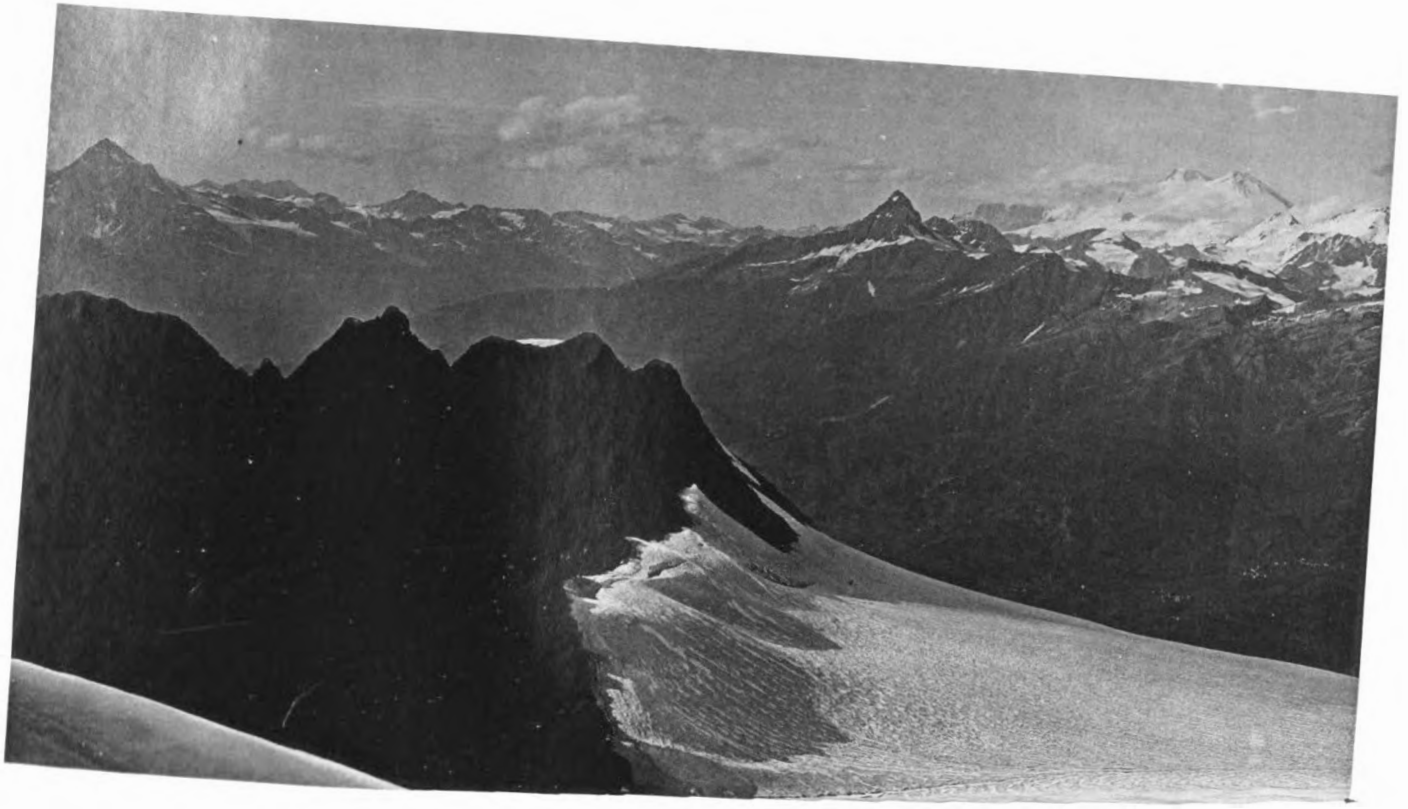

VIEW FROM THE LEILA TO THE N.W.

(FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY SIGNOR SELLA).

Fralk, Dangerfield, Photo Process, London.

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The Solitude of Abkhasia.

With Some Notes on the High-Level Routes of the Caucasus.

By DOUGLAS W. FRESHFIELD.

(Read before the Alpine Club June 5, 1890.)

IT is with some reluctance that I once more present myself before the alpine public. I should prefer to retire from these pages in favour of members belonging to a younger generation. But secretaries and editors must be obeyed, even should they treat an old member as the Swiss innkeeper treats his goat—serve him up at the end of the season, when other provisions run short, and call him chamois. If I grumble, however, I do not exercise this Briton's birthright because I have nothing to say. My difficulty is rather over-abundance than any lack of matter. The artist, we are truly told, is known by his omissions. But then, unluckily, not only am I no gymnast or humorist, as are so many of our modern alpine writers; I have not even any pretensions to be an artist. All my friends can credit me with is a taste for topography. That talent for picturesque exaggeration, which is popularly believed to be the distinction of alpine literature, has been attributed to me once only, and that by a not very dexterous flatterer.

