

It was impossible for them to imagine any person doing anything without the hope of gaining thereby some coveted backsheesh. In a missionary hospital Dr. Neve had operated upon a Ladakhi patient, and when he was ready to leave the hospital where he had been nursed and fed without having had to pay a single 'anna' during three weeks, he went up to the doctor and asked for backsheesh; 'For,' said the patient, 'you surely would not have taken all this trouble over me and taken out the tumour, unless you were going to make money over the sale of it' . . .

This was a story that Tyndale Biscoe tells in his book. We discovered in our own coolies the same train of thought. I am sure they could not understand in the least why these mad sahibs wanted to 'clamber' over the glaciers, as our friend the Aksakal in Leh quaintly put it.

Only one of them had a glimmering of the truth, and he was a philosopher in his own way. Our guides had christened him the 'White Bear,' because of the shaggy appearance he presented, wrapped in a rough sheepskin.

The White Bear had told our interpreter that the Sahib would never have climbed all those high mountains if he had not been sure of finding something of great value there! Perhaps this simple-minded coolie, pondering over the problem, had had a vision of an enormous heap of backsheesh on some mountain-top.

And the White Bear in his primitive wisdom was nearer the truth than he could have imagined; for my wife and I did find something of great value on those high Karakoram mountains, though it was not gold or silver. For we brought back from those lofty heights memories to fill a whole lifetime!

## THE AIGUILLE DE ZALLION.

By H. E. G. TYNDALE.

**I**F you look eastward from the chalets of Praz Gras (where, alas! it is now *défendu* to provide milk for the thirsty conqueror of the Aiguilles Rouges), you will see a long line of cliffs fronting you across the Arolla valley, rising steeply out of an endless wilderness of boulder and fragments of shrunken glacier; cliffs pale yellow and smooth here, grey and broken there, again deepening to a rich chocolate red or

Dent Perroc.

Pte. des Genevois,

Dent de Zallion.

Aig. de Zallion.



FROM NEAR PAS DE CHÈVRES.

throwing out some flattened buttress flanked by unbroken slabs. On the left stands the Petite Dent de Veisivi, sentinel of the valley; in the centre, Dent de Perroc disputing precedence of height with her neighbour Pointe de Genevois, whence the ridge drops quickly southward to rise at first gradually in gentle curves to the broad, humpy Dent de Zallion, then in a sharper ascent towards the Aiguille de la Za.

Between these two latter points rises a conspicuous sharp summit, nameless hitherto, barely lower than the Za and about three hundred feet higher than the Dent de Zallion. A long buttress runs unbroken up to this summit from the west, broad in its base and clearly very steep, narrowing in its upward course and curving gradually leftward towards the main ridge. Was this, we wondered, a route—perhaps even the ideal way to the Za? Stone-free, without a doubt, unlike the ordinary western approach to the Za. Let us return to the hotel and see what Larden's guide will say about it.

To our delight, Larden said nothing, and through a fine basking Sunday we were often at the telescope, in no way discouraged that probably the stiffest part of our buttress hid itself behind an outstanding moraine.

On August 14, 1922, before sunrise, Irving and I crossed the torrent and made our way through whatever of pinewood the great rock-avalanches from La Maya have spared. In many places the ground is ploughed up as if from a bombardment; and probably it would be wise to cut a new path further northward. Hot and breathless as the air had been in the valley, it became clearer and cooler as we approached the moraine, and when we halted for breakfast towards seven o'clock every sign pointed to an unclouded morning of windless calm.

How good is a return to the high places, when the early sun is searching the hollows of the westward hills! How much to recall every time—that harsh call of the nutcracker as he flaps by fussily in search of new pine-kernels, the black redstart watching from boulder to boulder, and the alpine accentor's note first heard as you clear the trees. Here in the deep grass rises the purple gentian, bearded campanula by the wayside; and soon aster, viola and vanilla orchid greet you as one long strange to the upper pastures. Thus was that lack of training quite forgotten till the serious business of the day was upon us. The moraine ended abruptly; below and to the right was the small twisted glacier whose

chief occupation seems to be that of collecting every stone-fall from the Za ; above us stood the blunt end of our buttress. Nearly eight o'clock as it was, the shadow of the rocks mounting steeply to the main ridge some two thousand feet above shut out the sunlight, and would keep us cool for some time to come.

