

FIFTY YEARS AGO.

BY G. A. SOLLY.

(Read before the Alpine Club, April 2, 1935.)¹

AT the beginning of March last the Honorary Secretary found himself unexpectedly without a paper for this meeting and, after drawing a blank elsewhere, wrote to me suggesting that the younger members might like to hear something of the conditions of mountaineering in the middle period of the Club. When such a request comes from a new Secretary, with a new President and a very experienced Editor in the near background, it is almost impossible for a loyal member to escape.

I was elected to the Club in February 1890, so have not been a member for fifty years, but my first visit to the Alps, which was for walks below the snow-line only, took place in 1885, so that I can just go back to memories of fifty years ago. In the main I shall limit myself to notes about the Club at that date and about the climbers, guides and conditions of mountaineering in general as they seemed to me during the years 1885 to 1895. You must accordingly pardon me if the personal pronoun is used very frequently.

First as to the Club. In the 1885 list there are 470 names, and in that of 1935, 686 names, although before the war a maximum of 729 had been reached. Twenty of the names in the latest are in the 1885 list, so that about 3 per cent. of our members have passed their Jubilee. At the time of the Club's Jubilee meeting in 1907 there were two survivors only of the original members. These figures are given without taking any note of survivors who had retired from the Club. In the early days of the Club before 1885 very little about it was known in the country generally. The Press hardly mentioned it unless to record an accident; there were no daily picture papers and comparatively few photographs. There were no other British mountaineering clubs, while the Club premises consisted only of the two small rooms at the top of No. 8, St. Martin's Place. The

¹ The narrative is the substance of the original paper; it was illustrated by slides from the collection in the Alpine Club, together with others lent by the Fell and Rock Club and several friends.—G. A. S.

members had been so few that until lately it had almost been possible for every member to be acquainted with, or at least to know by repute, something about every other member. It is true that the famous books of Leslie Stephen, Tyndall, Whymper and others had been published ; that Freshfield's party in 1868 and Walker's in 1874 had been to the Caucasus, W. S. Green to New Zealand and Slingsby to Norway, but the public had hardly got hold of the idea that the new playground was for all and not only for the select few possessing leisure and sufficient means to enable them to take a long holiday. The halcyon days of the 'sixties had long passed—days when the climbers tarried but to divide the prey, to every climber a maiden 'peak' or two. Most of the mountains had been climbed by more than one route, and the charm of exploration seemed to have passed away.

For myself, I do not think I had ever heard of the Club when I went out in 1885, although three of my schoolmasters—Dr. Jex-Blake, C. B. Hutchinson and R. W. Taylor—had been members. I knew all three, but do not remember that any one of them ever spoke to me of mountaineering.

By 1895 the position was different. Conway had gone to the Himalaya in 1892, Green to the Selkirks in 1882, while many parties had been to the Caucasus. The first *Climbers' Guides* had appeared before 1890, and Donkin's magnificent photographs had adorned Spooner's windows in the Strand. Many Mountaineering Clubs had been formed both in Great Britain and abroad. The Cairngorm and the Scottish Mountaineering Clubs were founded in 1889, the New Zealand Club in 1891, the Climbers' and others only a little later. The whole world had been awakened to the possibilities ; quicker and less expensive means of travelling had been developed.

It may be of interest to compare the clothing and equipment of that time and now. Before 1885 almost every climber, guide or amateur wore trousers ; knickerbockers were hardly known. The illustrations in early books and photographs confirm this. I believe that Horace Walker who climbed from 1855 to 1905 never wore them in the Alps before 1890, and the pioneer lady climbers all wore skirts. The first lady that I saw without a skirt was a young American whom I met in 1887 as I was coming down from the Matterhorn. I saw what I took to be a chubby boy sitting down as we passed ; I asked my guides what a boy of that apparent age was doing, but they had heard of the intended expedition and explained that it was a young lady. I assume that her seated position was in defer-

ence to the fashion of the times and to hide the change, and I am glad to be able to say that she made a very good ascent on the following day.

