A Face Climb.

By G. WINTHROP YOUNG.

MR. GODLEY recently, in a delightful paper,* pricked with sophistical points, refined to soothing gold on the philosopher's stone of his wit, the bubble sentimentalism of those of us to whom the new route is an inspiration or the luncheon-refuse anathema. It would be mere bludgeon work to argue that there is little of the 'desperate counsel' he imputes—hardly even a 'moderately severe course'—to be found in a retreat to Ida or Olympus; or to protest that the sop of a 'depopulated' perambulation from the Grimsel to the Gothard is a poor compensation for his cheerful surrender of the great monarchs of the Alps to the dominion of the 'railway guide' and the fixed 'excommunication cords.' We can only appeal for a kindly indulgence towards pilgrims whose poverty of imagination needs the stimulus of external circumstance, the unbottled summit and the lonely sunset, to revive that spirit of romance which happily seems to palpitate unaided for the philosopher even in the omnipresence of the Polyglot or the Polytechnic picnic party. At worst we are guilty of the pathetic fallacy; and we will accept the charge unrepining, if only, as the inevitable lines, railway or clothes, tighten round our solitudes—laid by philistinism and lauded by philosophy—we may be allowed the privilege of the losers, to withdraw to our tents, or sleeping-bags, and protest in peace a moral superiority over the triumphing tripper tribe. An irreclaimable sentimentalist by conviction, it is now some years since, as the outcome of a long apprenticeship to the craft of climbing and—equally vital—to the nature of guides, I registered a vow that when the proper period for the great Pennine peaks should arrive they should be ascended with every adventitious aid of pomp and circumstance. The experienced guide who knows his Alps, and in whose sophisticated mind the details of a climb are salted down and ticketed as 'Here I haul the Herr' and 'Here I haul him harder,' would knock the 'moral support' to romance out of a mountain range. On the other hand the good guide whose notions of the usual ascents of the Zermatt peaks should not have been prejudiced by experience or report would have to be re-exhumed, at the present date, from the congenial company of the dodo. No alternative remained but to contrive for each summit some new line of approach or fresh combination,

* *Alpine Journal*, vol. xxiii. p. 448.

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which might reduce professional infallibility to a human level of speculation and invest the ascents with the romance of uncertainty and the semblance, at least, of contributory effort on the part of the amateur. Earlier generations, with a wealth of new high-class ridges to draw or be drawn upon, could afford to uphold general rules, that may fitly be termed 'rigid,' with regard to the propriety of visiting, much more of leaving their cards upon, so called 'face climbs.' But a modern climber, with a dislike for peasant predestination, has to exercise a more independent and individualising scrutiny. There are good faces and bad faces, and nearly every face, however evil its reputation, will be found, if properly investigated, to have its sound points and salient ribs free from the defects of its general character. The more pronounced the stonefall the easier for the seeing eye to trace out the protuberant wrinkles. A face generally looks evenly insecure from below, and a side view tells us nothing but the general angle, suggesting a false rib with every new skyline as we shift. But stones prefer to fall down depressions and betray the lines of the real profile. There is, of course, the unreckonable risk of flank attacks from rocks bursting as they strike; but this is a peril shared by many accepted arêtes; the irregular flight in any case is short, and the dominant lines of the slope soon regulate the traffic again. The steepness of a face is also its own protection; a very small projection gives adequate cover for a considerable distance, and often the angle alone bars all but very fancy 'drop' shots. An example might be found in the lower part of the E. face of the Rimpfischhorn, the climb upon which this year was not only mapped out on these principles but considerately conformed to them in execution. It is, perhaps, worth mentioning that out of some thirty successful face climbs the only occasion on which our party has encountered real risk from a rockfall was on the Zinal side of the Gabelhorn, a popular ascent that would be classed by most with the ridge climbs. The 'single stealthy block' that has occasionally stalked us elsewhere is an importunist common to all types of ascents. On a blunt rib the consequences of stones released by an ill-handled rope or an unpardonable foot are clearly more widely spread than on a laterally-drained spinal ridge; but these climbs are, in any case, only for the excessively cautious and never for 'trippers.' A greater measure of care and pre-examination is called for on a face, but no popular ridge is sufficiently 'cleared up' to allow of these being neglected. It was, I think, Giraldus Cambrensis who first remarked on this mountain phenomenon, after

