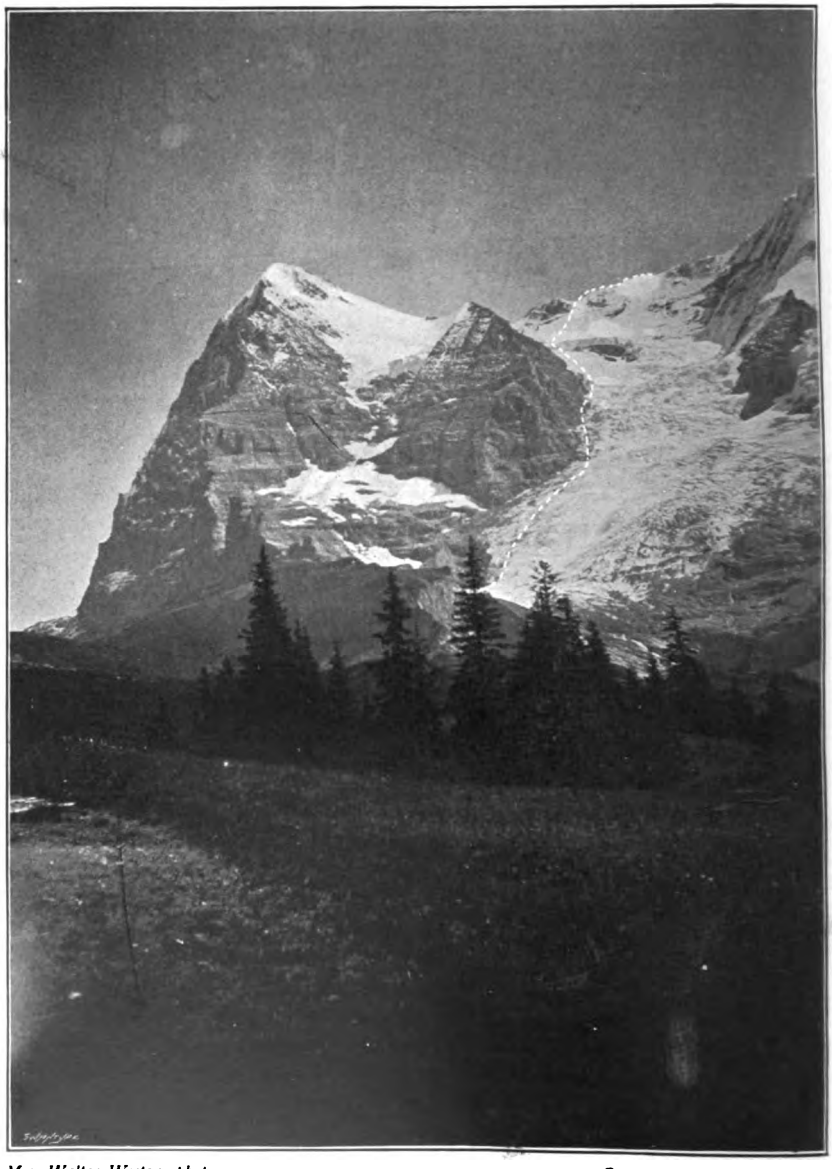


Mrs. Walter Weston, photo. *Swan Electric Engraving Co.*

EIGER AND EIGER GLACIER

FROM NEAR WENGERN ALP.

Digitized by Google

An Adventure on the Eiger Joch.

By WALTER WESTON.

ONCE upon a time—in the summer of 1897, to be precise—my friend Somerset Bullock and I, after some delightful guideless climbs elsewhere in the Bernese Oberland, found ourselves at last face to face with the *pièce de résistance* of our mountaineering *menu* in the shape of the Eiger Joch. The story of its first conquest, nearly forty years earlier, had always exercised a fascination over us, and perhaps the experiences that befell us thereon may be sufficient apology for venturing on a small 'plain tale from the hills' on our own account. At least the recollections of them will long last fresh and green for two of the trio that shared them; for one now feels towards the Eiger Joch the gratitude once expressed by a Japanese student to a friend of mine in the somewhat startling assurance, 'Your noble spirit is prowling in my mind. My lamp of hope is still kept burning by your vivid kerosene.'

