

COMPLAINTS—AND CONFESSIONS OF AN OLD MOUNTAINEER

By PAUL MONTANDON

To myself—and to my contemporaries of circa 1860 A.D.

THERE is not the slightest doubt about it, you *are* now an old man. It is all very well to contend that a fellow is not older than he feels himself to be. The world, however, for as much as it is good enough to take any notice of one's own little personality, has its private opinion which does not always coincide with our own. Why, for instance, does that damned fellow now help you, a conqueror of the Grépon, to climb into a tram or car? Curse the chap! Why, when full, do youngsters, and even young girls (!) offer you now their seat? True, if they don't you will say that all civility is lost among the younger generation. Why does one near you—dear soul—place a cushion upon your chair or even order a warming-pan to be put into your bed—for you who have so many times slept in the open, on rock or even snow? If chance still favours you with invitations you invariably get the place of honour near the lady of the house, provided there be no competitor in the person of some highbrow visitor with a lot of abbreviations in capital letters after his name. There you may exhibit your gifts of amiable conversation competing with some famous bygone Talleyrand. By and by you will give your gracious neighbours delicately but unquestionably to understand what sort of a hero you are—or were—in the High Alps. Take care, though, what you say: some Mrs. U.-O'B., who perhaps has seen you climb, may overhear you and pitilessly destroy your nice little romance. Saying agreeable things to young ladies is of no consequence whatever for them. They may smile politely, listening to your compliments, but in any case they will feel celestially quiet in your presence, and that is, I suppose, what they most appreciate.

Continental sporting clubs may honour you with Veteranships, together with a big medal, because you have lived (and paid) so long. By that official confirmation they expect you to feel thankful and proud of your advanced age. Should you formerly have done anything really notable, obtaining even a few good lines in the *ALPINE JOURNAL*, perhaps even a mention in the Presidential Speech, young mountaineers at Zermatt or Chamonix, where you promenade your own little celebrity (and perhaps your rheumatics), cast polite side-glances at you. They perhaps point you out to each other and you catch the words: 'It's A. B., he was a mountaineer—formerly.' Of course you put on an

indifferent expression before those looks, although they tickle your vanity—by the way the only thing in mankind which remains for ever young. In a similar way curators of museums point out to visitors some very ancient statues—mostly with broken noses—as famous remnants of a bygone age.

Your advice in council is listened to with outward deference. Your young colleagues' secret thought, however, is, I am afraid: 'We don't care for his so-called experience and for those stories told a hundred times. Those old days are past and we have vastly progressed since then: we moderns are busy nailing up north walls!' Young flappers who, roped to a solid number one, have succeeded in achieving a few good rock climbs, speak in your place and presence with authority (and pertness) on all Alpine questions—thus showing their vast superiority.

Now and then, to stir up your memories, you take in hand one or other of your six ice axes all of different periods, decreasing in length to the size of a walking-stick. You go over it with caressing fingers and you try if it has not lost its good swing. Each of the six has some little tale to tell. Do you remember where and when? Cast a look at your old friends, the white summit or black needles which beckon there, high up. There was a time when some of them required hard work from you and perhaps all your coolness and energy. Maybe you were then occasionally in the lead when ascending and likewise in the place of honour coming down. A fine time, bless responsibility! Now your thoughts are those of remembrance and no more of conquest. For the latter bodily force is necessary, first of all. . . .

But you have studied your philosophers and become quite enthusiastic about certain capital maxims of theirs. Some of them say you are now full of wisdom. So you seek for compensations for what is lost. You then discover in your thoughts a certain satisfaction that those heavy-rucksack-carrying times are over at last. So, likewise, those awful nights in over-filled *cabanes*, those hateful early breakfasts, those uncertainties about the weather and all that toiling and sweating. Now, in the morning, you may stretch yourself at full length in a soft 10-ft. bed as long as it pleases you and, thank God, take breakfast with pleasure and appetite at a Christian hour. All this even at the Montenvers inn. There formerly you had to start at midnight or 1 A.M. for your big climbs if the weather was fine. But dear old Edward Broome is no longer there pulling your leg the evening before in his inimitable, wicked manner; full of malicious pleasure he ever was: You will have to go . . .

However, are you quite happy that those early starts are over now? You still feel, it is true, in your flesh some San Sebastian-like wounds, due to unaccomplished arrow-like summits and unsuccessful trials when you were too prudent. *Carpe diem*, young man, our years flow away with incredible swiftness! At last, to escape from troubling thoughts you take in hand some number of the ALPINE or GEOGRAPHICAL JOURNALS for diversion. There you find stories of high deeds in the

Himalaya, in the Arctic and elsewhere, fought out by men most sympathetic, ardent and active in body and mind—true young men in every sense. You rejoice in their successes. You try to imagine yourself as one of their band . . . but those times are past for you and the summing up of your reflections is a sigh: Why is mountaineering such a fine thing?

