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The Col des Grandes Jorasses. By T. Middlemore. Read before the Alpine Club, May 5, 1875.

A FEW words will be enough to record this expedition. Indeed I hardly think it would be worthy of a fuller notice than that which has already been given in the last November number of the 'Alpine Journal,' were it not that some of the incidents may perhaps 'point a moral,' even if none of them serve to 'adorn a tale.'

On July 15, I had, in company with Mr. T. S. Kennedy, been driven by bad weather back to Courmayeur from an attempt at the ascent of Mont Blanc by the Broglia Glacier. The attempt, it will be remembered, was repeated in the following month, with sad result, by Mr. Kennedy's friend, Mr. Marshall, a gentleman who had already done good work in the Alps, and whose career, had it not been cut short by the expedition in question, would have placed him in the first rank of amateur climbers.

The day after our descent, my guide, Johann Jaun, at his own instance inspected, with Fischer, from the Mont de la Saxe, the Col des Grandes Jorasses. Jaun forthwith reported to me that the only difficulty was some rock climbing, which, if feasible, would take about a couple of hours; that this bit of rock work would certainly be stiff, but that it had not been sufficiently tested to be put down as impossible. This account, which I made as seductive as I could, was not enough to lead Mr. Kennedy to join me. Whether he distrusted Jaun's enthusiasm of suggestion, or feared that an expedition of five or six, burdened with such a slow and poor climber as I was, would not be successful, I can't say. Anyhow, he did not entertain the idea, and the same day left for Aosta.

The weather was too uncertain for a start, so I stayed at Courmayeur; but on the following day there seemed a fair prospect of a few days' fine weather. I engaged Joseph Rey as porter, and ordered the needful clothing for the inward man.

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Signor Bertolini is the prince of caterers. I had asked, for I am not nice in such matters, for simple provisions. He furnished us with a portable orgie. Mine is not the pen to attempt an analysis of our larder; but, for the benefit of future wayfarers, I may mention that you can nearly always get chamois in the very best condition, unadulterated with goat-like defilement. I have been twice blessed with the 'filet.' The white Capri is as delicious as it is wholesome; and the Marsala, with advantage to both purse and palate, does admirably double duty for both wine and Cognac. Signor Bertolini, with a well-founded faith in the weather, assured me I should soon be back again, and so he hoped I would pay the bill another time; but as it is only right to save one's executors all possible trouble, I insisted on the production of the note, and I was allowed to discharge it. Bidding my charming entertainers of the 'Royal' adieu, and receiving their smiling 'au revoir,' at one o'clock I was on my way for the Val Ferrex. Before we reached the valley, however, our hopes of the weather suiting the uniform experience of the season's travel, were again belied. We had to shelter from a shower. We meant to have taken for our gîte that which, in ordinary course, serves for the ascent of the Grandes Jorasses. A fine night spent there, and the early morning after it, are a great treat. The Val Ferrex and the comparative lowness of the foreground give all the charm of distance. Your own height brings a host of peaks into view. To the east you get a good part of the Zermatt mountains, dwarfed, it is true, but saved from insignificance by their clear lines of definition; more to the right you see the familiar outlines of the Graians; nearly due south the Ruitor is brought by its nearness into obtrusive prominence, and still further to the right, in the far distance, many of the peaks of the Dauphiné range can be traced. What I have described does not, of course, amount to a fine panorama, but shows what a reach the view has. The shortness of the twilight changes each succeeding moment the aspect of the scene, whilst a wonderful charm is added to the whole by the softness of tone of the Italian sky. This last beauty cannot be seen without being felt, but it can hardly be described. I know that as soon as I pass the mountains into Italy, I feel that the sky has a *timbre*, so to speak, of its own. My recollections are of some years back; and though in my memory the features of the scene are now nearly as dim as when twilight had merged them into night, its expression is hardly less present to me than when I first saw it. Forgive me this episode, for it recalls a scene

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witnessed by me more than once, although not seen, to tell the truth, on the night in question.

The time which we had wasted during the storm, together with an embryotic shower or so, boding little good for the morrow, decided us to bivouac much lower down than the well-known gîte, which is used for the ascent of the Grandes Jorasses. We chose the top of the grass slopes at the foot of the steep rocks leading to the Glacier des Grandes Jorasses, about 2,000 feet above the valley. A big boulder, that aforetime the glacier had shot from above, offered us shelter. Never did a Mrs. Gamp, even in a broiling sun on a snow-field, appear more seductive to the eyes of her staunch advocate, Mr. Ball. Ensconcing ourselves, therefore, under her screening ægis, after manifold libations in her honour, we slept the sleep of the just, at least, unfortunately, Jaun and Rey did, for they were so afflicted with easy consciences that they did not rouse themselves till 2.30 the next day, Saturday. This, with breakfast, meant a start not before 3.30. The day broke as usual with delusive smiles. We reached the top of the lowest ledge of the Glacier des Grandes Jorasses at 5.0. There Rey and I rested, whilst Jaun spent an hour in cutting steps across the glacier, which was so hard, steep, and slippery, that no time was wasted in the cutting, and it would have been unsafe to have slurred it. Leaving the gîte for the Grandes Jorasses to our right, we found the glacier easy, but a good deal crevassed. We thought it well to hasten our steps as we neared the foot of the Grand Chain, since our path was strewed with stones freshly loosened by the sun from the rocks above us. We gained these rocks at 10.30, and now began the '*crux*' of the expedition, which Jaun had described as 'about a couple of hours of stiff rock work.'