On a glorious morning in mid-July we left our quarters at the well-known hotel on the Kleine Scheidegg to reconnoitre our route before venturing upon a final attack. The guides at Lauterbrunnen whom we had invited to come with us on our way from the Ober Steinberg had one and all declined our offers. Driven, therefore, to make a virtue of necessity, and not unwilling to score, if possible, off croakers disposed to laugh us to scorn, we determined to play the game without professionals and to see if, in our match *v.* the Eiger Joch, we could not win it off our own axes.

The splendid terrace-shaped ice masses, cleft by great chasms, or rent and torn in wild confusion, towered above our heads and above one another, like the ruined defences of some Titanic fortifications. An hour's walk over the broken, grassy slopes of the Kleine Scheidegg took us to the foot of the Eiger, and we were soon on the Eiger glacier and struggling with the crux of the climb, the intricacies of the great icefall. At one time, like Sir Leslie Stephen, we found ourselves lying flat in little gutters on the faces of the séracs, worming ourselves along like boa constrictors. The next moment we were balancing ourselves on a knife edge between two crevasses, or plunging into the very depths of the glacier, with a natural arch of ice meeting above our heads. But bit by bit we gained ground, and at length emerged towards the centre of the frozen cataract, skirting under some threatening séracs which soon began to melt into chilly

Digitized by Google

tears of pity at our presumption in venturing to storm such a fortress unaided. We were soon rewarded by the sight of one of the grandest crevasses I have ever seen.

The picture was framed, as Bullock aptly described it, in a setting of gigantic spear-points and wedges of ice, towering 60 ft. above us, while in the depths of its cold blue vault hung huge icicles like monster organ pipes. But the only music was the slow drip, drip of melting snow and the hollow clatter of fallen *débris*. Some of the séracs rose in the most fantastic shapes, sometimes like a gigantic toadstool balanced on a slender stalk, or like church spires or square towers defended by trenches of unfathomable blue depth. Here our way was barred, and further progress seemed impossible. However we had been working hard, so I suggested a good square meal, after which our vision might grow clearer. We then sat down on our rucksacks under the shade of a firm-based, spreading sérac, a shelter pleasant enough when it ceased to drop its icy tears of unneeded sympathy down the back of our necks.

The result of our consultation led us to determine to keep close to the base of the Klein Eiger, and to force our way through the maze of crevasses to the glacier's (true) right bank. In Sir Leslie Stephen's historic first ascent this had been proposed, but was negatived—a mistake that afterwards proved nearly fatal to the expedition. As a matter of fact the crevasses of this icefall are so intricate, and their size so huge, that when once one has got into their jaws it is almost impossible to tell where you are till you get out again, either at the bottom or the top. Working hard, however, we somehow succeeded in climbing, crawling, or cutting our way through till we were again nearly in the shadow of the dark rocks on our left. Here we entered a gully in the ice, thinly caked with snow, at an angle of nearly 60°. By dint of hard step-cutting we reached the top, only to find that half an hour had been wasted, for a détour of a few yards lower down would have avoided the ascent altogether. The 'longest way round' would have been 'the shortest way home.'

On the other side of the gully we found a mighty rift partly choked by the débris of a great sérac, which afforded a safe but rugged road across. This gave access to a snow slope abutting on the Klein Eiger, for which we were aiming. Up this we soon kicked steps, and to our intense delight reached steep but solid rocks that gave a welcome and safer way of progression. Climbing these quickly we rose nearly 500 ft. in half an hour. With our bodies rose our

Digitized by Google

spirits also, for we found we had overtopped the icefall and its dangers, and there was no chance of sérac or avalanche interfering with our enjoyment.

