

SOLITARY CLIMBING :

SOME REFLECTIONS OF AN 'ALTES MURMELTHIER.'

THE practice of solitary climbing has, from very early times, incurred, and, no doubt, properly incurred, the severe reprehension of Alpine moralists. Other practices in other departments of ethics have likewise, from time to time, incurred the censure of moralists, with little or no attempt at justification, even on the part of those touched by it. Yet, somehow or other—theologians tell us it is owing to original sin—the practices do not become extinct, as according to all logic they might be expected to do. As we say, human nature is too strong for us. Mr. Stephen is a professed moralist ; but when he found the top of the Cima di Ball, who was his companion ?

It is a good many years since Sir W. M. Conway took occasion in this journal to formulate a theory, or several theories, touching the various motives by which those who seek their recreation in mountain ascents are impelled, and to classify such persons accordingly. We all know his famous subdivision of mountaineers into the groups of 'centrists' and 'excentrists,' as determined by the proportion in which the various motives referred to combined to drive them Alward. Another division, nearly, but perhaps not quite, coincident with that given above, was into 'gymnasts' and 'climbers'—'wanderers' would, perhaps, have been a better contrasted term. The gymnast was defined as 'a man for whom the overcoming of physical obstacles by means of muscular exertion and skill is the chief pleasure of mountaineering.' The definition of the other class was left to the reader's imagination ; we cannot go far wrong if we make it consist of those for whom the overcoming of such obstacles as present themselves in mountain travel by the exercise of observation and intelligence is the chief pleasure of mountaineering. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive ; indeed, they were combined in many of the first exponents of the mountaineering pastime, and must be combined in any guide who would attain excellence in his profession. Tactical skill alone will not make a great soldier ; but still less will swordsmanship alone.

Of late, no doubt, as Sir W. M. Conway and others have often insisted, the tendency has been to magnify the gymnastic motive and to undervalue the others. The present writer was once talking to an eminent Viennese climber, and regretting the great development of the 'Wegmarkirung' system in the Austrian Alps as destructive of the pleasure of exercising one's powers of observation in finding the road. He met, however, with no sympathy. The more easily and rapidly one could be brought to one's object—that is, to the point where the gymnastics began—the better. Surely this kind of thing goes far to justify Mr. Ruskin's satire about greased poles.

Yet there must still be a few who enjoy pitting not their muscles only, but their wits as well, against all the hindrances which the Spirit of the Mountains, aided as he is apt to be by the Prince of the Power of the Air, would put in the way of those who seek to penetrate his fastnesses. To find your own way over an unknown pass in a blinding snow-storm, even when no glacier is in question, is a very different and far more exhilarating business than plodding over behind a guide, with nothing to think about except how many dry articles you will find in your rucksack at the end of the day ; and here we come to our point. There can be little doubt in the mind of any one who has tried it, that the interest is vastly increased if you have no companion at all. For as Euclid might put it, with a reminiscence of Shakespeare, if two go together, either they must be exactly equal in experience and capacity (a case that hardly occurs), or one must be older in practice, abler, in better condition, than the other. Such an one will naturally be the leader. If it is the other man, you will again be merely the plodder behind ; if it is yourself, the added responsibility of getting somebody else out of the scrape besides yourself may heighten interest to the point of anxiety.

But even in fine weather one may sometimes, without being precisely a sage, see charms in the face of solitude. 'The untrammelled freedom of the wanderer's life,' to quote Sir W. M. Conway again, is ten times more untrammelled if he has nobody's little fancies to consider but his own. He can choose his own hours, his own *Proviand*—his own temper, shall we add?—unchecked, uncriticised. Oddly enough, too, he is likely to get even more society. Fellow-travellers at their inn in the evening are apt to be mutually self-sufficing ; unless, indeed, as will at times happen, they have fallen out by the way. But the solitary is perforce thrown on such society as the quarters afford ; it may be the *Wirth*, it may be the *Curat* or other local personage ; it may be a fellow-guest. In any case he is pretty sure, in the less frequented parts of the Alps, to find civility and intelligence, to say nothing of profitable exercise in the language.

So much for solitary roaming. Solitary climbing stands on a somewhat different footing, and appeals, perhaps, to a somewhat different part of human nature. It cannot be denied that the gambling spirit is gratified by it. The stake is the same as in the orthodox climb—upon this part of the metaphor each reader may put his own interpretation ; the odds against the player are longer, and the pleasure of 'pulling it off' is accordingly greater.

