

MOUNTAINEERING IN SOUTHERN COLORADO.

BY PERCY W. THOMAS.

(Read before the Alpine Club, Tuesday, May 5, 1891.)

IT was not with climbing intentions that I went out to Colorado last August. I went in the interest of the San Bernardo Syndicate, the possessor of a very promising silver mine in the rich mineral district of San Juan. My brother Wyan accompanied me.

We sailed from Liverpool in the *Teutonic* on August 6, when she made her 'record' passage from Queenstown to Sandy Hook in (to be exact) 5 days 19 hours 5 minutes, and on the evening of the 16th of the same month we reached Denver, after an uneventful journey from Chicago through the monotonous plains of Nebraska. I shall not attempt to describe Denver, and will only say that I found it a far finer city than I anticipated, and there can be no doubt that it is yet only in its infancy.

Our bedroom at the Windsor Hotel commanded a view of the Rockies, with Pike's Peak, 14,147 feet, the dominating point; and I confess that this first view of the range did not impress me. The peaks, though lofty, running up to 14,000 feet and more, do not present any striking variety of form; and I missed the distinctive individuality that belongs to most of the well-known peaks of the Alps. We spent a day in Denver, and then took the night train for Montrose, the junction for Ouray and the Red Mountain district. Our route lay over the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad—'the greatest scenic line of the world,' as its advertisements proclaim; and we certainly had a very beautiful and interesting journey. We passed through the Grand Cañon of the Arkansas and the Royal Gorge before we were up, but coming back we made a point of going through them by daylight. The railroad runs over a narrow track, the Arkansas River flowing alongside, and huge rock precipices tower upwards on either hand. Emerging from the cañon the line passes through a rocky, barren-looking country, not very interesting, up to Salida, but soon after commences the ascent of the famous Marshall Pass. The line, by a wonderful piece of engineering, winds up the mountain side in very steep curves and zigzags; and as evidence of severe grading I may mention that we passed a little watering station, each time of course at a higher elevation, no less

than four times. The summit of the pass is 10,852 feet above sea-level. The descent on the other side is nearly as steep, and looks alarmingly so for a railway train to go down; but a pilot engine is sent ahead to clear the track, and the train follows slowly after. Accidents occur sometimes notwithstanding these precautions—indeed, one happened a few days after we went over, resulting in loss of life; but they usually befall freight trains, where less care is exercised.

Beyond Gunnison is the entrance to the Black Cañon, which in my opinion is even grander than the Grand Cañon. The rocks are of strange form, and very precipitous; and, indeed, anyone fond of rock-climbing for its own sake might find plenty of occupation here, and of a pretty stiff kind, too! The show rock is what is known as the Currecanti Needle, which stands out by itself in the centre of the cañon, and has a very striking appearance. An ex-sailor who was working on the railroad—an Englishman, I believe—once climbed to the summit and left a flagstaff there as a record of his ascent, and he is said to have been the only man who ever succeeded in getting up.

At Montrose we changed trains, and I began to realise that we might by-and-by find something in the way of mountain scenery more in harmony with my ideas. Before us, and rather to our left, rose the mountains of the Uncompahgre group—a jagged ridge of striking rock peaks standing out grandly against the clear sky of a glorious summer's evening. I doubt if this range has been explored much. I could learn little about it, but the distant view made me think that amongst those queer-looking rock-teeth might be found a climb or two worthy of the name.

We were entering the Red Mountain district, famous in mining annals; and Ouray, our destination, combines the attractions of a mining camp and health resort. It is very prettily situated, steep mountains surrounding it on three sides, and its elevation is 7,640 feet above sea-level.

To our great pleasure, Mr. Mason, the managing director of the San Bernardo, was awaiting our arrival at the station, and we found that he had made all arrangements for our journey to the mines next day. And a long drive it was, some 75 miles over the most abominable roads I have ever seen out of Spain; and the extraordinary part was that one pair of horses did it, but, as Mr. Mason took care to explain, they were not the Company's, having been borrowed for the occasion from a neighbour!

We left Ouray at daybreak, and were in at Trout Lake, our destination, about half-past seven that evening. The scenery we passed through was not, on the whole, very interesting, but the weather was lovely, if a trifle hot.