The taste of the Club, one of its recent officers tells me, inclines nowadays towards a detailed account of one 'first-class' expedition. I might find something among my material to gratify this taste; yet I do not care to settle down to describe one rockwall or set of ice slopes, I would rather illustrate, if I may, the infinite variety of the country I have grown to love by leading you a dance

Over hill, over dale,
Thorough bush, thorough briar,

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by carrying you into those forest solitudes which Moore and his companions skirted in 1874, and which no traveller besides has ever seen.*

I have, perhaps, a better excuse than a personal inclination for taking this course. I am glad, at any time, to do what I can to link mountaineering with travel, and to hinder the specialisation of mountain-climbing as an inferior branch of gymnastics, to be taught by Swiss professors. One such professor—sometimes called a guide—it has been lately rumoured, I know not with what truth, already undertakes to enable any candidate (not over fourteen stone) to pass the ordeal of your committee in a single season for the moderate fee of two thousand francs! I should not be sorry to spoil this trade, and I shall sincerely rejoice if, by illustrating the vast extent, novelty, and many-sidedness of the Caucasian chain, I succeed in inciting others to carry on its exploration, I will not say to completion—for that time, happily, must be many years distant—but so far that we may know the characteristic features of each of its districts from Novo Rossisk to Bakou, from the western crags that look down on the Black Sea to the snows of Basardjusi that catch a glimpse of the eternal fires of the Caspian shore.

I shall therefore for the present relegate to an appendix a subject that I may possibly take up elsewhere—the High-Level Routes of the Central Caucasus—and pass over in a few sentences one of the most charming expeditions I have ever made, the first ascent of the Leila, south of Suanetia, in order that I may give a more detailed account of our journey across the great forests of Abkhasia from Suanetia to Sukhum Kaleh.

Last year, Captain Powell and I were delivered from the scant hospitalities of Betsho by the kindness of Prince Atar Dadish Kilian, the representative of the old princely family who were once the rulers, and, under Russian rule, are still to some extent the feudal lords of Suanetia. The prince, who has travelled much and speaks French, received us as his guests in the residence he has fitted up in one of the hamlets of Ipari, a few miles west of Betsho. Here we enjoyed the luxuries of a Persian couch and abundant fare, and saw and learnt much that was interesting of native life.

* With the doubtful exception of Mr. Spencer, an Englishman who more than fifty years ago took a part in the Circassian struggle. (See his *Travels in the Western Caucasus*, London, 1837). Mr. Littledale crossed some years ago from the Baksan to the head of the Neskra Valley and returned.

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On Sunday there was service at the ruined church; there were revels on the green, where boys and bears tumbled and the loving-cup went freely round, followed by songs and dancing by the women of the locality in the prince's hall, where they were entertained at midnight with a substantial supper. Such revelry was not the best prelude to an early start for the beautiful peaks of the Leila, which shone on us invitingly from beyond the deep bed of the Ingur. Captain Powell and I had already made one expedition to their base, up an exquisite valley of forests and flowers which opens opposite Latal, where yellow lilies with fourteen blossoms on a single stalk grow within a few yards of the ice avalanches that tumble from a fine glacier cirque. We had been enchanted by this lovely scenery and the most romantic of all sunset views of Ushba, but bad weather had prevented us from pushing farther, and we had seen enough to feel sure that the north-western angle of the range was a better point of attack on the highest peaks. By this ridge we ascended the western peak, which, though 13,400 ft. high, is as easy of access as the Breithorn or Titlis. Owing to delays beyond our own control we were late and did not go on to the central summit, which is perhaps 100 ft. higher, and equally easy of access. Signor Sella visited it a few weeks later. As in the case of the Wetterhörner, the outer summit is that conspicuous from the valley, and commands the finest view—a panorama of the southern side of the Caucasus probably unrivalled. Suanetia, during the ascent, clothed in the green of its forests and the gold of its harvest, its crumpled ridges and hollows lit and divided by the slanting rays of the morning sunshine, its castled villages clustering along the valleys, is a picture that lives in my memory as the fairest of all mountain views. And what a fence of peaks girdled this luxuriance; from the rock comb of Otur, on the W., past the enormous dome of Elbruz, the twin towers of Ushba, the granite pinnacles round Tiktingen to the cold shadowy crests of Tetnuld and Shkara! Surely Suanetia will one day be one of the sights of the world. The travellers of that day will bring their advantages with them, but will they enjoy the same thrill as those who first saw Ushba and Tetnuld, unknown peaks, break the clouds and charge into the upper blue?

It is, perhaps, desirable to add that the native hunters who undertook to conduct their prince and us to the Leila misled him, so that, to our great regret, he could not join us on the summit, and would have misled us too had we

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followed them. They made for a high glacier pass, occasionally used by natives, which passes immediately south of the three peaks, and descends to the Skenis Skali at Lentechi. Mountaineers could easily climb the peaks from this pass, but the ground was new to the natives, and they would not venture on it.

The morning after our ascent of the Leila broke unclouded. We had got back very late. But I could not loiter away contentedly the cloudless forenoon, when so much was within easy reach out-of-doors. The short walks in Suanetia are exquisite. The sunshine was hot, but the mountain air was fresh. So I set out to stroll alone up the long shallow glen behind Ezeri to the grass-pass at its head, over which we had seen Ushba from the church three days before.