To start at the very lowest point of our buttress was impossible, for there was nothing but vertical slabs. Moving a short way towards the Za, we found a ledge sloping at an easy angle up to the right, past the mouth of a broad, open gully, and continuing beneath an overhang round to that face of the buttress which looked into the heart of a great couloir. This wide cleft separated our ridge from the rocks of the Za, and continued upward, an unbroken icy stone-shoot, to reach the summit crest just north of the Za. Our ledge meanwhile was delectable, if one may here use a word sacred to much more formidable climbing in Wales ; delectable in its abundance of hold, in its wealth of plants—old friends greeting us again from every crack—and in the joy of well-nailed boots gripping once more a firm, rough, rocky surface. Approaching the Za couloir, the ledge became smaller until it ceased beneath a steep red cliff. Progress directly upward seemed possible on such fine rock, but the angle was fierce and we could not be sure of finding a way to a higher ledge, which seemed to the upward gaze to offer promise. Discretion therefore prevailed over valour, and we retraced our steps along the ledge to the broad, open gully. Broken rock and grass soon led to the foot of a small cave, recalling wintry days on Tryfaen. We climbed easily up the right-hand wall ; and just above, where the gully was narrowing into the heart of a forbidding cliff, was another cave-pitch, larger but no more difficult, exit from which would probably lead to the upper ledge noted from below. Away to the left, inaccessible across a curtain of slab, ran the crest of our buttress, still rising steep in its first upward step from the moraine, but well broken and promising soon an easier angle of ascent.

On leaving the upper cave we found, in fact, that a small ledge, again delectable and of the firmest rock, led upward to the right at a comfortable angle, though here and there of an uncomfortable narrowness. Holding was excellent ; nowhere was there any difficulty more serious than a delicate balance round some steep corner ; but though we moved constantly upward, our ledge ran always across the southern face of the buttress, and the steepness of the rock above

forbade as yet all thought of a direct ascent to the crest. Most impressive was our narrow view, above and below, red walls of smooth rock with occasional cracks that sheltered the hardier plants, framed by a cloudless blue above and the cold stony hollow of the Za couloir now several hundred feet beneath. We had risen enough to see the hotel and the white chapel among the pines, hidden hitherto by a shoulder of moraine, and imagined busy eyes, fresh from contemplation of a leisurely breakfast, searching out our movements with the telescope—Praz Gras basked in a generous sunlight.

We began to wonder if our ledge would continue his friendly service. Steady progress he gave to be sure, but slow; and the steep left-hand wall brought a craving for more elbow room. A careful swing round an overhang revealed more open ground, and close above us was the crest of the buttress, now rising gently; at last we could turn leftward, making for a steep crack. It went beautifully, with the largest and roughest of footholds, and we stood looking far down to Satarma and the Lac Bleu, and the wide range of pasture above Evolena. Our first step was behind us; the morning was yet young and the weather perfect. While we sat a moment to refresh ourselves with a sight of the distant Oberland, glancing up now and then to take comfort how easy was the next stretch of ridge, we boasted that we had found the one safe, the one quick, simple route to the Za, and that too under the very noses of Arolla's experts—Nepioi!

Already we were well above the lowest rocks of the Za, and now began to make height rapidly up the crest, where the rock lay broken into broad slabs with an occasional tiny patch of scree. On either side immense cliffs ran down, but luckily there was no call to search their faces for a traverse. A small brown gendarme stood high above us, and beyond him we hoped for another broad stretch at an easy angle; but we were soon busily at it again, for the ridge grew suddenly steep and its smoothness drove us off to the right. The way was not easy to find; we rarely got a long view forward, and the more tempting traverses led downward to a fearsome region of slabs dropping holdless for a great depth into the Za couloir. A hundred feet or so above us the crest still rose steep and unpromising, and indeed none of the cracks opening on our left looked helpful towards regaining it. Yet as we moved across the face, one ledge leading conveniently to another, we did not often lose height and never the interest of route-finding. Very gradually we neared the

crest ; a short, steep chimney took us up merrily under an overhang that covered a broad level slab, along which wriggling lizardwise and much hindered by rucksacks, we found ourselves again astride the crest.

By now it was nearly eleven o'clock. Still the formless Dent de Zallion overlooked us from the left across a wide semicircle of grey slabs—of a kind most repulsive to the climber ; though firm enough they were undercut and lay one above the other, like rows of crabs' backs. Thoughts of a traverse over such rock now forced themselves upon us ; for there had come into sight, not far above us, a section of the ridge which even on distant Praz Gras had troubled the imagination ; a section where, if the ridge itself should give no passage, we knew that the S. side was one vast slab, descending in a bare, measureless slope to the Za couloir and broken only by a huge overhang. So two rather anxious men went up a steep, broken face and over a small gendarme, to find a dismaying prospect. It was in truth much more like the edge of a gable than any reasonable arête should be, dark brown in colour, not extremely steep but absolutely holdless. Out of the question to traverse its S. side ; equally so a direct ascent ; there remained only to search for a route among the grey crabs' backs to our left. And here fortune was wonderfully kind : just where our need was the greatest she had built us a ledge across the face, somewhat ' scabreux ' in nature, where every hold sloped outward, but nowhere steep or narrow enough to try the balance unduly. True, it took us some way from the crest and gave little gain in height. But at least it led forward ; and where it ran out into smoothness the upward angle was not too severe. From here we could strike straight up for the ridge, still doubtful if it could be reached ; the holds, however, though few and sometimes none too reassuring, were always well placed. Progress was steady, and soon the upper part of the gable was near us. A short downward traverse to the right, and we were almost upon it, separated only by a bulging brown tower which looked too evil to cross. Immediately below, and parallel to the crest, was a stretch of slab, distressingly smooth but not oversteep and leading up towards a crack which if once attained seemed to give certain access to the crest.