They were busy building a new railroad along this route, which had brought a number of very rough (or 'tough,' as the term is there) customers into the district, and quarrels and shooting affrays were of ordinary occurrence, while, only a few days after we went through, the stage coach with the mails was 'held up' and robbed within a short distance of the place where we had lunched. We were never molested, and I would say here that, rough as the country is, I think it a mistake for strangers to go about armed, for one has a much better chance of not being interfered with if one does not make a profession of carrying a weapon. Next day we were able to realise what a charming spot we had come to. Trout Lake is 9,700 feet above sea-level, and the Lake is as beautiful a little lake as any I have seen. Hemmed in on three sides by the mountains of the San Miguel Sierra, brilliant in their colouring, with a pine forest growing to the water's edge on one side, and meadows bright with flowers sloping upwards on the other, it is a spot to be remembered pleasantly for all time. I think it is the purity of the Colorado atmosphere which lends sometimes a colouring, the like of which I have not seen in the Alps, and when the evening light is shadowing the peaks there comes over them a soft blue hue, which is exquisite in its fairy beauty. Our quarters at the little inn, which is kept by Mr. Chess. Greenwood, a hero of the great Civil War, and his wife, were very comfortable, if primitive, and our hosts did all they could to make us feel at home.

For some days my time was pretty well taken up with the affairs of the mine, but I made one ascent with our foreman, Mr. Murphy, to the highest point of the San Bernardo Mountain. The view was a fine and extensive one, and it gave me a fair idea of the lie of the land, and enabled me to locate Mount Wilson, the highest point in the San Juan, 14,309 feet, according to Nell's map, published in 1889; though some authorities give a slightly lower elevation. But I was most attracted by a marvellous rock-tooth rising out of the end of the ridge of Sunshine Mountain. That, my companion informed me, was the Lizard's Head, but he could tell me no more beyond that someone 'claimed' to have been up it. Even at that distance it looked formidable enough, but where man has been man can go, and if I had

the chance I determined to make its nearer acquaintance, provided I could find a suitable companion.

In this I was fortunate. Mr. N. G. Douglass, our second in command at the mines, I discovered to be an ardent sportsman (sporting in the Rockies means being a climber too), and quite ready for anything I proposed. He suggested taking rifles, as big game—bear, deer, and mountain sheep—was often met with where we were going; and so, armed in this way, and taking blankets and provisions on a led horse in case we had to camp out, we started up the gulch to the left of the San Bernardo Mountain. Some delay arose at starting, and we did not get off till 5.40 A.M. We continued up the gulch, and at its head passed through a pine wood and down again into meadow land, bordered on the opposite side from which we had entered by the long ridge of Sunshine Mountain, with the wonderful Lizard's Head standing up against the sky line at its extreme edge on our left.

We tethered our steed, breakfasted, and shouldering our rifles, made our way across the meadow towards a point which would bring us nearest our mountain.

On the opposite side of the meadow, we entered a fir wood again, and here we went softly, for there were traces of deer; but beyond traces we saw nothing, and we got above timber line without sighting game. We were nearing the Lizard's Head now, and at each moment it looked more formidable till, as we got up almost to its foot, our chance of making a successful ascent seemed as remote as anything could well be.

And now, as we mounted, I began to experience, in a degree which I had never previously felt, even at much greater altitudes in the Alps, a most inconvenient difficulty in breathing. As a rule, I have not been troubled by this. Occasionally, when out of training, I have experienced the feeling during the first expedition of a season, but only to a trifling extent. I was not in bad condition in the Rockies, and although, hitherto, I had always believed that shortness of breath and want of proper training were one and the same, I am now inclined to modify my opinion to the extent of admitting that climate may have something to do with it, and I am the more disposed to think so from the fact that I heard many of the natives complain of the same inconvenience.

We had no trouble in getting right up to the foot of the Lizard's Head, but beyond the foot we got no nearer to the summit. The sides are perfectly precipitous, and only at one

point did it seem possible to get on to the rock at all. We were able to make our way round the base on three sides to the ridge running northwards towards Sunshine Mountain; but it did not seem to me altogether a safe proceeding, as the rock is composed of a limestone formation, and is crumbling away, as was evidenced by the quantity of *débris* strewn round its base.