When the climb became steeper, the track became flowery. In about 1½ hrs. from the Prince's house I looked down a steep hillside on to the towers of Mazevi, while full opposite the S.W. peak of Ushba raised its tiers of precipices into the air. A little track among the rhododendrons zigzagged up the down on the right. It led to a broad meadow, the highest point of which was marked by an engineer's signal of heaped-up turf. The grass was ablaze with gentians, forget-me-nots, and pyrethrums. This spot is one of the loveliest in Suanetia, and deserves a visit from all who rest at Betsho or Ezeri. It commands a perfect view of Western Suanetia.

I should like to have spent the day where I was. But we were to start the same afternoon for the forest. We had succeeded, through the Prince, in obtaining information as to the native route to the Kodor, which I had failed to get two years before. The paths were steep, disused, hardly practicable; we were recommended rather to cross the main chain to the land of the Karatchai, W. of Elbruz, and return by another pass. None but hunters and outlaws knew the forest tracks, but two such hunters were promised us, should we require them.

Two mules were provided for our journey, a third was to be found at the last village, Lashrash; with them came the two hunters, rude children of nature, barbaric in speech and gesture, who were to be our guides. Before starting, the Prince took me aside and made two separate requests—first, that we would keep together in the forest, lest some outlaw, ignorant of our quality as his guests, should be tempted to lay violent hands on a straggler; next, that we would not

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take the hunters down as far as Sukhum Kaleh, as they were in great terror of fever. In any other direction they were to follow our bidding.

The shadows were lengthening fast as we crossed the spur that encloses the Ezeri basin and began to descend towards Pari. Pari had in 1868 been the seat of Russian government, and my companions and I were then entertained by the Cossacks quartered there. The place had not changed, the old castle of the Dadish Kilians still lay in ruins; the house where we had lodged looked only a trifle more dilapidated. On the steep ascent beyond, one of our mules gave us the first foretaste of their temper by kicking off his load. Interminable delays followed, and we were glad to halt and pitch our tents at the next small hamlet, where the few inhabitants were very friendly, and supplied us with milk, bread, and eggs.

The morning was fine and warm. We wandered round the steep hillsides, and in and out of the deep bays worn in the soft soil by the torrents. The last before Lashrash comes from a very small glacier high on the bold rock-peak that rises in the S.W. bend of the horseshoe that holds the head of the Betsho glen in its hollow, and turns its convex side to the Nakra. It would be well worth climbing. The Leila peaks look insignificant, but the gorge of the Ingur backed by the broad peak behind the Nakra, so conspicuous throughout Suanetia, is imposing. There is the breadth about the landscape that is characteristic of the southern slopes of the Caucasus. It was very warm as we climbed up the last zigzag into Lashrash. We sat in the shade of a barn and bargained for provisions, while our horsemen (as we trusted) looked for the promised mule. The people were inquisitive and saucy, upsetting some eggs we had bought, and refusing to make good the breakages.

We could not get milk at first. But Maurer went foraging, and discovered some very good women who had milk and cheese to offer at discretion. We found seats in a courtyard, where we were kindly entertained. None of the crowd about the barn followed us. Why money should fail to procure what was to be had for nothing a hundred yards off, why we should be first mobbed and jeered, and then quietly entertained, was one of the varieties of travel common in the Caucasus, and which serve as puzzles to the traveller.

In the midday blaze we walked up to the bare slope that leads to the crest overlooking the Nakra, where we were to leave my old track to the Dongusorun Pass. The descent

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was long and lovely, the path pleasant among meadows and copses, where wild fruits delayed us, and past trickling streams. Frequent parties of haycutters were at work. We went down some 2,000 ft. to the bridge, about 3,500 ft. above the sea. There were log-huts and fields of Indian corn by the water. A rough track started up the opposite hill into the beech forest.

The steep hillside was built up with roots. Such a bank one finds often in our own island. Imagine the Bisham woods above Marlow turned into a mountain 5,000 feet high, and that you have to drag two ill-tempered mules and a reasonable but inadequate jackass up them. But if there is one subject that is a weariness as much to the reader as the traveller it is surely the behaviour of baggage animals!

Slowly we struggled up the mountain under the welcome shade of superb beeches and pines. In time the track entered a niche in the hillside, and we climbed beside a foaming torrent. On the edge of a snow avalanche, in a garden of golden blossom, we made our halt. The first climb had been steep, but the next was steeper and harder; by a track a man could hardly walk up without use of hands. The beasts somehow or other heaved on our goods. Where the ground was steepest a fallen trunk often came to add to our difficulties. Still this first day we made on the whole steady progress. We topped the pines, and came into the beautiful upper fringe of birch and cream rhododendron; the view—long hidden—lay beneath, or rather behind, us. We wandered knee-deep, sometimes waist-deep, in grass and flowers, first over moist level pastures, then across unmown slopes. On a high platform, an hour short of the pass, we pitched our camp. The landscape from the tent door was, perhaps, the noblest I have ever enjoyed from a bivouac. Suanetia was spread below. The gorge of the Ingur lay on our right. The valleys were fenced in by high snow mountains. Nearest were the Leila, crowned by the double crests, from between which streams its large western glacier; Ushba rose, a grim rock castle, opposite; farthest away, but every peak clear, shone the central group, Koshtantau showing its rocky comb behind the snows of the watershed.