The rocks we crossed transversely until we once more neared the glacier, with which they were connected by another tongue of snow. To get on to this we had somehow to surmount a perpendicular wall of snow twelve feet high. My friend, as the lighter man, kindly volunteered to use me as a ladder, and mounted first on my back and then on my shoulders, but still failed to reach and grip the edge of the snowy barrier. He finally solved the difficulty by stepping on to my head, and the way he 'took off' from that spot, shod as he was in the heaviest Alpine boots I ever knew, left, in more senses than one, a very decided and permanent impression behind.

He then calmly remarked that there was a grand view, that our difficulties were over, and that he felt uncommonly pleased with himself. I, rubbing my head at the foot of the snow wall in semi-darkness, was not in a position to see it from his point of view! However, with the help of a long silk sash let down from above, and with much struggling and kicking on my own part, I overtopped the edge, stood by my friend, and then was able to shout 'hurrah' with him at our success. Behind us was the Eiger; in front rose the mighty Mönch, its dark precipitous cliffs draped with shining, hanging glaciers, that send down their avalanches with a thunderous roar, re-echoed from the opposite cliffs with appalling effect. Below us, to our right, lay the séracs and crevasses we had climbed or circumvented: to the left an obvious route was at our disposal through less broken ice, and beyond and above this towered the tremendous ice-slopes for nearly 1,500 ft. over which the rest of our upward way we knew must lie.

A close, quick survey of the scene, to photograph it clearly in our memory for the morrow's venture, and we turned to descend. In 3½ hrs. we were back at our hotel at tea, followed by a shower bath and, after that—the deluge. It seemed hard lines to have overcome the main difficulties, to have, so to speak, got out our most dangerous opponents, and then for rain to stop play! The match was postponed for a fortnight owing to continuous bad weather.

At 2.45 A.M. on Monday, August 2, three sleepy individuals 'might have been seen,' had any others been so foolish as to be looking out at such an unearthly hour, stealing burglar-like away from the Bellevue Hotel, where all

Digitized by Google

the other guests and domestics were sound asleep. My friend and I had with us a porter, known to be strong and stated to be a capable climber. His qualifications subsequently proved to be as limited as those of another I heard recommended mainly as 'a good fellow who doesn't snore in huts.'

In spite of the storms and snow of the past two weeks we succeeded in retracing our route without a check, to the astonishment of our companion, and in 3½ hrs. or so had regained the highest point originally reached. Here we sat down for our 'second breakfast,' and then hauled ourselves up to the top of the snow wall and 'made tracks' for the foot of the great ice slopes far above us without delay. Soon we had left the crevassed glacier behind, crossed a level plateau of snow, and found ourselves at the great bergschrund.

After crossing this we began to kick steps in the snow, and for half an hour our upward progress was fairly fast. By-and-by the snowy covering of the slopes began to thin out. Step-kicking soon gave way to step-scraping, and at last step-cutting in earnest became the order of the day. At first the slope was only about 50°; it then steepened to 55° or more.

Up to this time Bullock had been leading, and splendidly had he worked for nearly five hours, so now I took my turn and went in front. I admired his skill more than ever when I got there! At every yard the ice grew harder until our progress rivalled the average pace of a Japanese legal process, or a snail not fond of active exercise. The fragments of ice chipped out by the axe skidded with a musical ring down the glassy steep to the bergschrund below.

The porter at the bottom of the rope now began to lose his head, as a preliminary to losing his feet, and insisted upon either tying himself into a knot with his share of the rope or letting it drag after him in a huge loop, in his frantic efforts to embrace Bullock as a precautionary measure in case of a slip. In pathetic tones he begged me, from 40 ft. below, to 'please make bigger holes, as my feet are so big and your steps so small.' To please him and keep him quiet Bullock enlarged the steps between himself and me; but even this was not enough, and the porter found it needful to enlarge the icy staircase till a small elephant could almost have romped up it!