Puttees were hardly known in the Alps until Conway returned from India in 1892 and told us about them. We used cloth leggings which had to be buttoned on, and generally had a strap, cord, or steel chain under the instep to keep them down. One year I used a steel chain, but it got broken and was very troublesome to fasten up again. In the Caucasus in 1893 I think all our party used leggings, but in 1894 we had puttees.

As to nails, little was known of all the modern fancy patterns with screws and spikes. The 'Mummery' spikes and four-pointed screws were introduced about 1890, and a few had crampons and rope shoes, mostly of Austrian make.

We relied on the local shoemaker to put in the best nails he had, and by the end of a season, you might have a dozen varieties of nails in your boots. In passing I may mention three early references to crampons or spikes. Colonel Beaufoy who ascended Mont Blanc in 1787 says, 'I carried with me cramp-irons for the heels of my shoes by means of which the hold of the frozen snow is firm, and on steep ascents the poise of the body is preserved,' and at the Glacier de la Côte he says, 'We' (that is, self and guides) 'fixed our cramp-irons to our shoes.'

Undrell who made the ascent in 1819 says, 'Our shoes were fitted with the crampons used on such expeditions,' and in 1845 the Rev. Robert Snow on his way to the Col du Géant says that 'At the foot of the Tacul I had some spiked nails screwed into my boots.'

With regard to photography by climbers, the Rev. H. B. George was amongst the earliest to make use of the camera for illustrating climbing books. He used his own negatives in *The Oberland and its Glaciers*, published in 1866, while F. C. Grove used photographs taken by Horace Walker in his *The Frosty Caucasus*, published in 1875. After this the practice became common, although for large photographs glass plates were still employed. I believe that such were used by Donkin, and I remember meeting Signor Sella at the Trift above Zermatt in 1889 when, in addition to his guides, he had several porters to carry large glass plates and other impedimenta. Also in 1893 Woolley used glass plates, which I well remember helping to carry up many steep slopes. On his next visit in 1896 I understand that he tried films. The fact that it is no longer necessary to carry the heavy glass plates no doubt accounts for the popularity of mountain photography to-day.

In 1890 it was the exception to meet a party with a camera, whereas now it is quite the other way.

Further, before 1895 very few papers read before the Club were illustrated with slides, and I think I am right in saying there were no photographic exhibitions at the December Club Receptions held in the Whitehall Rooms.

There is in the Club a large collection of early photographs, but they are mainly of mountain scenery, which has changed little except for the retreat of glaciers, and there are comparatively few pictures of places well known to the early climbers and familiar by name to all readers of Alpine literature. I should like to suggest an appeal to all who have such photographs to offer them to the Club to have slides made and, above all, to have the places identified. I have in mind such scenes as mountain *gîtes* and old huts, villages destroyed by fire and since rebuilt, such as Meiringen, Grindelwald and Euseigne, and old churches such as Zermatt and Saas Fee, now replaced by larger and more modern but less picturesque buildings.

My own experiences which began in 1885 were very humble. I visited the old village of Meiringen before the great fire. I ascended the Schynige Platte (6790 ft.) and, from its top, first heard and saw avalanches falling from the Oberland peaks, while an eagle soared high above us in a cloudless sky. If the rate of exchange permits, I hope to make my Jubilee ascent this year, and have every prospect of success, as a railway to the top has been thoughtfully provided.

I could not do much in 1886 when I was at Grindelwald as I had been ill, but I made my first 10,000 ft. peak, the Mettenberg, with three gentlemen staying at the hotel who asked me to join them and to share the cost of two guides. I have forgotten the names of these gentlemen except that one was a Mr. Leach, and as the hotel visitors' book was lost when the Bear Hôtel was burnt down in the following year I have never been able to ascertain them. This was the original Bear, and I was sleeping in the Rubi house close to it which was also burnt. The hotel was then managed by the Boss family, of whom I knew Emil and Fritz best ; I have very happy memories of my meetings with them.

One of our guides was old Peter Baumann, who is included in the list in *Pioneers of the Alps* by Cunningham and Abney. He was a very fine man, but having reached the age of fifty-three was supposed more or less to be on the retired list and did not undertake long expeditions.