While we looked dark clouds swept up the Ingur, and settled on the Leila, which became a Sinai of darkness and forked lightning. We prematurely congratulated ourselves on the course of the storm. We had hardly settled for the night, when another storm that had crept up from the S.W. unseen behind the hills burst on us. For the next hour our

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little shelter was assailed by all the fury of the elements. First a gale; then a perpendicular downpour; then blinding sheets of flame and crackling discharges; then renewed onslaughts of wind, which rushed furiously against the side and ends of the tent. On the top of the storm came hailstones, which made deep indents as they struck the canvas, and filled every hollow in the ground with several inches of ice.

Our Suanetians had borrowed a *bourca*. But even the famous *bourca* was not enough for such a storm as this, and they pushed inside the tent-doors, screaming in broken Russian, like the babies they were, 'We are lost! lost! lost!' at each fresh blaze and volley of the sky's artillery.

We fell asleep to the patter of rain. When I untied the tent curtains at dawn a lovely and unexpected effect greeted us. The Leila stood out clear and cold against a sky swept of all its vapours, the peaks of the central group showed deathly white against the black skirts of the retreating storm-cloud, still fitfully flashing, and its upper edge cut sharp against the amber of the sunrise.

It was but a gentle and pleasant ascent over pasturage to a wide gap between the southern spurs of Borkushel [the Otur of Signor Sella]. The pass was marked by three blocks of stone set on end. A herd of oxen were pasturing about it. Powell attempted to record the outline of a bold glacier-streaked rock-peak in the west. In this direction the view was interesting and picturesque, but without the grace and sublimity of Suanetia.

A short glen led down towards the Neskra, whose forest depths were hidden; beyond it was a rocky snow-clad peak comparable to the Uri Rothstock; south of this stretched a wide expanse of grassy heights and hollows, over which our future path must lie. How near, and yet how far, they looked, separated from us by the deep dark valley of primeval forest!

A track fairly marked led, not down the tributary glen, but under and then over its southern ridge. Among the first pines heavy rainclouds from the S. met us, and we sheltered while our hunters went off to find some Abkhasian shepherds they saw afar off. They returned with fresh milk and a fine young goat. We declined the goat at the high price at which it was offered, and, the rain ceasing, went on our way, descending very steeply among beautiful timber and flowers. The forest grew denser, and the fallen trees and roots often checked the mules. The trees were so thick we could see little or nothing even of the sky, while we

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descended the valley along the top of a curious ridge running parallel to the torrent, but many hundred feet above it, possibly an ancient lateral moraine. In a dark hollow the donkey, which we had trusted, abandoned us. Its owner, it seemed, had not, as we understood, agreed to be at our service for our journey, but had only done us a turn for company's sake, and was now going on some mysterious business of his own down the Neskra. All our goods were put on the two mules, and they were then invited to climb, poor beasts, a wall of rocks and pine roots a laden man could hardly master. Naturally mules, baggage and all, were very soon 'confusedly hurled' down to the bottom.

The goods were hauled up, and the tedious process of reloading began for about the sixth time within two hours. The ill-conditioned hunter was making difficulties, when I suggested he might carry something himself, whereon he flung the saddle-bags to ground again and indicated he would desert us. I put my hand on my revolver, and he drew his dagger, and indulged in a torrent of words which signified he would see us no farther. Powell did his best successfully to soothe this savage, and we got on again and made our way down a wall of pines to the lowest depth and the Neskra torrent.

The stream flowed in a water-worn cleft between rocky walls linked by a bridge. On the farther side the forest was very dense, and there was no track. We descended into the bed of a small tributary, beyond which we were met by an impassable fence of fallen trees, destroyed, partly at least, by fire. I waited in charge of the mules while our men made a way into a clearing. Powell followed them and found a log-hut and a field of maize. Three natives of uncertain origin, Abkhasians, I believe, were inhabiting this lodge in the wilderness.

Our men declared it was too late to attempt the ascent, that the mules could not manage it unaided, and that next morning the foresters would help us for a small fee. So we camped by the water.

No two camps could have possibly been more dissimilar than this and our last. In place of the wild landscape and high open pasture, we were in a deep dell, surrounded by gigantic pines and tall alders, which formed so dense a canopy that the sky was invisible, and the weather comparatively indifferent. We beat down the thick carpet of ferns and made a glorious fire, round which we toasted some of the pods of maize our neighbours had brought us, and

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baked some thin loaves. While thus engaged, the noisy horseman came to me and made a speech to the effect that Englishmen and Suanetians were brothers, and that if he had drawn his dagger it was only because I had laid hands on my revolver. The little storm did some temporary good, and for forty-eight hours, till we finally lost our way in the forest, his behaviour was less boisterous.

It was a grey dawn when we set out, and the patter of rain was heard on the tree-tops, though little came through to us for the first hour or two. Path for long there was next to none. We wandered now along a torrent bed, now in and out between the enormous prostrate tree-stems. Then came the great climb to the pasture region. It was steep beyond all alpine conceptions of a horse-path; the animals got up it by hard climbing. At last we emerged from the glen the sides of which we had been scaling, and followed the undulating crest of a spur towards the upper pastures. When these opened before us we halted under a moss-draped pine, and sent a deputation to get milk and buy sheep of a shepherd whose flocks were not far off. When we were starting again one of our horsemen set fire to the moss on our pine, and in one moment the tree was in a blaze of flame from top to bottom. The mischievous knave capered with delight at his handiwork. Fortunately the tree stood apart, and the conflagration soon fell, leaving the tree singed rather than burnt.

