

Alpine walks, for Englishmen, may be drawing to its close. In that case, the task of the historian should begin, and contributions, however humble, may assist him. Possibly that is the present chronicler's justification. Anyhow, it is pleasant to recall old days: to feel the satisfaction of the man in Homer's simile, who, having in his prehistoric way travelled in foreign parts, sits at home and says 'There I was, and there.' But I admit that he said it to himself, and had not the impudence to say it to the Alpine Club.

'A CLIMBER IN A FAR COUNTRY.'

By MALCOLM ROSS.

(Read before the Alpine Club on Tuesday, February 3, 1914.)

THE lecturer began with a brief description of the mountain systems of New Zealand, dealing first with the volcanic belt in the North Island. Pictures were shown of Ruapehu (an extinct volcano and the highest mountain in the thermal zone) and of Ngauruhoe in action sending a column of steam three thousand feet into the air. There was also shown a rather remarkable view of the crater with the party standing on the very brink of the main vent, from which fumes and vapours were continually rising. Recently lava had been seen in the throat of this volcano, and it was thought possible that some day there might be an eruption on a grand scale. Such an eruption, however, would not do as much damage as similar eruptions in the more populous centres in Europe and the East, where towns and villages cluster at the bases and even on the shoulders of volcanic mountains, seeing that in New Zealand the country in the volcanic belt was barren and sparsely settled. From a mountaineering point of view the volcanoes, it was explained, presented no difficulties, but they were decidedly attractive to the climber interested in vulcanology, geology, and botany.

Leaving the volcanic zone, Mr. Ross took his audience on a hurried trip amongst the peaks and through the passes of the South Island in the vicinity of the fiords and the great lakes, where the granite rock-climbing was of quite a different kind from that which the mountaineer obtained on the softer rocks of the higher mountains of the Alpine Chain. Interesting

pictures of Mount Tutoko, Mount Balloon, Mount Mackenzie, and The Remarkables were shown.

It was explained that the Southern Alps extended in a series of ranges from the N. to the extreme S. of the Middle Island. In the S. the ranges were intersected by the splendid fiords on the one side and by the arms of the long, deep lakes on the other. The mountain masses, in some places, fell sheer to the water's edge, and their bases were far below the level of the lakes or of the sea. Many of their lower slopes were densely wooded, while their summits were capped with perpetual snow and ice. In the region of Milford Sound they rose steeply from the water's edge, and their solid and sometimes smooth granite walls seemed uninviting to the foot of the climber. Going further N. there was another fine series of mountains in the region of lakes Wakatipu and Wanaka. Though not high, as heights go in the European Alps or in the Himalaya, they were imposing mountains. Only within comparatively recent years had passes been discovered between the lakes and the sounds, and although these passes did not lead the traveller beyond the sub-Alpine heights, they took him through scenery that was no less remarkable for its beauty than for its grandeur—a fitting introduction to those greater marvels in the heart of the Southern Alps.

Northwards, from Mount Aspiring, at the head of the southern system, the Alps proper extended in an almost unbroken chain along the western side of the Middle Island of New Zealand to where Mount Cook or Aorangi rose, dominating the landscape, and giving an outlook from sea to sea. Here one was amongst the monarchs of the range, and the views were indescribably grand. There was a glorious Alpine panorama stretching N. and S., and, though all the highest mountains had been climbed, there were hundreds of untrodden peaks and passes still awaiting the foot of the climber.

Interesting pictures were shown of the pioneering days when the rivers were unbridged and it took the coach two days from the nearest railway to reach the accommodation house at Mount Cook ; when the Hooker river had to be crossed on a cage slung on a wire rope high above the foaming water ; and when the hardy mountaineer had to make his bed under some overhanging rock, on the hard, uneven surface of an old moraine, or upon the gravel bed of some unexplored river.

The Tasman Glacier—greater than the largest of the European glaciers—was traversed from terminus to source, and some fine views of the ice-field itself and of the mountains

on either side were put upon the screen. Climbs on Haidinger, Elie de Beaumont, De la Bèche, the Minarets, and on the Liebig range were briefly referred to, and the lecturer then proceeded to take his audience with him on the first traverse of Mount Cook, which was, a few years ago, accomplished after one continuous journey of 36 hours. Splendid pictures of the well-known Bivouac Rock, and views from that point looking towards the highest peak of Mount Cook and across the Tasman Valley to the Liebig and Malte Brun ranges, were shown and briefly described. The climb to the highest peak by way of the N.E. Arête was stated to present few, if any, difficulties to the experienced climber, though there was a tedious crossing of a high snow plateau—best done at night—and the ascent of a steep three-thousand feet snow slope that was apt to try the patience of the most patient mountaineer, and even to produce somnolence in those who were mechanically following in the path of the step-cutter. Beyond that there were steep but not difficult rocks and snow arêtes. On the occasion referred to, the highest peak was reached in a little over 18 hours from the Bivouac Rock on the Haast Ridge on the E. side of the range.