I was making for a big boulder on the ridge when an exclamation from Mr. Douglass made me look round. And a grand sight met me. Rising straight up from the ridge, sharply defined against the bright blue sky, towered the Lizard's Head, on this side absolutely precipitous from base to summit, for perhaps a sheer 600 feet or more. But one mountain that I know of can bear any comparison to it, and that mountain is the Aiguille du Géant. I was the more surprised at this grand appearance, as, although the mountain looks very fine from other points of view, there was nothing to lead me to expect a sight so imposing, and I think Mr. Douglass, who had never been up there before, was quite as much impressed as I was. We sat gazing for a time, and I bitterly regretted not having our camera, a mishap to which, unfortunately, prevented our taking any photographs while we were away.

We continued after awhile to follow the ridge towards Sunshine Mountain, for we found some traces of big horn or Rocky Mountain sheep, and were in hopes of getting within range of one of those wary animals, for one has the best chance by stalking the quarry from above.

We spent the afternoon in this way; but, although we found plenty of fresh tracks, we never got a shot, which after all was perhaps fortunate, as I discovered subsequently that the fine for killing one of these animals at that season of the year amounts to \$50.

We had a good scramble, and when we got back to Trout Lake towards evening, we felt we had earned our supper.

The next few days were spent in visiting various mines, and although I can assure you that I got through a considerable amount of pretty stiff climbing through drifts and shafts, stopes and winzes, a description would be out of place here. My mission, however, took me through some very beautiful scenery, and over some high passes, and in the course of a few days I gained a very fair idea of the topography of the district.

The Lizard's Head having baulked me, my thoughts turned towards Mount Wilson.

We had tried, not very successfully, to gather some information as to the best means of attacking the peak, and it was thought we should learn something more definite if we rode over to the hot springs of West Dolores, on the other side of the range, where the inhabitants of the district do most resort to be cured of rheumatism.

Accordingly, on the afternoon of August 30, we left Trout Lake, our cavalcade consisting of Mr. Douglass, my brother, and myself.

After following the road to Rico for a short distance, we branched off across the meadows, over a faint bridle path, and after awhile rode through a pine wood, and then descended into a narrow ravine or gulch, through which a stream from Mount Wilson runs, on its way to the valley. At this point we had a very fine view of the massif of our mountain, which with its immediate neighbours, fine peaks, but apparently nameless, and with the wonderful Lizard's Head rising at its flank, formed a panorama worthy to compare with many a one in the Alps.

It looked to me as if a camp at the head of this gulch would form an admirable base from which to attack the mountain; but it also looked as if the climb from this side might prove a stiff one. In the event of failure from Dolores I made a mental note of this.

We continued our ride up some steep grass banks, and as we mounted the view became more extensive. It was lovely weather, and as the afternoon wore on into evening the lights and shadows became as beautiful as anything I have seen. We had passed into an open park-like country—a 'mesa,' as it is termed in Colorado—bordered on either hand by pine forests, which by their sombre colouring contrasted pleasantly with the golden hues of the meadow land and the soft blue tints upon the distant mountains. My brother compared the view to one he was familiar with in Perthshire, and anyhow I found it very beautiful. The sun was setting as we rode up to the collection of rough log huts forming the settlement of West Dolores. The place was full, but they managed to give us a room to ourselves, containing a couple of shakedown, one of which my brother and I shared, while Mr. Douglass took the other. We had a capital view of Mount Wilson from our cabin, and Mr. Douglass and I had a good look at it. I saw, as I thought, two distinct routes by which an ascent would be feasible; but the local people laughed us to scorn, and declared that no man could climb such steep rocks, and that if we made

the attempt they 'guessed' they would be seeing us back there if we didn't get benighted. They all persisted that we should never get up, and the balance of opinion was that the only chance was to circumvent the mountain by way of a mine called the Silver Pick, and one gentleman went so far as to declare that that was all right, as he himself had been to the top that way. As this same gentleman subsequently said he had been up the Lizard's Head, but, when pressed, admitted it was only 'as far as one can ride'—an ascent on a par with the Frenchman's ascent of Mont Blanc, 'jusqu'au Montanvert'—I am inclined to discount the statement. They so confused us with advice that Mr. Douglass whispered to me that we had better 'gang our ain gait,' and expressed himself quite willing to try any route I chose to select.