Difficulty was now for the time over. The broad pastures afforded an easy ascent to a high platform, under which lay a small clear tarn. Just before reaching it our walking mutton gave Maurer the slip. He stalked it unsuccessfully, and it finally went off over the hills at an easy pace in the direction of its fellows, followed by its late leader.

We had nothing to do but wait. The afternoon was fine, and the prospect beautiful. We were as exactly as possible on a level with the pass of the day before. Ushba could still be seen behind it, and the Leila peaks were prominent beyond the Ingur. To the south spread a most interesting landscape, the deep valleys that converge to the gorge of the Ingur, dark in forests, out of which rose the fine edges of grassy spurs; on either side the gorge was guarded by two clusters of bold peaks, probably limestone, in the hollows under which spread small glaciers, comparable to those of the Marmolata in South Tyrol.* The nearest to us, that W. of

* On the N. side of the Caucasus the limestone rises in a continuous

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the Ingur, was united to our standpoint, or rather to a ridge still a mile in front of us, by a very long, smooth, grassy crest, the water-parting between the Ingur and Kodor basins. As yet we could see nothing of the latter, and the main chain north of us was hidden by a snowy block close at hand. Earlier in the day we had had glimpses of the glacier of the Nakra, and should doubtless but for cloud have seen the snows of Elbruz over its head.

The hours passed, and when at last Maurer returned with his captive there was only daylight enough left to go on a few hundred yards to a sheltered hollow, where rhododendron enough could be found to make a fire. The fuel was too scanty for heavy cooking, and our sheep was reprieved. I may as well confess with what result. At starting next morning the animal grew very restive, and Maurer, in a fit of temper, cut the rope, and we saw our chops scamper off for the last time.

It was a cold, exquisite morning, with the eastern breeze that in the Caucasus is a sure sign of fine weather. Our men now confessed to knowing no more of the road. We followed a faint track to the gap nearest the rock-peaks. A glorious landscape met our eyes. At our feet stretched for thirty to forty miles the basin of the Upper Kodor—once the fertile district of Darl—a valley as great as Val d'Aosta, one vast forest fenced round by lofty mountains, not, indeed such giants as hang over Suanetia, but broad glacier crests and abrupt, if blunt, granite crags and pinnacles: mountains bearing the same relation to those of the central group as the Titlis and Galenstock range bear to the Bernese Alps. It was not so much any individual peak that fixed the eye as the glory of the whole landscape—the rolling leagues of forest, the broad hills bright in the early sunbeams, the flashes of light in the depths, here a cliff, there a sinuous reach of river, nowhere any sign of human habitation. Great poets often imagine scenery transcending ordinary experience. Shelley, I think, would have been pleased to introduce the Kodor, as it lay in its primal loveliness on that summer morning, into his 'Prometheus,' and would have found it difficult to add to its splendour.

There was no track visible leading down the glen below us, but a thousand feet below sheep were feeding. We

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line, broken by gorges parallel to the main chain; on the S., in isolated blocks, more or less in a line, but not continuous. The same arrangement exists on the two sides of the Alps.

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found three shepherds, Abkhasians, with a primitive, half-Greek air—as Greeks may have been 3,000 years ago—who were communicative. There was no way at all, they told us, from where we were down into the valley; we must return to the crest, and keep along a lofty spur level, or nearly so, for a long distance, which ran parallel to the main valley of the Kodor. We promised one of the shepherds a knife and a reward if he would take us down to the river. He insisted on being paid beforehand, and, remembering the good faith of our foresters on the previous day, I rashly consented. We remounted to the crest. The walk along it was enchanting. Flowers at our feet—crocuses and gentians—space and sunshine on every side, below the rolling leagues of forest hemmed in by the high fence of peaks and glaciers, except to the west, where the blue spurs fell towards the Euxine. As we advanced the source and upper glen of the Kodor were added to the view. The pines and birches ceased some miles below a small glacier that flowed from under a blunt castellated rock-peak. The largest glacier in sight was W. of the Kluchor Pass, a broad sheet of ice we saw afterwards very clearly from the Black Sea, somewhat similar in character to the Adamello glaciers, and very accessible. Between the Nakra and the head of the Kodor rose a cluster of rough granitic summits some 12,000 feet in height.

After about two miles of this high terrace-walk our crest fell more rapidly, the first trees—noble firs and beeches—were met, and a few hundred yards lower we were buried in the forest again. The path disappeared, the ground was steep, but there was no difficulty for man or beast in reaching the banks of a stream, a slender tributary of the Kodor, which had long flowed through a glen on our left. We lunched in a lonely dale beside its water. I retired to bathe, and on my return found the shepherd had disappeared. We had already had to argue rather forcibly with him to induce him to keep his promise, and now he ran, leaving us to find or miss the bridge over the Kodor. The abrupt appearances and disappearances of Caucasians in their native wilds often remind one of the behaviour of Homeric deities.