In 1887, with R. W. Brant and my youngest brother, I walked up to Zermatt from Visp. There was no railway and one had to ride or walk to St. Niklaus, where the carriage road to Zermatt began. There were always crowds of porters to meet the trains at Visp; they had their address cards and fixed tariff and recognized former customers. It was an established business which disappeared as the railways came, when the porters had to seek other employment which they obtained, probably, on the new railway.

We had no idea of serious climbing, but thought we might manage the Cima di Jazzi, and after a conversation with Peter Anton Perren engaged him as guide. We got safely up but thought it a grind, while Perren on arriving back swore that he would never go up that mountain again. We proposed for our next expedition the Mettelhorn as being within our powers and pockets, but he opposed the motion and said he would take us up the Riffelhorn which was better, and for the same money, so we went up by a route on the north arête. I had been accustomed to a good deal of scrambling and bird's-nesting from childhood and had no difficulty with the rocks.

After that we became more ambitious and crossed by the Adler Pass to Saas Fee. The Adler Pass route at that time went down the glacier to Mattmark, making with the walk to Almagell and the ascent through the woods to Fee a very long day. There was no Britannia hut, and in fact no hut at all for any of the Saas mountains. There was then only one hotel at Saas Fee, the Dom, and opposite to it the old and beautiful village church. Two days later we returned to Zermatt over the Alphubel Pass. My brother had to return home then, but Brant and I ascended our first big mountain, the Zinal-Rothhorn. Our money was then at an end and Brant did not wish to do more, but Perren urged me to do the Matterhorn. I felt that I might never be in such good training again, but had to explain the financial position, when he at once said, 'That does not matter. You send it in October or at Christmas, or when you like and we are glad to have it then. If we have it now we spend it quickly, but if it comes later it is very useful.' Our early British climbers had established a great trust in our national honesty, a trust which has been well maintained to this day. After consulting two members of the Club, Scriven and de Carteret, who were at the hotel, I engaged Perren and, as second guide, Josef Brantschen of St. Niklaus, in preference to another guide who had been with us; we went up to the hut built in 1880 and now disused. It was a beautiful

night and we stood outside watching an eclipse and after that a magnificent display of lightning. The flashes travelled round, lighting up all the peaks in succession from the Theodulhorn on our right to, I think it was, the Rothhorn on our left—a glorious view. Later, after we had retired, we were roused by the entrance of a German gentleman who had made a solitary ascent of the mountain. He was quite well but very tired, and the guides helped him to get his meal. Next day was fine and the mountain in good condition, but with some ice high up. It took us $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours in all— $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours to get up and 3 hours back. On the way we passed the old hut, which had much ice in it, while there was a good deal of snow at the top.

In 1888 I had bad weather. I took on Franz Burgener, brother of the better known Alexander and Alois, and after three wet days at St. Niklaus slept out on the way towards the Ried Pass, hoping to get over to Saas somehow. There was thick mist, but we got over the Balfrinjoeh and another small pass into the Saasthal and then up to Fee, and two days later crossed by the Feejoeh to Zermatt. There I again took on Perren, and in doubtful weather we ascended the Rimpfischhorn direct from the Monte Rosa Hôtel. There was much new snow and some mist, and the expedition took us 17 hours in all. In 1928, forty years later, Peter Anton and I again went up, taking as our third man Peter's son, Edmond Perren, who was not born in 1888. The conditions on this occasion were such that we went to the top unroped. Edmond was a promising young guide, but unfortunately he died two years ago in an accident in the valley.

In 1888 I met Lorria at the Monte Rosa Hôtel, badly crippled after his accident in the 'Penhall' couloir of the Matterhorn, but brave and cheerful. He must have been a fine mountaineer and especially good on ice; he was quite willing to spend a night or two out rather than return from an uncompleted climb. He once told me that he was only ordinary on rocks, but 'On ice,' he said, 'I am a guide.'

I think it was during this season that we had a 'Punch,' one of the famous functions elsewhere mentioned, with Jost to brew it and mix the materials, Herr Seiler coming in to have his health drunk. I heard of one later 'Punch' only, in 1890, I think, when H. E. B. Harrison and Brant were present.