That evening we had an amusing experience. There was but one room to sit in, and here the miners and all of us congregated. There was chewing and spitting galore—we had got used to that by this time—smoking, and some card playing, but what amused us were the stories. Told in the quaint style they were, they were highly entertaining. Each one became more wonderful than its predecessor, till by the time we got on to the subject of bears we were prepared for pretty well anything, and in the States when once you get on to bear stories Ananias has to 'take a back seat.' With the prospect of an early start we turned in betimes; but in the small hours I woke to hear the rain pattering down on the roof of our shanty in a most distressingly persistent manner. This continued all the morning; but in the afternoon a rapid clearance took place, and Mount Wilson looked out from the mist, thickly powdered with fresh snow.

We had an idle day. My brother tried his hand with the trout, while Mr. Douglass and I amused ourselves by working out what our mine ought to do, a rather fascinating employment! The weather improved still further towards evening, and our prospects for next day brightened considerably.

We had another amusing evening, and an old-time miner became eloquent on the subject of his Australian experiences in the early days of the gold rush, which were rather interesting. We ended up with a most luxurious swim in the hot bath.

We were up before 6 next morning, and were glad to find the weather fair. We breakfasted, saddled our horses,

and were off by 6.30. For a time it was quite chilly as our route kept us in shadow. My brother left us before long to return to Trout Lake, whilst we rode on towards Mount Wilson. There was no trail to speak of, and in trying to find the best way, we had to lead our horses uphill through long grass, up to our knees, covered with hoar frost, which saturated our clothing in an uncomfortable manner. We then threaded our way through a pine forest; but with the great massif of Mount Wilson rising high above us, we could not go far wrong, and in due time we emerged into the open, and our route became clear. A few deer bounded by us, and were lost to sight in the forest; but we did not get a shot. At the limit of timber line we dismounted, and tethered our horses, and then commenced the serious part of the expedition.

We had a long look as we drew near to the foot, and my belief in the feasibility of the routes I had picked out increased. We both thought a route by the arête best worth trying, so we made for that. We commenced the ascent over loose shale, where it was a case of taking two steps forward and losing one, a tedious proceeding, and before we reached the arête I again felt that difficulty in breathing I had before experienced in these parts. However, we were up at last, and then the real climb commenced. I had always fancied that climbing in the Rockies would be mere child's play by comparison with the Alps, but here I found something more nearly akin to one or two well-known rock climbs than I expected. Indeed the climb along that arête, without presenting any real difficulty, was not to be despised, and had not Mr. Douglass been a good and plucky climber we might never have got to the top. Several places required climbing, and once we had to traverse some smooth rocks *à cheval*. The climb seemed long from the point where we took the arête to the top, and Mr. Douglass more than once when we reached a false top and found we had further to go expressed the opinion that it was 'a very discouraging mountain.' But the goal was reached at last, and at 12.40 we stood upon the summit. Unfortunately at this moment the weather, which had been threatening for some time, turned bad, and a cloud swept down upon us and it began to snow a little. Most of the view which I had been particularly anxious to see was obliterated, but here it was not as it is in the Alps on similar occasions, for, in spite of the mist, on one side, we got an almost uninterrupted view of the far-off plains of Arizona and the Great Divide

in Utah. There was no trace on the summit of any human being having been there before, so we erected a cairn and left our names, while Mr. Douglass planted a staff where I expect it will remain undisturbed for many a day. As we were fixing this staff it hummed exactly as I have heard ice-axes do in a storm, although a plain stick without any metal on it at all. It was somewhat chilly up there, so we did not rest long. We followed the arête for a short distance and then we thought we would try to descend by a couloir not far below the summit, which I had marked previously as a possible route up. For a while it went very well, but about half-way down it narrowed, the walls on either side rising smooth and perpendicular above us. Still the descent was not difficult, but it presently became troublesome from the fact that a stream flowing out of the mountain side was coursing down the couloir, and as it was only possible to descend where the water was coming down we got pretty well drenched. One or two nasty bits it required determination to descend, for the rocks were steep and the water leapt over them in quite a considerable fall. It needed care, too, for the rocks were worn smooth by the action of the water, and were very slippery in places. And here, again, I must bear testimony to Mr. Douglass's pluck and climbing powers, for to one who was not accustomed to Alpine work this descent might very easily have become alarming. We got down without mishap, but I felt glad that we had not selected that route for the ascent.

We soon rejoined our horses, saddled and mounted them, and rode off towards Trout Lake, leaving our friends at Dolores to think what they pleased about us. Search-parties, as far as I am aware, are not organised in the Rockies on the smallest pretext, so that it really did not very much matter whether they 'guessed' we were lost or not.