We were close to the main valley, and a level, well-marked path led us down its left bank, under the deep shadow of beech and pine, until it trended uphill, where a tributary stream had laid bare a broad track with its floods. It was natural enough the path should cease in the torrent bed, and beyond it we recovered something of a forest track. Here and there we came on rude hunters' lairs. There was just

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encouragement to push on. 'Niet daroga.' 'There is no road; the horses are lost—we are lost!' howled our Suanetians. 'Jest daroga.' 'Here is the road,' we exclaimed from time to time with a confidence we did not feel. We crossed with very great difficulty the deep bed of a second stream. We fought on through thorns and bracken waist or shoulder deep. We literally hacked away with axes and daggers through the brushwood, until we were brought to a standstill by ground too rough for animals.

At last, as dusk drew near, we came to the river brink, where a steep impassable cliff fell directly on the water. Further advance was impossible; to scale the hillside was a tiresome task for a well-girt unladen man, out of the question for an ill-saddled laden horse. We sent Maurer to use the remaining daylight in prospecting. He came back despondent. We camped in a dingly dell, above a tangled copse of elders, where there was hardly room for a tent among the rank growths. It was not a nice camp, and I was very stiff and tired, not from distance, for we had only walked downhill all day, but from the ceaseless worry of the pathless forest. There were insects flopping about in everything. However, we slept till dawn. The Suanetians were keen on bridging the river. Powell, too, favoured and energetically laboured to carry out the proposal. An hour or more was passed in cutting down a tree, flinging it nearly across the boiling torrent, and then seeing it carried down.

That plan having failed, we resolved to return to the spot where the good path had failed us the previous afternoon, and search thereabouts till some way over the water was found. The five-verst map indicated a crossing, and though it had proved thoroughly untrustworthy since we left Suanetia, it was possible that here in the Kodor it might be right, at least in this indication. The forest was so intricate that we found it no easy matter to retrace our steps, but we succeeded. In three hours we were back at the path. At first we searched in vain for any crossing among a labyrinth of water channels and islets; but after some time, guided by a clearing, which was probably an old track half overgrown, we came on a bridge formed of a single monstrous trunk concealed behind a thick-grown island. How were the mules to get over? The Suanetians made a mad attempt to lead them over the trunk, but the wiser beasts declined, and roped with our alpine rope they swam the swift waters most pluckily. While the luggage was reloaded we halted in a very delightful spot, under an enormous beech, beside the

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dancing Kodor, a bright stream to which glaciers do not contribute enough to discolour its waters.

What sort of track we should find on the right bank of the Kodor was now the question. After more than one steep little fall and rise in and out of the gullies of streamlets a path barely discernible led along the brow of the high bank overhanging the river, and under the shadow of a vast beech forest. So long as we were under the beeches our way was smooth and easy. But after two hours the track, such as it was, descended to the side of the torrent, and was from time to time effaced by its vagaries or smothered in dense copses. Boughs flapped in our faces, while loose stones turned under our feet. It was very warm and wearisome. The junction of the valleys where we should join the paths from the Kluchor and the Nachar seemed to recede as we advanced. At last the track went up among fallen trunks that had to be turned somehow by our mules. We crossed a meadow, where the shoulder-high flowering grass was shaded by walnuts and wild fruit trees, and rich in raspberry bushes. A rude hunter's shanty was the only trace of habitation. Another short climb, and we began to drop through the thickest hazel copses. We had crossed the tongue of the hills, and were approaching the Klutch torrent.

We came suddenly on its brink, where it flowed in swift eddies between high banks, a broad bridgeless stream, too deep for a man on foot to wade easily. While we were taking counsel a train of unladen baggage horses came in sight on the opposite side, conducted by two natives, picturesque figures, in bright-coloured clothes, and with bashliks (draped like a Phrygian hood) over their heads to keep off the hot sunshine. We shouted to them to bring over their animals for us to cross on, and one came over. But hardly had he engaged in conversation with our wild guide, than the latter managed to convey some insult, which resulted in the horseman shouting out, 'Suanetian asses' in Russian for our benefit, and plunging back into the stream. This was more than I had patience for, and I jumped hastily into the water and arrested him. A little further parley sufficed to arrange matters, and we all rode over the water in turns. No sooner had we arrived on the other side than our wild men began to grumble again, and express their intention to go back. 'We want to go home. We are lost; the mules are lost! Here is Kodor.' That was about as far as their Russian carried them. We disregarded this talk, and got off again. Our troubles from the absence of path were now brought

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to an unexpectedly sudden end. We found a good narrow cart road, obviously constructed by engineers, running along a broad and open valley. We rode for many miles over gentle slopes and level meadows, varied with wild flowers, and covered with fruit-trees—pears, golden and purple plums, and cherries. But nowhere was there a sign of any inhabitant. All this wealth of forest and pasture, of fruit and flower, was wasted on a few bears or the rare passer-by, the Tartar from the Karatchai, who fills his sheep-skin hat as he passes with the plums that drop from the branches and colour the ground beneath them.