The Col des Grandes Jorasses, as you face it from the south, is a gap in the main rock chain, some 100 feet wide, and some 1,500 feet deep; flanked on the west by a steep rock wall, and on the east by some rocks of equal steepness, but broken up by the action of heat and cold. A slice of rock about 15 feet thick, and bearing much nearer the western than the eastern wall, runs in the middle. The spaces between are filled for the most part with glacier. We can readily realise what the thing is like by picturing to ourselves a long and steep gully, formed by the intersection of two planes of rock, and cut lengthwise by a third plane.

Before we reached the foot of the rocks we saw that the scaling them would be a tougher job than Jaun had foretold; so we now wasted no time in settling to our work. The only

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feasible side of attack was on the eastern flanking wall. The rocks here were very rotten, as bad indeed as any you could find on the Italian slopes of the great chain, baked into rottenness by the glare of the southern sun.

The foot-hold was bad, the hand-hold was worse, and both feet and hands had to be used. I find it far easier to graduate the pressure of the feet than of the hands in climbing loose rocks. Our course lay along a line which followed the bottom of the couloir, and was raised a little above it. Sometimes we were nearly forced into the gully, and with our axes could have almost touched the ice, stones, and such small débris as from time to time whistled down it. Of course so long as we kept quite clear of the couloir, which we managed to do the whole time, so long this cannonade gave us amusement without a particle of risk. There was another source of falling stones, which, if not risky, was anyhow not pleasant. This source was ourselves. The rocks were so steep and broken that, with the best care, we each of us kept disengaging stones. This inconvenience Jaun, who led us, treated with marvellous good temper. I, who came next, was not so serene. Two of the axes, which from time to time had to be perched, had been already carried away by falling stones. My hand had been cut by another stone, which was immediately followed by a third, bruising my shoulder, and so jarring me as to make me feel quite sick. My language, I fear, became expressive. Jaun cheered me with the assurance that a short five minutes would bring us clear of our stony foes. Well, after a five and a half hours' fight, with very short intervals of rest, we managed to get to the top of the rocks. As soon as we had planted ourselves in the glacier, which formed a kind of entablature over the gully, we turned round to examine our route from the rear. The gully from above seemed still steeper than from below. Down it the snow which we loosened swept past us, gaining force from the few feet of steep nevé, crowning the couloir, and shivering itself to dust a few feet below us. We saw that the gully was the natural drain pipe, down which the débris of the whole col was sent; forming the pipe of the funnel of which the steep wall of nevé made the shallow basin. Casting our eyes on our path, we realised to the full its difficulties, due to its intricacy, steepness and concealment. However, we gave ourselves little time for reflection. It was now four o'clock, so we pushed our way up the wall of snow that stood between us and the top of the pass. This, a work of five minutes, with three axes, took up half an hour with only one. Indeed, as it was, there seemed some likelihood of

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our manning a raft of snow down the couloir; but with the help of our hands, and legs sunk well in the snow, we reached the top of the pass at half-past four. I turned to Rey, and reminding him that I had promised him from twenty to forty francs, according to the difficulty of the journey, I added that a climb such as we had done was quite outside my reckoning, and I should therefore comfort him with 100 francs. Rey thanked me, and said that this sum was also quite beyond his hopes, and then added with great earnestness that he would not repeat the journey, no, not for 1,000 francs; and he evidently meant it. I told Jaun, and we both laughed heartily.

Our descent of the Mallet Glacier was very steep, but, through the softness of the snow, not difficult. The snow, moreover, was a capital soft bed to drop into, and thus by a few deep jumps we saved a great many détours. We cleared the seracs in something like two hours. It was now getting dusk, and we had no wish to spend the night on the Mallet, so we put on pace for the rest of the glacier. Our haste, however, only hindered us; for hurrying close together, with only a few feet of rope between each man, down the end of the stream where the Mallet Glacier débouches into the Échaud, on a surface which seemed scarcely streaked by a ripple, where one would be inclined to scoff at the idea of a crevasse, Jaun, who was first, suddenly disappeared, descending by a clean drop some twenty or thirty feet to the end of his rope. I straightway grounded myself in the soft snow. Rey was equal to the occasion; he jerked the rope under my arm-pits, and then with great presence of mind proceeded to strangle me. At first he treated with indifference my prayers for life. He was evidently acting under a stern sense of duty, and would not be influenced by a mere appeal to his feelings. But at last, as he saw that tugging at me did not affect Jaun's case, he gave me rope, and joining our strength we pulled Jaun to the surface. We landed him *sans* hat, *sans* axe (so we had not the wherewithal to gaff him with), a bit cut about the face, very purple there, and almost breathless. On the whole, however, not much the worse. Slightly scared, perhaps, but no doubt pleased to find that his '*facilis descensus*' was not such warm work as he had feared. I suggested a bivouac at the Pierre à Béranger; Jaun, who is generally brimful of bonhomie, scouted the idea, told me I might, but he should sleep at Couttet's. Jaun therefore, when we had fairly got on the rocks of the Échaud, breaks the bottom from the remaining bottle, after carefully arranging that none of the contents should be wasted, sticks a candle end into its neck; so, with