By this time I had heard of the Alpine Club and was anxious to qualify, so I determined to have a strenuous holiday in 1889 and engaged Perren and Gabriel Taugwalder for a month; we met at Zermatt and had an excellent time for three and a

half weeks, finishing up at the Montenvers. It may be of interest to state that the agreement with the guides was 30 francs for each day when a peak was done, 25 francs a day when a pass but no peak was accomplished, and 10 francs a day when we rested or only went to a hut. At that date these terms were quite satisfactory to two of the best of the Zermatt guides.

During the season we traversed the Nadelhorn, after sleeping at the Festi hut, which was, I understand, on the same ledge as the old Festi *gîte*. It was a poor place, with hardly room for six. I had a corner, Joseph Imboden with his son and his Herr filled up most of the rest, and my guides decided to stay outside. I joined them about 1 A.M., and we had a cold and grim meal on the ledge, looking down to the dark and shadowy valley below. I have not been up there since, but have heard that the present hut is not upon the same site. Two or three hours later when the sun rose and began to show on the Weiss-horn we had a glorious view, one of those that live in the memory. However, the good weather did not continue and we had snow on the top of the Nadelhorn, and with some difficulty found the way down by the Windjoch to Saas Fee. Later in the tour on the way to the Montenvers, after climbing the Aiguille du Géant, I met a party of three coming from the Dru. One was obviously a guide and the second turned out to be J. H. Wicks. The third I could not make out. He was dressed in a black coat with trousers, and a clerical-looking hat, but he seemed to be the leader, jumping crevasses and finding out a route at a tremendous pace; a little later I saw him serving at the hotel *table d'hôte* and learned that he was Alfred Simond, who was then still willing to act as guide to his friends on a big expedition. Thirty-two years later I again ascended the Aiguille du Géant with G. S. Bower and J. B. Meldrum, coming to the conclusion that the mountain had changed and was then much steeper and, notwithstanding many extra ropes, much more trying to the wind! A Swiss gentleman who was up there at the same time said he had come to the same conclusion, though it was sixteen years only since his former ascent.

Two days later I crossed the Nantillons Glacier, which I then saw for the first time on my way to the Aiguille des Grands Charmoz; thirty years later I found an old letter to a relative saying that it was a dangerous place, and I did not want to go there again. Nevertheless I have visited it several times since.

The last time was in 1921, when I traversed the Grépon with amateur guides only—Bower, Meldrum and Howard Somervell.

I was not then strong enough to accomplish the 'Mummery crack' without a pull, but I think I could have done the rest, though not sufficiently fast to complete the expedition in one day. I owe a very great pleasure to my friends for asking me to join them. I doubt whether any one else of well over sixty has made the climb without professional guides and when no member of the party had previously climbed the mountain; none of the credit, however, is mine.

While referring to the Montenvers district I may call attention to the large stone that, according to tradition, was used by Pocock and Windham in 1741 as a shelter on their way from Montenvers to the glacier, and is perhaps the same stone mentioned by Pierre Martel in his reply to the letter from Windham. Dr. Forbes in *A Physician's Holiday, or A Month in Switzerland in 1848*, refers to it as the Englishmen's stone seen by Pocock and Windham in 1841 and says that their names were freshly painted on it. In an early edition of Whymper's *Guide to Chamonix* there is a sketch of it and it is spoken of in *Ball* and other guide books. On my visit to Montenvers in 1889 it was pointed out to me, and I remember some letters on it, although I cannot say that the names of the travellers were there. I saw the stone again in 1892 and 1895, but not later. Probably it was broken up during the construction of the railway, but if so it seems strange that none of the natives took any action to perpetuate so old a memorial. My recollection of it is that it would have been useless as a *gîte*, although making a very good shelter from the glacier wind for any luncheon party. It is not quite certain whether or not the stone of 1741 was there during the whole century and a half of its alleged existence. Coolidge considered that there had been a change and that the original stone had disappeared, but it seems clear that the said stone was seen by Forbes in 1848 and remained until after 1890. Since reading this paper, I have come across a much earlier mention by Bourrit. My edition of *Relation of a Journey to the Glaciers in the Duchy of Savoy* is the second edition published in London, 1776. On p. 105 Bourrit mentions his visit to the 'English stone.' This I think must have been the original stone which disappeared, according to Coolidge, before the visit of Forbes.