Meanwhile I cut steadily on—sometimes with both hands at the axe, sometimes with one hand only, to give the other a rest. Bullock offered to relieve me at the work, but we

Digitized by Google

could not have reversed the order of our going without risking a catastrophe through the porter's unsteadiness, and I held on. Hour after hour went by and the distance seemed scarcely to decrease, and the crest of the icy ridge to grow no nearer. And yet the time passed quickly somehow. Probably the constant tension of the nerves, and the absolute need for presence of mind, forbade all thought of anything but the next step in front and our ultimate goal. 'Look but one step ahead, and secure that step,' was our motto. My friend tells me that, for him, motion upward at length became merely mechanical, as he realised that no personal effort on his part would accelerate arrival any more than a railway passenger could quicken the speed of the train by anxiously poking his head out of the window. He remembered wishing for the loan of a pair of wings, but his anxiety to be off the slope was mainly due to the constant reminders of insecurity which he received from our elephantine friend below.

After four hours' ceaseless cutting at length came a rest. I hacked out the last step, and was able to grip the edge of an outcrop of rocks jutting from the snow. But we found them too rotten to climb, and we had to cut steps in the ice again for thirty or forty feet before we could reach a ledge firm enough to cling to, while we made a long-needed meal. Half an hour's well-earned repose was broken all too soon, and at 2 o'clock we were again on the move. As far as possible we kept to the rock, treading as lightly as we could, though now and then the porter despatched the larger part of some projecting mass with a thunderous clatter down the slopes beneath. We were now approaching the foot of the great wall of broken red rocks that forms the actual crest of the topmost ridge between the Eiger and the Mönch. Disintegration had worked ceaselessly and surely to compass the ruin of the rocky fortress, whose tall towers uplifted their fantastic forms to a now angry-looking sky.

Half an hour's interesting scrambling landed us on the highest point of the ridge; on the left is a jagged rocky arête, on our right a narrow corniced edge of snow.

During the intense excitement and interest of the last two hours our attention had been so wholly absorbed in our work that we had had no time to think of the weather. But with the tension relaxed we began to look about, and saw that lurid clouds were brooding over the distant peaks, and that the sooner we got off the ridge the better. On our right were the slopes on which we had spent nearly eight hours of