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this lantern of Bacchus, Jaun trudging to the front, we tramp over the glacier. The clearing the crevasses by candle-light was a lively, but lengthy, example of faith without works; though I must do the candle the justice to say that it kept going out when it was most wanted, and so we were saved many of the mischances that befel us when our will o' the wisp kept in. At length, by the efflux of time, rather than by our own exertions, we gained at midnight the Montanvert. A little more than an hour longer brought us to Couttet's hotel at Chamonix. The porter was waked at 1.15 on Sunday. He did not, I fancy, quite enter into the fun of the expedition, but waked in his turn Baguette, who took care we did not go supperless to bed, and gave me a shake-down in the salon, where I slumbered till a late hour, recking little the revilings of the guests, who looked on me as a trespasser and common foe. The Sunday we gave to rest, and to the repair of our impedimenta.

Now having failed, as at the onset I said I should do, to adorn a tale, I may be called upon to make good my threat of pointing a moral. Well, perhaps I can't quite do that; but I think this climb does give occasion for 'a word in season,' and just on this account: that the founders of the Club, and our forerunners in climbing, have been so much the victims of industry and duty, as to leave for their successors very few things of the first-class to do, and these few things are mostly of the kind of work that I had to deal with in my Jorasses Col. In my early days of climbing, and this dates only a few years back, like many others, I was brought once a year to Zermatt. There you are so immediately in the thick of your work, and the entourage from the Riffel is of such unequalled magnificence, that I do not wonder that many like me have learned there first a love for mountain work. The almost religious interest with which many, especially the young and enthusiastic climbers, regard Zermatt, has led me to liken it and the Riffel to the Delphi and Parnassus of some 2,000 years ago. Forbear with me a moment, I mean no disrespect towards Zermatt, but is not she like Delphi? Is not the oracle at Delphi well represented by the hotel Mont Rose, with the guides as its infallible priests, and the mountaineers, the votaries ever ready with their gifts to tempt advice and sanction to new expeditions? Are not the utterances of the guides truly oracular, marked by an ambiguity and uselessness which gives them purely a religious interest? Of course I am speaking simply of the climber's cultus. Parnassus, without doubt, cuts a poor figure by the side of the Riffel, since the wisdom of the ancients

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never furnished for the pilgrim of the period a refectory so charming as the wisdom of Herr Seiler has provided for us of the present day. Where are the Muses, I may be asked? Is not Mme. Clausen a host in herself? But I must not push my parallel too far.

Well, in the early days of my mountain enthusiasm, when I chanced to meet in this charming spot any of the fathers of the Club, with perhaps Mr. Hardy, the Nestor of the Riffel Haus, and one of its staunchest supporters, I can call to mind my own despair and that of others, at any suggestion of deviation from the old paths. How one might be met by the comment, 'Shall fools step in where angels fear to tread?' The full justice of the latter clause I grant, but when the former is applied to such as are not content 'stare super vias antiquas,' I crave leave to plead my mild demurrer. The question is just this: nearly all the best things in the Alps have been done. What remains is stiff and possibly risky. How then shall we deal with this residuum? Some, with I am sorry to say, a certain flavour of official sanction, have counselled not simply caution, a thing which should always influence us, but have advised that the residual climbs, if involving possible danger, should be attempted neither by travellers nor guides. If this advice were followed, it would seem to me a cancelling of the indentures of the younger members who have apprenticed themselves to the noble pursuit to which this Club devotes its energies. There are really only three paths open to the Club. It may keep clear of the onus of advice. It may counsel the giving up of such expeditions, or it may lastly advise their being undertaken with due care. To refuse advice is manifestly immoral, since a recognised authority like this Club, whose antecedents qualify it above all other bodies to give an opinion, has no right of silence.* Further, the advice of dissuasion cannot be justified. The Club is not prepared to transfer to others the honour of completing what remains of Alpine work to do. If its mission is fulfilled, its *raison d'être* is accomplished, and the Club should dissolve. Really then the third course is the only one which in reason and honour the Club can take. Let us therefore wisely guide the current which we cannot and ought not to stem. Let us urge our members by practice on the rocks, and by taking these climbs tentatively, with patience, prudence, and enterprise, to fulfil for the Club a work which it began with admirable adventure, and which, till now, it has continued with honour to itself and with advantage to the world.

* See 'Proceedings of the Club,' p. 279.

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