Here we must clearly distinguish between solitary climbing and climbing without guides. That is quite a different matter ; and the propriety of it in any particular instance must be judged by its results. A guideless party differs in degree only from a party led by any amount of professional talent ; it is exposed, except incidentally, to no greater dangers ; it can attempt the same expeditions, it can go into the same places. The sole limit to its achievement is the capacity of its members. With the solitary

rambler or climber it is quite otherwise. What is safe or easy for two or more is dangerous or impossible for one. For danger, the well-known case of the snow-covered glacier may serve, or rocks on which, in a party of climbers, only one would move at a time. The following instance will show how the presence of a companion may convert impossibility into ease. There is a certain tor on Dartmoor, the summit of which is formed by several granite blocks, in shape like gigantic pillows, superposed one on another. As you stand on the slope of one the edge of the next catches you about the top button of the waistcoat. There is no handhold, and the height is just too great to allow of a steady hoist of the body from the flat palms. An acrobat might manage it, but hardly an ordinary gymnast. The writer was there once with a friend who had climbed every tor in the neighbourhood from almost every side, but had never conquered this. When two were together, however, the problem became ridiculously simple. For one to drop on one knee, and for the other to mount on the corresponding joint of his other leg was, as the old romances have it, the work of an instant; from thence it was easy to scramble on to the upper 'pillow'; an outstretched hand afforded the grip necessary to enable the second member of the party to surmount the obstacle, and the first recorded ascent of — Tor was made. Every one who has travelled in mountainous regions and stepped off the beaten tracks will be able to quote similar instances from his own experience. Some things the solitary climber must let alone.

On the other hand there is a large class of situations in which the main difference between solitude and society is that the former demands increased attention and more extended prevision. Where with a companion you ought to be sure of ten steps ahead, alone you ought to be sure of twenty. Slopes of old snow must be negotiated with caution; they are apt to thin out at the lower end, and if you abandon yourself to the delights of a glissade for a few yards too far, you may suddenly find yourself, as the present writer once did, with the upper part of your body prone, head downwards on a steepish incline, your loins gripped by a frozen crust, and your toes dangling in vacancy above a little torrent—an attitude undignified at the best, and one from which it is not always easy, without the aid of a friendly hand, to resume the normal. You must also take increased heed to your footing, remembering that when there is no one at hand to render or seek assistance, a trifling disablement—sprain, twist, or bruise—may have very serious results.

Other rules for solitary climbers or rambles are: study your map minutely—if you propose to cross a pass, most minutely on the descending side, remembering that while it is much easier to lose the way going up hill, it is ten times more serious to lose it going down. Be very clear, especially on the descent, about the side of the stream you should be on. On the ascent look back frequently, and notice objects which you *have* passed; so that in the event of your having to retreat, the way may not be unfamiliar to

you. The same remark, of course, applies to climbs when you mean to come down the way you went up. Take especial note of the openings of side-valleys, and the points where their torrents join the main stream. Always carry a compass, and in cloudy weather consult it every few minutes. In fine weather, accustom yourself to steer by the sun till you get your orientation instinctively. This last hint would seem superfluous did not experience show how many people may have been familiar with a place for years without knowing the 'aspects' of it, or how few seem to see instinctively on which side of a tree you ought to lie if you want the shadow to pass on to you and not off you. Conducted in this way, there can be no doubt that solitary mountaineering is a fine school for teaching endurance, foresight, and skill, to say nothing of observation; qualities for which no one is ever the worse in the mountains, even where no great 'technical' difficulties are before him. After all, it is in the unlikely places that accidents happen; and the man who is accustomed to going alone learns to regard no place as more likely than another, and therefore is on his guard in all.—*Explicit advocatus diaboli.*

THE COL DE LA SAUCE.

A NOTE

BY DOUGLAS W. FRESHFIELD.

INVESTIGATIONS connected with the revision of the 'Alpine Guide' have recently led Mr. Coolidge and myself to the discovery of a curious confusion, or rather sequence of mistakes, with regard to the passes on the mule track round Mont Blanc between Contamines and Chapieux, which had up till now escaped the vigilance of successive editors—including ourselves—in the Guide-books we have at various times edited. I have also, I think, been successful in identifying in a long superseded map the origin of a double error in topography and nomenclature which seemed at first sight surprising in so careful a writer as the late Mr. Ball.

The traveller on the 'Tour of Mont Blanc,' if he has in his pocket both a modern guide-book—Ball, Murray, or Joanne—and one of the standard French Government maps, whether the *annuaire* mother map, or the more exact 'Carte de la Frontière Militaire' (the clearest as to paths), or the later but not always trustworthy 'Carte Vicinale,' will find it quite impossible to reconcile his books and maps.

The French maps all agree in indicating accurately what every one who traverses the track in clear weather sees to be the fact, that the path between Nant Borrant and Chapieux crosses two ridges, the first the water-parting between the Bonnant, a tributary of the Arve, and the Doron, a tributary of the Isère, which flows through the valley of Beaufort, the second the parting between the Doron and the torrent that flows from the western glacier of Mont Blanc past