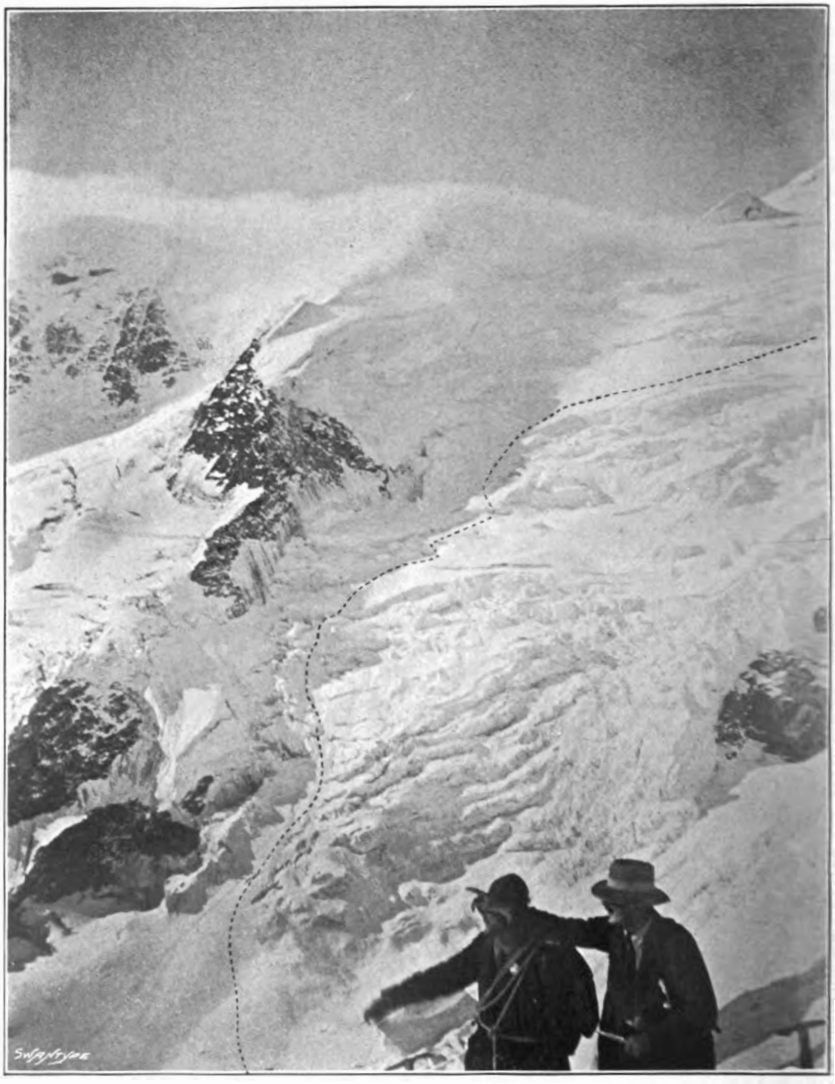
Digitized by Google

unceasing toil: on our left black cliffs falling nearly sheer for 2,000 ft. to the Viescher Glacier below were impracticable. We must go straight on.

The porter, whose fears, dispelled by our victory over the ice slope, had now returned with reinforcements, became our chief danger. The low muttering of the thunder, and the weird lights and shadows playing across the ridge on which we were balanced, were too much for him. His teeth chattering with terror he closed up to me and begged us in agonised tones to go back. A sudden flash of lightning shot from the clouds, but without waiting for the music we started along the narrow edge of the corniced ridge. With a mixture of German and Japanese I frightened our frantic friend into keeping his tears and his embraces for a more fitting time, and we steadily moved on. The wild beauty of the ice world here was astonishingly impressive. The edge of snow below which we were passing exhibited every variety of form. Here it rose like a wave arrested and frozen at the moment of breaking into spray, or like a gigantic arum lily, there a fringe of fantastic lace, or the teeth of some fabled monster of myth. Cautiously but quickly we pressed on at a safe distance from the edge of the cornice, but before we could quite gain the point where we could cross, and turn downwards on the southern side, the storm burst upon us.

As Bullock remarked, we were in an atmosphere charged with electricity, surrounded by the very thunder cloud itself. Like the hiss of a hundred serpents the lightning sizzed over the snow, and sang weird strains about our steel axe-heads. Woollen gloves provided a certain amount of protection as non-conductors, but the sensations were still sufficiently uncanny. Bullock said his head felt as if a tiny whirlwind had started in his hair, and that his funnybones behaved in an inconveniently jocular way. I saw him take off his hat to see if his hair was on fire, and then he found it standing erect like a blacking brush. As the electricity seemed to be charging him too much I insisted on having a change of axes, but he still felt, he said, uncommonly like an animated lightning conductor. Before us the white bulk of the Mönch now loomed out of the mist with strange distinctness, or again appeared wrapped in semi-transparent vapours. Below us, in the great glacier basin to the south, whole armies of dark clouds were massing, and I have rarely seen a stranger sight than this silent hurrying on of panic-stricken black battalions, soundless only until with startling suddenness the ranks lit

Digitized by Google



Mrs. Walter Weston, photo. *Swan Electric Engraving Co.*

ICEFALL OF GRINDELWALD FIESCHER GLACIER

FROM BELOW MITTELEGGI ARÊTE OF THE EIGER.

Digitized by Google

up, and then the roll of heaven's artillery echoed and re-echoed from peak to peak.