The list of my expeditions in those three years is recorded in the Club Candidates' book, but is only of interest as showing what was then considered a sufficient qualification.

I had been advised, wrongly as I now think, that the earlier visits in 1885 and 1886 need not be mentioned. Up to that

time I had never climbed with any member of the Club nor with anyone who ever became a member, except R. W. Brant, so that I hardly knew where to find a proposer or seconder. This had its advantages at the ballot, for on that evening one candidate failed to secure election, but as no one knew anything against me I was passed. Except for the five war years and one other year I have been to the Alps or beyond every season since.

From about 1890 the spirit of travel amongst distant and unknown ranges developed rapidly, Freshfield, Conway, Collie and many others all taking part in the movement.

My utmost length of holiday was limited to seven weeks, but after hearing the speech of Conway at the Club dinner on December 20, 1892, I decided to go beyond the Alps if I could. Some here will remember that dinner, when Conway came in morning dress directly after his arrival in London from India, and only just in time. He made a delightful speech, perhaps the best he ever made to the Club, just telling us of his tour in an unknown region, with the memory of its details and incidents still fresh in his mind. As an aside, I may point out the date of the dinner—December 20—the early dates now so common are an innovation.

India and New Zealand were out of the question for me, and I hesitated between Canada as described by Green, Spitsbergen, to which there was then a regular line of steamers, and the Caucasus. The chance of delay for quarantine set me against Canada, and the length of the sea voyage against Spitsbergen, so I decided in favour of the Caucasus, having the good fortune to be able to join a party comprising Woolley, Cockin and Newmarch. In 1894 I went out again with Newmarch and Joseph Collier. Our doings are recorded in the *ALPINE JOURNAL*, but we did not have favourable weather in either season.

I have tried to describe mountaineering as it appeared to me between forty and fifty years ago, and to give some particulars of the Alpine Club itself; in doing so I have drawn upon my own very ordinary experiences, as each one can do, whether he be an old or a new member. We cannot fail to see the changes caused by traffic development and by the increased number of visitors, but the mountains remain the same. We may miss some of the charm of the huts where one seldom used to meet more than two or three parties and, if you crossed a mountain, you could be almost certain of finding room in the hut on the opposite side, with perhaps a well-known climber or guide to greet you.

We still have our friends at hotels, although they may be now the great-grandchildren of former owners whom we knew well, while the guides and villagers will still give the same warm welcome. The problems of the climber are different and very difficult expeditions are more frequently undertaken—he may have become an expert cragsman in Great Britain, but icework is a craft that can be learned on the glacier only. Those who will not stay to learn have still the same sad toll to pay.

The Club is 50 per cent. larger than it was and the same intimacy between members is impossible, but the spirit of friendship remains; the memories of the past are the property of all. If there is any pride in the Club it is in the knowledge that it has taught mankind how to make use of the playgrounds of the world. The soul of the Club is unchanged. We still go to the hills to find the spirit of each spot, and those who have eyes to see and ears to hear or a heart to know the secrets of the mountains will look back while life lasts with thanks for strength and health and happy memories of days gone by and of friendships made.

To one who joined the Club almost as a stranger, its friendliness has seemed its most remarkable feature.

To have known intimately and to have climbed with such men as our three northern Presidents, Horace Walker, Charles Pilkington and Woolley, or as Slingsby, or, coming to men more of my own age, as Archer Thompson, Joseph Collier, and Harry Walker of Dundee, or as Mumm (I do not name the living), has been a pleasure of value beyond estimate—a privilege upon which no price can be placed.

LESLIE STEPHEN'S LETTERS TO SOME FRENCH FRIENDS.

WHILE writing the preface to my translation of *The Playground of Europe* I tried to find documents enabling me to draw a sort of intellectual portrait of Sir Leslie Stephen. I thought of asking Stephen's French friends whether they had kept any of his letters. One was found in the C.A.F. archives and I had it copied. Mme. A. Savine, *née* Loppé, the granddaughter of Stephen's intimate friend, lent me twenty-three letters he had written to her grandfather between 1875 and 1904, and allowed me to publish them. I gave some extracts of them in the preface of my translation, and thought they deserved ampler quotation. Some of them had been copied