Below a step in the valley, as the sun sank behind the western hills, we pitched our camp. It was a gorgeous evening, and the folds of the mountains were rich with southern bloom. High on the W. some crags bore snow, but the landscape was no longer that of the central chain. The reach of the Kodor we were in might answer to the basin of Aosta with respect to the Pennine ridge. The mosquitoes were very troublesome. Next morning in less than 2 hrs. we were at the long-expected Shkaltra. But before reaching it we enjoyed an exquisite vista up a long glen to the S.E., densely forested, and closed by a glacier and a fantastic rock-castle, the last of the isolated limestone snow-peaks, lying between the basins of the Ingur and the Kodor. A few horses were seen grazing; then a field of Indian corn came into view, and at last, of a sudden, a stone-built house of one storey and two rooms. This was the much-talked-of Shkaltra, where we had been led to expect Cossacks, post-horses, and 'good accommodation for man and beast.'

The house was well enough in itself, but its only occupant was an unfortunate Georgian who could hardly walk twenty yards, so reduced was he by malarial fever. There were no horses procurable, and now, suddenly, our horsemen struck. The mules were hardly unladen when they roared out in more determined tones than ever, 'Home we go!' We represented that they were sent by their Prince to go where we ordered, at all events as far as the spot where we could find substitutes, and that they would have no present until we reached such a spot. But this time the men were in earnest. It was clear they were in an honest fright; whether of fever, or of civilisation, or of the unknown generally, who shall say? At any rate, they acted promptly and with great decision.

I saw what was coming, and hastily decided that it might be dangerous, and was certainly not worth while to

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oppose force if the men chose to ride off without money or food into the wilderness. Of course the presence of the Georgians' packhorses aided us in coming to this decision. A minute or two later the Suans leapt on their mules' backs and rode off at a hand gallop, shouting and screaming in triumph as they passed out of sight round the first corner. It was the last we saw of them. They had no food, for our meal was exhausted. Doubtless, however, they did not starve. The Caucasian, in the first place, can travel on less than most men; and they would first rob the maize-fields and fill their pouches with pods and plums, then beg milk and cheese from the shepherds, who live the whole summer through without tasting bread.

The peace that succeeded the departure of our grunting, grumbling savages was at first a relief; but our feelings became more mixed when the facts of the situation were fully revealed. Powell, knowing no native tongue, had been able hitherto to hold but very imperfect communication with the Georgians; else, indeed, our journey might have taken a different turning.

Now, through the sick solitary of Shkaltra, who talked Russian, we learnt that the Georgians had no intention, or indeed power, of descending further, for they were under a contract with a working-party of Russian officials engaged in continuing the mule-road over the Kluchor Pass into the Teberda, and were bound to start on their return the same night. Had we known this earlier, we might have gone to the camp, and made it a base for mountain excursions.

Our position was awkward. The Russian moved about listlessly, expecting his next fever bout; the Georgians lay on their backs, and scarcely deigned to utter monosyllabic gutturals between their yawns. There was nothing for it but to tramp on to Lata, 5 hrs. down the valley, and trust that it might not prove a second Shkaltra. We set out in the heat of the day, yet I never felt heat less at so low an elevation (about 2,000 feet). Whether it was the dryness of the air, or the beauty of the landscape, or the frequent shade of the western hillside along which the path was cut, we did not suffer, and kept up a good pace despite a heavy pack which Powell good-humouredly carried more than two-thirds of the way, Maurer and the rest of the luggage having been left behind at Shkaltra.

The straight upper basin of the Kodor ends at Shkaltra. Henceforth the river bends more to the S., and runs in a winding course through a narrow valley or open gorge,

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wooded to perfection, for some 15 miles, until, bending west again, it opens out as Lata is approached.

Two miles short of our destination we met a party of Suans mounting into the hills. The leader wore a very handsome dagger, which attracted our notice. He told us he was one of the Dadish Kilians' retainers, and Powell thought it a good opportunity to send a note to the Prince reporting the manner of our horsemen's departure. He had just finished writing it, and was holding it out to the Suanetian, when an evil-faced Mingrelian, who was walking with, but not one of, the party, suddenly stepped forward and, snatching the piece of paper, tore it into a hundred fragments. On the Suanetian remonstrating he drew his thin dagger, which glittered like a snake's tongue in the sunshine, and stood scowling. The Suanetian carefully kept between him and Powell, and nothing more came of this curious incident. We could not make it out, nor could the Russians to whom we told the story explain this man's unaccountable but obviously very real passion, except by the suggestion that he had eaten too much of the intoxicating wild honey which is said to be found in these valleys. Possibly the Mingrelian thought the paper contained some evil charm? It was written, I should say, in French, and the natives had no clue to its contents.

At Lata, again, there is no town. The station consists of two cottages in a common enclosure, a ruined barrack, and a rough shanty where the Cossacks and natives attached found shelter. A field of gigantic maize lay at the rear. Elsewhere nature had resumed her rights; vines ran wild, fruit-trees poured their red or golden crop into the lap of the earth unregarded, the broad clear river danced along over its stony bed through impenetrable thickets, while beyond it the hills rose in such wooded slopes as poets dream of and landscape gardeners caricature. Far away to the W. the white crags of a limestone gorge marked the gate of the hills and shut out this earthly paradise from any sight of the sea.