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apparently fruitless attempts to get the Snowdon gullies into a decent state of repair: 'It is wonderful that when, after diligent search, all the stones have been removed from the mountains, and no more can be found, a few days after they reappear in greater quantities to those who seek them!' Face climbs have an additional merit in affording chances of further advance by a lateral escape on to alternative ridges. Of course one would rather not cross couloirs on faces, just as one would rather not traverse top-heavy towers on knife-edges or run over policemen on motors; but the obstructive position of each makes it often inhuman to avoid them, and they all serve at least one useful purpose in concentrating into an almost negligible compass the terrors of irresponsible laws of motion and inertia, which were never intended for the purposes for which we break them. Design, caution, and above all pace are a rule of three that can deal as securely with the fractions of falling faces as with the square roots, or boots, of gendarmes on arêtes, or on duty.

It will be seen that there has been a certain reasoned quixotism of motive inspiring our efforts to release these mountain faces from their unmerited ostracism, not exclusively a desire for originality or for a subversion of the equilibrium of the guide mind. It is hoped that the respectability of the Weisshorn, in all its aspects, has been to some extent established; and if I take the south face of the Dom as the present illustrative instance it is only because, in defiance of all proof, its east face still labours under the suspicion of assault and battery, and it is eminently desirable that one at least of its surfaces should be discharged without a stone upon its character.

Mayor and myself had a few days to spare at the end of last season, and the Dom looked irresistible from our Monte Rosa tea table. Joseph Knubel was still handicapped, or rather knee-capped, by an injury got on the S. face of the Weisshorn, not the result, old-alpine-traditionally, of a falling stone, but of trying too hurriedly to get raspberry jam out of a tin. So we took Gabriel Lochmatter to help. We should probably have strengthened the party in any case. It is hard to envisage the S. face of the Dom without including the Täschhorn, and memory was still busy with the fearsome occasion when Ryan and myself, with some professionals in 'walking' parts, were overmuch interested spectators of an extraordinary ascent of its southern precipices by Franz Lochmatter. *Hinc illi Lochrimatteri!* We got to the new Dom hut with the usual dissatisfaction; it is impossible to time one's weary ascent of

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these eastern slopes of the valley so as to keep always behind the climbing shadow; some objectionable pass is certain to let a glare of hot light leak through upon one's back on the least sheltered zigzags. The night in the hut was as indescribable as all such nights are when one has the starlight and the straw to oneself. I do not remember when we started, nor yet when we reached the top; our times are decently buried in Mayor's official memory and the back numbers of the 'Journal.'* We put on the rope sufficiently prematurely to colour the whole day with the glowing consciousness of having done the right thing. The so-called central couloir, for which we were aiming, is really what is left of the flat S. face by the projecting intrusions of the western and southern arêtes. A previous party† had made a route up it inclining back to the left and reaching the summit by the W. arête. We attacked it on its right side, not from any contrariness but on principle, because a subsidiary ridge, protruding on the right from the S. (Dom Joch) arête and turning downwards almost through a right angle, offered a convenient route up the face and a secure shelter from the discharges of the couloirs. The strata sloped outward and the rocks were loose, but the climbing was dry and easy. The arête, as we mounted, gradually drew itself up off the face, until, at the corner where it turned back toward the S. ridge, we were climbing on a shaky and fairly sharp edge with a sheer fall on our right into a secondary chasm. A gradual descent on its left upper side brought us back into the central couloir or 'flat,' and we skirted up its right wall, keeping in the shadow of the buttresses of the S. arête, until they in turn retreated and the couloir developed into a big semi-circus or amphitheatre, the meeting place of four or five slantingdicular gullies. This was the one unattractive section of the ascent, since in order to reach the lower ends of the ribs descending into the top of the circus it was necessary to traverse an open and slabby arena commanded by at least two couloirs, the angle of whose possible artillery admitted of no nice calculation. We collected the party and our breath, and then took the danger zone at a hand and foot gallop. In a bad year, with snow or ice to check the acceleration, this passage could not be academically upheld; in fact, given such premises, several portions of the climb which were easy enough in sunshine and bareness might induce plenty of time and a superfluity of matter for thought. We struck a prominent rib curving down in

* *Alpine Journal*, vol. xxiii. pp. 330–1. † *Ibid.* vol. xiii. p. 413.

