them on the snow, the ropes coiled up, ice-axes, belts, and empty wine-canisters. All five were, of course, completely frozen.

Of the remaining six nothing whatever was seen. On the 20th, 21st, 22nd, a party of some of the best Chamouni men searched in all directions from the Grands Mulets upwards, bestowing special attention to the Calotte, where they dug and sounded with the greatest care, finding, according to a statement in the '*Écho des Alpes*,' one or two small articles scattered here and there upon the snow along a line from somewhere near the other bodies to the great crevasse at the summit of the Glacier de Brenva.

So far two or three things strike us as curious—first, the fact that the five bodies found were those of the heaviest of the party. Second, the curious fact that not one of the three guides was found, though two out of the three travellers were.

We now come to the only light which has been thrown upon the history of these unfortunate men since they were last seen upon the summit. In Mr. Bean's pocket was found a disjointed diary, quoted at length by Mr. Stephen in his notice of the accident in the last number of the *Journal*. The genuineness of this I was at first disposed to doubt, from the very unsatisfying explanations contained in it. The external evidence in its favour is, I think, however, too strong to allow any reasonable man to think it a forgery. They left the summit, according to this paper, at 2.30 P.M. on the 6th. The history of the day ends in their hollowing a grotto out of the snow, and passing a miserable night at an altitude of some 15,000 feet. How it came to pass that they had by

nightfall descended so little—whether they went down farther and were forced up again by impassable difficulties—whether the six missing men were then with him, he does not tell us.

On the 7th we find the weather was no better; and the letter which follows apparently only repeats the history of the 6th, that they had no idea where they were, and that they had dug a hole in the snow. He tells us, too, that his feet were frozen, and his strength gone. He does not drop a hint as to what they did on the 7th, whether any attempt was made to find the way, or whether, utterly worn out with cold and hunger, they had laid themselves down to die. Then comes the last entry, written in characters more and more blurred and indistinct. ‘Morning terribly cold again and much snow.’ This seems to mean the morning of the 8th, but it may just possibly refer back to the time he began the letter which precedes it, and be a further account of the 7th. I am inclined, however, to the other opinion, that life was prolonged till some time on the 8th. So that after losing their way they spent the night of the 6th, the day and night of the 7th, and varying parts of the 8th, in a sinking condition on the snow, without food or wraps.

The difficulties which meet us in thinking over this account and the positions of the bodies are: How was the 7th spent? What caused the division of the party, and on what principle was the division made? I cannot frame any really satisfactory theory to embrace all the facts. The five who were found were probably the weakest members of the party, and the other six apparently made one more effort to find their way, resulting, if we are to trust to the evidence of the glove picked up in the direction of the Brenva Glacier, in a grave in the snows of the south side, or perhaps a fall down the steep rocks above the lower basin of the glacier. In no other way, that I can see, can we explain the entire absence of guides with the party found on the 17th; and the position of the ropes and axes seems to show that they, for their part, had finally given up all attempts to save themselves. The three bodies lower down were possibly blown down the slope from the two above, as the torn condition of their clothes tends to show, or must have wandered there in utter aimlessness, as no rope even was found with them.

The idea first entertained, that all had been blown away by the violent storm, is clearly disproved by Mr. Bean’s diary as regards the bodies found, and presumably as regards those missing, otherwise he would surely have made some comment upon it. After these latter had left their companions, it is of

course possible that they suffered that fate; but then we can scarcely imagine an east wind blowing them over on to the south side, on which the general opinion seems to be they have perished. Marks on the snow there were of course none, owing to the lapse of time, and of the grotto no trace, I believe, was discovered, a natural consequence of the violent wind and constant snow-storms during the first half of September.

Mr. Stephen, in the last number of the 'Alpine Journal,' has made some valuable remarks about the lessons to be drawn from this accident, in which, I suppose, we should all agree. I would only lift my voice against the depreciation of Mont Blanc, in which, owing, I suppose, to the number of successful ascents, it has become the fashion to indulge. If Mont Blanc has been the scene of many successful expeditions, he has, on the other hand, more blood on those white snows of his than, I think we may say, all the other Alpine peaks put together. I, being a married man, and conscientiously debarred from the tempting peaks at which I used to aim, was casting about last year for high but safe ascents. The popular Mont Blanc seemed just the peak I wanted, for has not some injurious writer told us in the 'Times' that there is no more difficulty on it than on Snowdon? Difficulty there no doubt is none, but terrible danger there most certainly is, at any rate in bad weather. And even on the finest day, no one who has stumbled over the acres of avalanche *débris* under the Dôme du Goûté can say that he is in *perfect* safety.

I do not at all know what reputation as guides these three poor men who perished possessed. It is hard to see, as Mr. Stephen has said, that they could have been first-rate, especially as they had just ascended the very ground they such a short time after failed to descend. I do not think our guides would have brought us down if we had attempted the Mur de la Côte, as they did not pretend to be specially skilled on Mont Blanc; but having come up by the Bosse arête, and having once brought themselves to face the danger of descending it in an icy state in a high east wind, their instinct was never once at fault, and our confidence in them, shaken on the top, was completely restored again.

I believe at Geneva there is a subscription opened for the families of the guides, two of whom at least have left widows unprovided for. Donations may be sent to M. Feundler, 41 Plain Palais, Geneva—President of the Geneva section of the Swiss Alpine Club.