ALPINE DANGERS.

SIR,—May I add a word or two to the controversy suggested by Mr. Middlemore's paper on the Col des Grandes Jorasses?

The question raised by his narrative appears to be this: Is a man justified in exposing himself and his guides for five hours to incessant falls of stones in order to effect a new passage? Mr. Middlemore tells us that the stones on the Grandes Jorasses knocked away two of three axes, and that one stone hit him. It was obviously a mere accident that another stone did not knock out the brains of one of the party, as a stone knocked out the brains of a porter at Grindelwald a month ago.* Are such risks justifiable? I answer emphatically, no. I add that in my opinion such performances should be discouraged as decidedly as possible by the Alpine Club.

Nobody will deny that some adequate reason should be given for encountering such risks, and especially for inducing guides to encounter them. If Mr. Middlemore chooses to risk his own neck, he must answer for it to himself. When he, in effect, tells a guide to risk his neck on penalty of an imputation of cowardice in case of refusal, he is taking a serious responsibility. Mr. Middlemore laughed heartily at Rey for protesting, in the ordinary guide's formula, against a repetition of their feat, and of course Jaun joined Mr. Middlemore's laughter. I think that Rey was perfectly right, and I hope that he may not be tempted to forget his good resolutions.

What reason does Mr. Middlemore consider as adequate for the risk encountered? He seems to think it enough to say that nobody had ever been in the same place before. If that is a sufficient reason, I can only say that my notions of logic are very imperfect. It would justify the worst folly that ever was committed in the Alps.

But, says Mr. Middlemore, if we don't run risks now, we can't make new expeditions, as the earlier members of the Club used to do. Let me protest in the first place against the implied assumptions. I do not deny that members of the Club have done silly things. I have done silly things myself, and I heartily regret them. My only excuse is that I did not know at the time how silly they were, and my regrets would be doubled if I thought that my ignorant folly would be turned into precedents for more deliberate folly. To make our actions

* Since the above letter was written, another porter has been killed at Grindelwald by a falling stone.

Digitized by Google

a precedent—I speak as one who had the good fortune to make Alpine ascents before the novelty was exhausted—it would be necessary to prove not merely that we did rash things, but that we knowingly did rash things. Now I appeal to Alpine literature generally—to the writings of Mr. Wills, Mr. Kennedy, and Professor Tyndall, and to the volumes of 'Peaks and Passes'—to justify my assertion that all our early members asserted emphatically and systematically that the expeditions which they undertook were not dangerous if ordinary prudence were used. This was their invariable and, I think, satisfactory defence, repeated *usque ad nauseam* against all gainsayers. They never said, These things are dangerous, but we will do them. They said, over and over again, These things are not dangerous, as ignorant people suppose, therefore we will do them. Whether they were right or wrong in their facts is quite another question. But it is most illogical to allege their views in defence of the very doctrine which they most carefully and systematically disavowed.

We should never have done the Matterhorn, it is said, if we had been so nervous about danger. I will not ask whether the ascent of the Matterhorn was cheaply purchased by the loss of the lives of four brave men. The true answer is this: We should never have 'done' the Matterhorn if Mr. Whymper and others had not learnt, by cautious and well-conducted experiments, to overcome the imaginative dangers, and to estimate rightly the true conditions of the case. We should have done it without loss of life if the rules of prudence had been strictly observed. It surely requires some courage to allege a case where a most lamentable accident was caused by neglect of a well-established rule—the rule, I mean, of not taking an incompetent walker with an insufficient force of guides—as a justification for despising other rules of prudence in future.

But, says Mr. Middlemore, If we are not to do dangerous things, we shan't do new things; and if we don't do new things, the end and object of the Club will disappear, and we ought to dissolve. Now, in the first place, if this be true, the Club will in any case come to an end in a very few years. The number of unaccomplished feats may be reckoned on the fingers, and when we have lost half-a-dozen lives in effecting these few ascents, our destiny will be accomplished. But, in the next place, I must protest against the whole theory as utterly unworthy of the Club. I agree that one object of the Club is to promote Alpine climbing. But the most absurd of all ways of promoting a noble exercise is to associate it indelibly with foolhardiness. If the end of the Club be to induce

Digitized by Google

men to risk their necks in pursuit of childish objects, the sooner it is dissolved the better. I hold that we can best promote Alpine climbing by enforcing with all our power a code of rules which will make it a reputable pursuit for sensible men. The first and best recognised of all rules is to avoid those dangers which cannot be met by any degree of skill or activity; and the most conspicuous instance of such dangers is that from falling stones.

A sad accident, to which Mr. Middlemore refers in his paper, should be a warning to us all. Mr. Marshall, he says, had he been spared, would have been in 'the first rank of amateur climbers.' He would have been something infinitely better than that; though this is not the place to pronounce any eulogy upon his memory. But I confess that I cannot think without a lively feeling of indignation of deliberate exhortations to the Club to encourage expeditions of known and inevitable danger, when we have to lament the loss of such men as Mr. Marshall and his excellent guide, Fischer. The accident which happened to them illustrates the dangers which are incurred by even a trifling breach of prudential rules. But Mr. Middlemore would apparently advocate conduct, compared with which theirs was the very height of prudence. No amount of success in gathering up the last crumbs of Alpine adventure would reconcile me to a repetition of such losses. To say nothing of higher considerations, they bring discredit upon the occupation which we all love so heartily and must all wish to flourish when—as must in any case happen—the charm of novelty has departed. So long as I am a member of the Club I shall advocate the policy calculated, in my opinion, to recommend it to men of sense, not that which would sanction the imprudences of men—not of sense.

Mr. Middlemore explicitly says that most of the remaining things to be 'done' (I hate the word) are of the character of his Col. His account proves that the Col is specially conspicuous for the most unavoidable of all Alpine dangers; and yet he would encourage the repetition of such performances. I think it is high time that we should protest vigorously against such opinions.

Yours truly,

LESLIE STEPHEN.

August 12th, 1875.

Digitized by Google