A topographer—not, however, one of those attached to the new Survey—was living in one of the cottages, and as soon as he returned from his work entertained us hospitably. In the meantime we were taken charge of by a good woman, the wife of a subordinate in charge of the post, whose husband was also away. He had but lately recovered from a bad fall caused by his horse shying on meeting a bear suddenly while coming home late one night from Sukhum.

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But a few paces further, and he would himself have been thrown over the precipice and killed.

Our object was now attained. The mystery of the great forest, which Grove, Moore, and I had so often talked over, was at last solved. I had learnt what truth underlay the strange tales current in the Caucasus. If we had not met with the wild men of the woods living apart, without villages, clothes or firearms, clad in skins and feeding on berries, of whom M. Jukoff had repeated to us the legend, we had visited the secret lodges of the wilderness and their denizens. If we had not been as fortunate as Mr. Spencer, who saw chamois looking down on him from every crag, as numerous as the squirrels in an English park, we had had frequent proof of the proximity of bears. If we had ascertained that the forest paths were not impassable—when found, we had learned well the difficulty of finding them. Between Suanetia and Lata we had spent six days. With competent guides Shkaltra might be reached from Lashrash in three days, and Sukhum Kaleh in five days. This entrance to Suanetia may be of service to travellers, like ourselves, anxious to vary their route out of the mountains, or to link the Western with the Central Caucasus. The valley of the Kodor is beautiful and unique in its desolate richness. The Kluchor pass opens a fresh group to explorers. Mountaineers may use its road and that of the Maruch pass, farther west, as bases. It is possible to cross with horses from one to the other on the north side of the main chain. M. de Dechy has photographed in one of the northern valleys, and his views show peaks and scenery well worth attention. Still further west lie the unknown wilds of the Zelentshuk, where Mr. and Mrs. Littledale, the adventurous pursuers of rare game, who have lately traversed Central Asia, went three years ago in quest of the Aurochs—an animal which seems always to put at least one mountain between itself and its admirers.

Lata is notorious for fever. Here my friends, the party of 1875, believed they caught the illness which, in one case at least, inflicted an injury that was never repaired. The Russian barracks were deserted partly on account of the loss among the men quartered in them.

We were kept at Lata two nights, and then made a forced march (or in my case ride) of 56 versts to Sukhum Kaleh and civilisation, lunching on the way at Zebelda with two hermit monks who now occupy the deserted fort.

The next morning a steamer, on which I found more than one English acquaintance, took us to Batum. The voyage

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on a cloudless day under the seaward skirts of the great chain, the peaks and glaciers of which are visible from ship-board, was most enjoyable. At Batum I parted with much regret from Captain Powell, whose knowledge of Russian and genial companionship—to say nothing of his energy and experience in camp—had been of the greatest value to the search-party, and above all to myself on my farther journey.*

The High-Level Routes of the Caucasus.

Early explorers soon learnt that the horse-passes N. of the Central Caucasus are many of them dull. High-level routes were greatly wanted, and have now been found. Taking Karaoul, accessible from the S. by easy passes, as well as from the N. valleys, as the most central spot in the chain, high-level routes W. may be made as follows:—

I. (1) The Dychsu (or Shkara) Pass to the Bezingi Glacier.
(2) The Zanner Pass to Mulach in Suanetia.
(3) Mr. Mummery's Pass from the Thuber Glacier to the Gvalda Glacier.
(4) The Cheteen Tau Pass to the Shichildi Glacier, the upper Baksan, and the foot of Elbruz.

Travellers who wish to keep above the tree-level may combine with the Zanner a pass from the upper névé of the Zanner Glacier over the spur of Tiktingen to the Thuber, discovered by Mr. Cockin this year.

II. (1) The Ullu-auz Pass from Karaoul to Dumala.
(2) The Mishirgi Pass to the Mishirgi Glacier.
(3) A pass to be made N. of our Saluinan Chiran Pass† to the Chaourtu Glacier and Chegem Valley.
(4) Either of the passes recently made to the Adyrsu; thence to Urusbieh, or over
(5) A pass, easy but new, to the Adylsu and Elbruz.

A high-level route E. from Karaoul may be made as follows:—

I. (1) The Stule-vsek (horse pass) to Styr Digor.
(2) A *new* pass from the Karagam Glacier to the Cea Glacier.
(3) Our pass from the Cea Glacier to Mamisson Road.

Or—

II. (1) Karaoul over Pasi Mta to Rion and Gebi.
(2) Over Gebi-vsek to Styr Digor or Gurdzie-vsek to Karagam Glacier, and on as in first route.

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* A very interesting article on 'The Abkhasian Insurrection' will be found in the late Mr. Gifford Palgrave's *Essays on Eastern Questions*. The writer was vice-consul at Sukhum for a short time. Sukhum is now a station of the Anglo-Indian telegraph, and two English telegraphists are stationed there. It has a fair hotel.

† I consider this pass, which I described in detail to the Club, too hazardous for general use—at any rate in the direction in which we took it—owing to the constant fall of stones on the W. side.

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