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a westerly direction from the summit and skimmed up its corrugations to our first halt and breakfast. On principle I had negatived all previous suggestions of pause, and we were well ahead of time and of its debilitating effects upon sun-swept slopes. The few small stones that fell passed down the upper fork of the big couloir to our left, and below followed the left-hand (W.) side, where we had located them to our satisfaction from the first. We were now free of all external considerations and could enjoy at leisure the sombre view of the splendid walls that enclosed us on either hand, with the northern snows of the Täschhorn shivering in the first rush of morning light before us, and the Rimpfischhorn smiling frostily across the beautiful jet and foam curves of the Dom Joch, obviously proud of its promotion, and thankful for even a temporary divorce from the virtuous but bourgeois society of the Strahlhorn.

The further rib was sound, if steep, with minute but gentlemanly holds. Where it merged in the final face of the peak the rock deteriorated, and the leader's intense anxiety to keep religiously up the centre of the narrow, triangular face, and not to be drawn by any soft options on to the trodden paths of the now adjacent W. and S. arêtes, induced the performance of some remarkable gymnastics up overhanging and dissolute crags. This is a form of childish indulgence which we all condemn in each other, and most of us, I suggest with diffidence, in our own performance condone. No well polished ridge in the neighbourhood of a popular hotel but has its small pinnacle to be ascended 'absolutely for the first time.' No cunning old local guide but knows and profits by our unconfessed but universal weakness for the 'true and new' arête. Mayor and I had secure front seats and the knowledge of a broad margin to the time sheet; and while we divided an upward smile of lofty superiority it was noticeable that it was the tail which refused to move, when we reached the final snow-crest, until the leader had made certain by tentative peeps that the steps were going to be kicked on to the exact summit. The view was a rare one even for the Alps on a day that proved the hottest in an exceptional year. With regret we renounced the tempting descent on Saas, out of regard for the early closing of our holiday, and prepared with set teeth and much 'pomade Séchehaye' on our faces to brave the glaring monotony of the usual way. I have only once felt anything approaching the scorching oppression of the passage of these tracts of white heat, on an occasion when Mackay and myself, after

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being tricked on to the Trugberg, climbed the Mönch at midday with the successive detachment of each of our accepted seven cuticles. We fled faster and faster from the furnace, hunted by puffs of hot breath, and our expressions might have suggested to an onlooker a more than usual sensitiveness to the ingenuity with which all sub-alpine paths elude the tantalising shadow of the fir trees. Two hours and fifty minutes stands for the first man's time from the summit to the door of the Randa bathroom, and little less should in justice be recorded for the passage thence to the tea table.

It will be remarked that the climb, like most proper climbs, was thoroughly dull, uneventful, and unworthy of record, which makes it all the pleasanter to recall and the better illustration of my thesis. As the last-named appears to have got involved with several others in the course of the ascent I shall not, by restating it, risk the sort of questioning pause which usually follows the striking of the keynote by a conscientious pianist after an unaccompanied verse. It may be sufficient to put a problem to the gentle protagonists of 'fine old crusted routes' and rather over 'full-bodied huts.' 'What could be the comparative pleasure of the other parties thronging up the usual ascent of the Dom on that fierce day? And to suggest the solution by a trifling misquotation from the 'Traveller'—

> Some sterner Virtues o'er the mountain's breast
> *May* sit like falcons cowering on the nest;
> But all the gentler Morals, such as play
> Through life's more cultured walk, and charm the way,
> These, far dispersed, on timorous pinions—come
> To sport and flutter in a kind-o'—'scrum'!

Some Expeditions in Dauphiné: a Night on the Meije.

By O. K. WILLIAMSON, M.D.

DURING the summer of 1906 I was able to carry out a long cherished plan of spending part of a climbing season among the high alps of Dauphiné.

On July 2 an evening walk up the Lautaret road from Bourg d'Oisans brought me late at night to the Hôtel Juge at La Grave. The following day was spent in repose, and in the evening old Alois Pollinger joined me. On the 4th a training expedition was decided upon, in accordance with custom; and what more suitable object could be chosen than the Aiguille du Goléon, 11,251 ft., that fine view point to the

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