The weather had become beautifully fine again, and we had a charming ride back, except for a portion of the way, where we had to force our way through the forest. Mr. Green, in his book on 'The Selkirks,' has recently described the trouble attending this; and I can endorse what he says, and sympathise with the annoyance he experienced, although our difficulties were as nothing to his. It is perfectly wonderful, though, what these mountain horses can do. We saw more deer, but we had no time to go out of our way to stalk game; and as it was nearly dark before we rode into Trout Lake.

This ended my mountaineering in Colorado, such as it was, with the exception of a ride over the range by the pass between Telluride and Ouray, 13,000 feet or so above sea-level. This ride is worth mentioning on account of the splendid view we got of the great mountains of the district, with Mount Wilson standing out grandly as the monarch of the range. The pass is a nasty one for horses, and accidents on it are not rare.

We had quite a race to catch the train at Ouray, and I am sorry to say that the inducements held out to our steeds to hurry up resulted in the annihilation of two umbrellas and a fishing-rod! However, we got there in time, which was lucky, for had we had to delay our journey a day longer we should have come in for a bad railway accident.

The impression gained by my brief experience was that the San Juan district of Colorado is quite worth a visit by an organised mountaineering party, and without guides. There are plenty of high mountains, for in the State of Colorado alone there are some 130 measured peaks, ranging in height from 13,500 feet to 14,500 feet, the highest point being the dominating peak of the Sierra Blanca, 14,464 feet. The climate is delightful, the scenery is lovely, and in August and September there is very little rain as a rule. There are not the grand conquests to be made that there are in the Caucasus, the Andes, the Himalayas, and elsewhere; but there are many untrodden peaks, and, I will venture to say, many an interesting rock scramble, while if any member of the Club wishes to cover himself with glory let him climb, if he can, the Lizard's Head.

But it is not for climbing alone that a visit to Colorado is interesting. You meet in the mining districts with a state of society similar to that described so vividly by Bret Harte. Life is held very cheap; the majesty of the law has hardly a proper terror for evil-doers; crime as often as not goes unpunished. All men are accounted equal. And yet with all their peculiarities I like these Colorado folk. Going, as my brother and I did, prepared to accept the doctrine that one man is as good as another, we got on famously. We met with courtesy, almost invariably, and I am bound to say I found something very refreshing in this spirit of independence on the part of all, from the humblest upwards. We had to shut our eyes and ears to a good deal, but for that we were prepared.

We met with one or two amusing (in one case, perhaps, even alarming) incidents, of which I think the following

worth relating. We were sitting one evening in the saloon adjoining the hotel at Trout Lake, when there appeared at the door an extremely formidable-looking individual. He was dressed in rough mining costume, with the inevitable slouch hat and trousers tucked into the boots. Villain was written on his face, which was red and bloated, with eyes suggestive of an undue attachment to the flowing bowl. He stalked in with hardly a 'how d'ye do'—they say 'how do you do' in Colorado instead of 'good morning' or 'good evening'—and sat himself down. I saw the others, who were mostly miners from the San Bernardo, did not seem to much appreciate his company, and they went on with the conversation without taking any particular notice of his entry.

But very soon he put in his word, and with statements of such a kind that they seemed to be made only with the view of provoking contradiction, which out there is usually the prelude to a row. At last, on some unusually glaring misstatement being made, my brother in a rash moment ventured to differ somewhat decidedly. At this our visitor, like the Ancient Mariner, 'fixed him with his glittering eye,' and, after watching him thus for a little, rose, and touching him on the shoulder, somewhat to my consternation, said, 'I'll thank ye to come outside.' Now being invited to 'come outside' has generally a more alarming significance in Colorado than elsewhere. I saw the miners exchange looks and the barkeeper's hand wander furtively towards the shelf where the bar revolver lay always loaded and ready for use; but my brother stood up like a man and went out without hesitation. For a few seconds I experienced a feeling of suspense, and was on the point of following them, when back they came in a most jaunty manner, and, going up to the bar, my brother asked straight away what he would take to drink! I might have spared myself anxiety. It turned out that when they got outside our unwelcome guest had nothing more terrible to say than this: 'Stranger, I hev bin on the drunk for three days, and I haven't a cent. Will you stand me a drink?'