The descent—undertaken under especially adverse conditions, the rocks being glazed with ice and coated with recently-fallen snow—was graphically described. After some interesting work on the ice-plastered ridge, a break in the ridge brought the party to a sudden stop; but by bringing the spare rope into requisition and lowering the climbers down one by one the difficulty was left behind. Soon afterwards another almost vertical cliff blocked the way. At the foot of this cliff there was a narrow chimney that fell away from the perpendicular and sloped inwards. On its final 12 feet there were neither hand- nor foot-holds. There was accordingly nothing for it but to unrope again and be lowered down singly. 'Graham,' continued the lecturer, 'lowered me down with one rope, Fyfe and Turner anchoring on the rocks above. For a little way, by clawing at the rock with feet and hands, and by the friction of my body, I was able to descend with some slight amount of dignity. Then, as I reached the part where the chimney sloped inward from the perpendicular, I lost contact with the rocks, and hung suspended, like Mahomet's coffin, between heaven and earth. When, after my brief and more or less graceful gyrations at the end of the rope I found the strain removed from my waist, and footholds and handholds once more actual realities, I made no complaint,

even though the middle finger of my left hand, which had been cut on the sharp rocks, was spurting blood, and dyeing the snow at my feet a beautiful crimson.

'The spot on which I found my feet was not the best of landing-places, for the rock shelved outwards into snow. It was now Peter's turn to descend, so I planted myself as well as I could, and watched the operation. He was a good stone and a half heavier, so there must have been a considerable strain on Fyfe's arms. As he slid off the rocks into the air, his ice-axe caught in the chimney and sent him swinging round. I saw a long body, a swirling mass of arms and legs, and a nice felt hat sailing down on the wind to the Linda Glacier thousands of feet below, and then a somewhat blown but otherwise cool mountaineer, with a little assistance as to where to plant his feet, landed beside me. Peter's descent was so comical that I could not refrain from laughing. Turner was the next man, and Fyfe urged him forward. The rope was fastened round his waist, and he, too, cut a comical figure as he slid off from the perpendicular, clawed at vacancy, and eventually landed beside us. Fyfe's grinning countenance peered over the edge of the cliff above, as if he were enjoying the sport. Sensational as this performance was, especially until a landing-place had been found, a more serious one remained for Fyfe to accomplish. Once more he hitched the double rope over a rock, and scrambled down the precipice. The only rock available was slightly loose, so he had to be very careful at the start in case the rope should slip over the projection. Such experiences are apt to be a little nerve-shattering, and these two sensational descents—especially the latter one—must have taken something out of him. However, he was again equal to the emergency, and, assisted by Graham's long reach as he swung over the last few feet like a pendulum, he was soon beside us in safety.

'We climbed on down the ridge for some time, and eventually, at a quarter to 7 on Wednesday evening, we had left the dreadful arête behind us, and Peter cut steps across a frozen slope that led from Green's Saddle into the long 2000-feet couloir that sloped steeply down to the Hooker Glacier. It was a quarter to 7 on the evening of Wednesday, and, as we had now been going since 11.15 P.M. on Tuesday, or for 19½ hours, we hoped to find the couloir in good order. Our hearts sank as we saw Graham plying his ice-axe. Fyfe shouted to him to endeavour to do without the cutting, and to kick steps; but this was impossible—the slope was frozen hard! The wind was increasing in violence, and it was bitterly cold. There was still the

alternative of cutting down to the Linda Glacier on the eastern side and of a comparatively easy and comfortable descent, out of the wind, to the great plateau, from which we could gain the Glacier Dome, and then descend to the Bivouac Rock by means of our steps of the night before. The matter was mentioned between Fyfe and myself, but we scarcely gave it a second thought, and decided to stick to our original intention to "col" the peak. The word was given to go forward down the couloir, and young Graham, who was leading, treated us to a splendid example of ice-craft and physical endurance as he proceeded to hack a way with his axe down that 2000 feet of frozen slope. It was a narrow, steep gully, varying in width from about fifteen to twenty yards, and flanked on either side by great walls of precipitous rock. Hour after hour went by, and we seemed to be getting no nearer to the foot of the couloir. The wind was cutting keen, and every now and then it would send a shower of broken ice from the precipices above swishing about our ears. In one place we took to the rib of rock in the middle of the couloir. Occasionally the rocks on the left of the couloir were used for hand-grips, thus enabling Graham to cut smaller steps. Turner then began to feel the want of sleep, and he asked me to talk to him to keep him awake which I did with all the cheerful energy I could command for, had he fallen, upon me would have devolved the honour of holding him on the rope.