The passage along the final crest to the highest point of the Eiger Joch was comparatively simple. It was now 4.30 P.M., and we had been working hard, with the exception of about fifty minutes' halt for food, for over thirteen hours continuously. As we left the top of the hard-won pass it was rather an anti-climax to turn to the left, through the gathering mists, and begin a gentle descent over the soft deep snow that the past fortnight's Föhn wind had piled on its southern side.

We had been going steadily for nearly an hour from the top, intending to make for the Bergli 'Club Hut' as our night quarters, when the séracs of the Viescher glacier hove in sight. Mindful, however, of warm welcomes and cosy shelter lower down on past expeditions, we suddenly made up our minds to exchange the doubtful luxuries of a night at nearly 11,000 ft., on mouse-infested straw and short rations, for the certain pleasure of good beds and fresh food in plenty at the Bäregg.

Instead, therefore, of crossing the Mönch Joch to the Bergli Hut, we gave it a wide berth, to our right, and steered straight for the icefall that dropped abruptly from the snow plateau which we were now crossing.

For two hours onwards the work was of a very difficult and intricate character, with crevasses of great size and depth, and only the amount of snow that partly filled them made the passage possible. We were more than pleased at the result, when at length we emerged from the icy labyrinth, and looked up at it, for we saw we had come down by the only possible route, and we afterwards learnt that the passage had probably never before been accomplished.

After consuming the remainder of our store of bread and marmalade we continued our march across the now easy glacier, and succeeded in reaching the further side, where we unroped, just as twilight was softening the passes and the peaks above and around us.

Darkness had now risen from valley to peak, and as we left the glacier for the rocks we felt our difficulties were even not yet done with. The faint track, needing care even by daylight, was now trying in the extreme. The porter declared it was impossible, and his eye lighting on some dark slimy rocks over which small icy cascades were pouring, he coolly suggested we should sleep under them. Such a course would have led to repose of too permanent a character, and the proposition

Digitized by Google

was dismissed with scorn. By-and-by we came to a rickety ladder, down which we crept gingerly, and below it I stumbled on an empty wine bottle. A lucky stroke with the point of my ice axe made a clean hole in the bottom of this, which a candle I fortunately had in my pocket exactly fitted, but only after vainly striking some dozens of damp matches did we manage to get a light. Our own alpine lantern had unfortunately slipped out of its owner's pocket, and found a grave in the Eiger Joch bergschrund, earlier in the day, and the loss we felt considerably. With the aid of our solitary flickering flame we picked our way slowly down, and wind and rain ceased as we finally stepped off the rocks on to the hummocky surface of the Lower Grindelwald Glacier, which was now the only barrier between us and the Bäregg Chalet.

Like fireflies we flitted to and fro, threading the crevasses where they were wide and jumping them when narrow. Slowly we zigzagged across, only to find ourselves cut off by a foaming torrent in an icy channel. We retreated and tried lower down, but again with no success. Just then a terrific roar burst through the stillness of the night, and down from a hanging glacier crowning the Kalli cliffs to our left a mighty avalanche thundered on to the glacier below. It was several minutes before the echoes had ceased to reverberate in the great defile, and by that time we had managed to lose each other in our tantalising search for a way off the glacier. Up and down in the hollows amongst the waves of ice the candle flitted. Was this will o' the wisp wandering never to cease, we were beginning to ask, when suddenly a cry from the leader is heard, 'Here it is; we're off.'

And sure enough so we were. Half a dozen steps took us off the last ice-hummock; on to the path we scrambled, and by it we mounted to the well-known wooden ladders below our haven of rest. The windows of the lonely chalet showed no light, and long and loud we knocked before the welcome answer came. It was one o'clock in the morning, but they received us as warmly as long looked for friends. Soon we were sitting before a roaring fire, revelling in such coffee, honey, bread, and butter as never were. Considering we had been hard at work for twenty-two hours, with very little rest, we felt surprisingly fresh. At 2 A.M. we turned in and slept the sleep of the satisfied.

Digitized by Google