I was standing in a broad hold somewhat to the left of this slab, and at first could watch the leader moving upward with great care over the wrinkles of the rock. Clearly it was no place to hold safely the second man, and as the coil of sixty-

foot rope at my feet grew ever smaller my anxieties increased. Was there any prospect of a holding-place? I called up. No reply except a steady passage of rope through my hands. 'No more rope!' 'Unrope,' came the distant answer, and soon the end knot passed out of reach and sight. Few men can be so forlorn as the ropeless. Memory took me back eleven years to the late afternoon of a cloudless Italian day, when I had stood beside a pile of axes and rucksacks at the foot of the last overhang on the S. ridge of the Herbetet, waiting for a friendly rope from the two invisible and barely audible above, 'to join them as best I could.' I now climbed round to the base of the slab, and could see Irving well up in the crack and close to the crest. Soon he was astride, very pleased with life and looking upward confidently. 'We're as high as the Dent de Zallion,' he called down, and got out the spare rope; nearly one hundred feet were needed to reach me, and two or three shots before the knot-end came just within reach. If one must climb slabs by wrinkle-holds when training is bad and balance worse, it is very comforting to have a rope from above; shortly below the entrance to the crack the slab grew steep and a clumsy step would be difficult to recover. It was good to be on the crest again, to look down upon that repellent gable now well below us and shutting out all view of the lower ridge, and to hear a confident voice, 'Steep, but straight ahead now, I believe.'

The difficulties, in truth, were over. Except for the last stretch of slab they had never been severe, but there was hardly any portion of the climb where our route lay obvious to follow, and we had often wondered if some sudden obstacle might not check all further progress. The more pleasing was it now that we need not leave the crest. Very narrow in places, sound and warm to the touch, it never gave trouble, and brought us quickly to the foot of the twin summits. The higher lies to the right, looking from below like a crooked finger: he proved game to the end, sent us round to the S.E. foot, and gave a delightful short scramble round steep corners and up to sit astride of a beautiful rough yellow slab, in great contentment.

Hardly a breath of wind stirred. Towards the E., now first seen across the wide Mont Miné snowfields where a few cloud shadows drifted lazily by, stood the Zermatt peaks, with their host of memories. Westward, we could tell the number of Mont Blanc's attendant cathedrals, shining in that faint icy blue of a fine-weather distance. At our feet the Za

couloir fell grey and forbidding to the moraine where five hours earlier we had roped up ; the Za himself rose sharp and reproachful, not two hundred feet above, and round his foot lapped gentle waves of glacier, promising an untroubled return to the valley. An hour went by unnoticed as we basked and brewed our tea, sleepily recalling the details of our climb ; unnoticed also the sun now too scorching, and a gross darkness gathering slowly over the Aosta valley.

We descended quickly to the N. Col de Bertol, and down over its schrund by a wide bridge, as yet safe though clearly not long-lived. Mont Collon and the peaks of Chermontane were still bathed in sunlight, but already behind them a wall of thick cloud crept forward under a gusty S.W. wind. As we fled down the zigzags towards the lower Arolla glacier, the first grey fingers of storm curled round the upper Vuibez crags, distant mutterings of thunder grew nearer and lightning played about the Aiguilles Rouges. Soon there was a sound of much rain, and a great wind rushing valleyward flung us home, soaked but triumphant, to the welcome of a bedroom tea.

And if we discovered that our route was no novelty, for all our boasting, and certainly a very long way to the Za ; or that its first conqueror apparently had not even thought of recording his victory over a peak to which Siegfried would give neither name nor height : and if Dr. Dübi's admirable guide-book is temptingly ambiguous about the whole matter—what then ? For us it had all the charm of a new route : not a boot-scratch to cheer our way, constant doubt if the next corner might not prove fatal to success, disturbing thoughts of that brown gable and its flanking slabs, and for myself the perfect confidence born of years under Irving's leadership. I must indeed confess to have groaned aloud as that crooked finger beckoning from the summit never seemed to come nearer, but always to mock my bad training, and to have searched out the temptation of an unattractive descent into the icy depths of the Za couloir. Yet as we first gained the crest of our buttress, and knew that at any rate the steepest bit must now lie beneath us, I had thought how Guido Rey himself took heart from a memory of Dante's words—' Cette montagne est telle, que toujours au bas, dans les commencements, elle semble difficile. Mais plus l'homme s'y élève, moins il y trouve de peine.'