'A few minutes later, some bits of rock, dislodged, no doubt, through the falling icicles that were broken off by the wind, came whizzing past us, and as Turner immediately cried out "Oh, my head! my head!" I knew that he had been struck and in a moment had driven the handle of my axe into the frozen snow and had hitched the rope around it; while Fyfe, behind me, had already taken a firm stand. Turner, in his account of the accident, says: "We would have been dashed to eternity if I had fallen and upset Graham out of his step while step-cutting, which would have been a very easy matter." Such, however, was not the case, for both Fyfe and I had the rope absolutely taut, and, being well anchored, we could easily have held up three times Turner's weight. As a matter of fact, he could not have fallen a yard. Fortunately the accident was not a serious one. It resolved itself into a scalp wound about three-quarters of an inch long, and Turner, after a few minutes, was able to continue the descent. Had the stone struck Turner on the top of the head, it would undoubtedly have cleft his skull in twain. Luckily it only grazed his head at the base of the skull.

'We had now descended about a thousand feet of the couloir.

The sun had dipped to the rim of the sea, and the western heavens were glorious with colour, heightened by the distant gloom. Almost on a level with us, away beyond Sefton, a bank of flame-coloured cloud stretched seaward from the lesser mountains towards the ocean, and beyond that again was a far-away continent of cloud, sombre and mysterious, as if it were part of another world. The rugged mountains and the valleys and forests of southern Westland were being gripped in the shades of night. A long headland, still thousands of feet below us, on the south-west, stretched itself out into the darkened sea, a thin line of white at its base indicating the tumbling breakers of the Pacific Ocean. Difficult as was our situation, Fyfe and I would find ourselves gazing in contemplation of this mysterious and almost fantastic scene of mountain glory. Turner was concerned mostly with his head, and Peter had to devote his whole attention to the step-cutting.

'We climbed down a rib of rock in the dusk between the lights, and then zigzagged on down the couloir in the steps cut by the never-tiring Graham. Presently the moon rose and bathed the snowy slopes of Stokes and Sefton and other giant mountains in a flood of silver. After the accident we kept closer in to the rocks to evade any falling icicles or stones that might come down the couloir. Graham, anxious, no doubt, to get out of the couloir, was now making the steps rather small, and there was sometimes difficulty in seeing them in the semi-darkness, and in standing in them once they were found; but we got occasional hand-grips on the rocks, so that the danger from a slip was reduced to a minimum. On one occasion I did slip in a bad step; but Fyfe was easily able to hold me on the rope. Down, down, down we went on this apparently never-ending slope. Hour after hour went past, and still the end of the couloir seemed a long way off. Very little was said. Occasionally there would be a request by Turner for me to hold him tight on the rope, or a plaintive cry of "Peter, where are the steps?" I had to cheer the stricken one by repeatedly telling him that there was only another hundred feet or so when there was a thousand or more. I can only hope that the Recording Angel turns his eyes from those in trouble in the High Alps to devote his attention to less aspiring sinners. Else there is a black page in his book to my account for all the lies I told Turner about the length of that couloir between 9 and 12 o'clock that night. However, it is just possible that the end justified the means, and that, after all, there will be an entry to my credit on the other side of the ledger.

'The wind continued bitterly cold, and the shadow of the precipices in the moonlight seemed to fill the head of the valley with gloom. Some lines of Shelley's seemed to fit the situation :

"The cold ice slept below ;
Above, the cold sky shone ;
And all around,
With a chilling sound,
From caves of ice and fields of snow
The breath of night like death did flow
Beneath the sinking moon."

'Towards the bottom the couloir broadened out somewhat, and the work was easier. We progressed a little more quickly and at last reached the bergschrund. This schrund, in ordinary seasons a very formidable one, had been often in our minds during the past few weeks, and gave us some concern from the commencement of the descent ; but we reckoned that we could cross it somehow, even if we had to sacrifice an ice-axe and one of the lengths of Alpine rope. The first attempt to find a bridge failed ; but Graham, with a pretty bit of snowcraft, in the uncertain light found a comparatively safe snow bridge, over which we crossed one by one, while the others anchored with their ice-axes and held the rope taut in case the man on the bridge at the time should show an unpraiseworthy desire, by reason of his weight or the rottenness of the snow under him, to explore the unknown depths of the schrund. In a few minutes we were all across in safety, and just after midnight—on Thursday morning—we stepped on to the upper slopes of the Hooker Glacier, and the first crossing of Mount Cook had been safely accomplished !'

Mr. Ross went on to describe how the party threaded their way by lantern light through the broken ice of the Upper Hooker, and after that the weary trudge down the valley to the Hermitage which was reached 36 hours after they had left the bivouac rock on the E. side of the range.

Finally the lecturer, while expressing a just pride in the fact that New Zealanders had taught themselves the craft of mountaineering in a new country and had climbed almost all their highest peaks without guides and without a serious accident, paid a glowing tribute to the work of the Members of the Alpine Club, whose precept and example they had so carefully followed. He also eulogized the splendid pioneering work done by the Rev. W. S. Green, the father of Alpine climbing in New Zealand.