Yes, my dear, you are old and very talkative too. Complaints are unworthy of a man. You had far better and without any more fuss comply with the Editor's demand: take your pen and write down a few reminiscences (but without embellishing your sins and shortcomings) as well as your continental English and your fading memory will permit.

As I said before, the JOURNAL is full of important enterprises, mostly successful in every way. Let me then, for a change, relate some little adventures of mine which did *not* come out well and where I left, or might have left, so to speak, something of my own anatomy. They will afford the readers—if any—occasion for exercising their severest criticisms, which I shall humbly accept. Such lessons have, in fact, no lesser value when they come from eventual sinners themselves.

In the course of sixty years of mountaineering I fell once—once only—into a crevasse. I have had, alone, to haul up a man out of a depth of 33 ft. I have had an arm damaged and nearly crushed. I was bombarded by chamois from above. I was thrown down a considerable distance by an unfortunate companion, a learned man, falling directly upon my innocent head. I slipped, only once and but a few inches, on an easy mountain but in a dangerous place, and do not like to even think about it. I have had to hold three companions hanging on my rope. And lastly I have been a witness of a fatal accident, but of this I have written elsewhere and at length.

So I cannot pretend that nothing ever happened to the party of which I was a member. But fate has been very kind towards me. It has left me, as the only drawback, with one arm somewhat shorter than the other, although other little deficiencies would not class my skeleton as quite A1. But let me quit that *plaisanterie macabre*.

That ominous crevasse first alluded to is situated on the Tribolazione Glacier, just at the top of the icefall, where as a rule they are most dangerous. Our descending party of four followed exactly the same way as on the ascent. We had then crossed that quite invisible cleft at right angles. The snow was still almost hard. Leading the party and testing all the time, I found myself all at once hanging 15 ft. deep in the void. It happened as sudden as lightning. I had not even had time to protest! Although the rope seems to have been almost taut at the time, the second man too was taken by surprise and drawn along a little bit. The crevasse was a big one. I could not see its bottom. One side could just be touched with my outstretched axe, which I had kept. The other wall could not be reached, even when balancing towards it. I had trodden upon the only weak spot of the powerful

bridge. The rope was a very good and very thick one. But by the fall and my weight—about 12 stone—it had cut very unpleasantly into my body, causing a painful contusion of the ribs, which I felt somewhat during full two months afterwards. From a fall of only 15 feet! Falling deeper or with a thinner rope round one, this pain would be very much greater. So that thin ropes, even when of first quality, are not to be recommended on crevassed glaciers. Women, I am of opinion, should even use belts.

I had instructed our porter, the last of the party—a very good man—once for all what to do in such an emergency. When he had let down his part of the rope I stepped into the loop with great relief (best with *both* feet into a *large* loop). The hauling up over the rim, as is generally the case, was not easy, but taking hold with both hands of an out-stretched axe, I could crawl out. Meanwhile the weather had had time to change—I remarked that it was snowing. I had felt only some *stupeur* at the first moment and no anxiety afterwards. But emerging into safety I felt, for all that, that my long-tended nerves were just a little shaken.

It was a good lesson and served. A spare rope carried by a middle-man would, of course, be useful in similar cases; it might be a thinner one. The day afterwards I went with the porter to the Cima del Gran Sertz, leaving the intended Becca di Montandeyné with its crevassed glacier alone, on good grounds.

On another occasion, as said before, I hauled a too rashly progressing companion out of a 33-ft.-deep icy depth, into which, out of my sight, he had fallen in spite of my objurgations to go carefully. I was alone with him, but once the Mummery system of double-roping was ready to put into action, he came to the surface in a few minutes. Held somewhat by me he had slid down without much harm to the dry base of the crack, which made the rescue easier.

That accident which happened in the Bernina ¹ years ago, when two of a descending party of four fell, the leading guide hanging with all his weight of 90 kg. on the likewise hanging tourist, was an unspeakably awful one. It will be remembered that the guide cut himself loose after waiting some time, thus saving himself uninjured, but meanwhile the gentleman had died of heart failure.

An accident which might have had serious results happened to me at a place named *Bärentritt* on the Dundenband (Blümlisalp Group). A young relation of mine, quite a beginner, stepped inadvertently upon a big and very heavy slab which evidently had just kept its balance. The slab, sliding down towards me who was looking the other way, took me off my feet. But being retained very soon by some small protuberance, it finally pressed my right arm just a little against the rocky terrain. My elbow was split in the form of a 'Y.' Besides that I sustained much damage to the muscle of the upper arm. I succeeded nevertheless, with aid, in photographing the hated slab-culprit. To reach the Kienthal, we had now to return over the *Dundengrat*, during

¹ On the N. slope of Fuorcla de la Bellavista in 1898.—*A.J.* 19. 497–502.

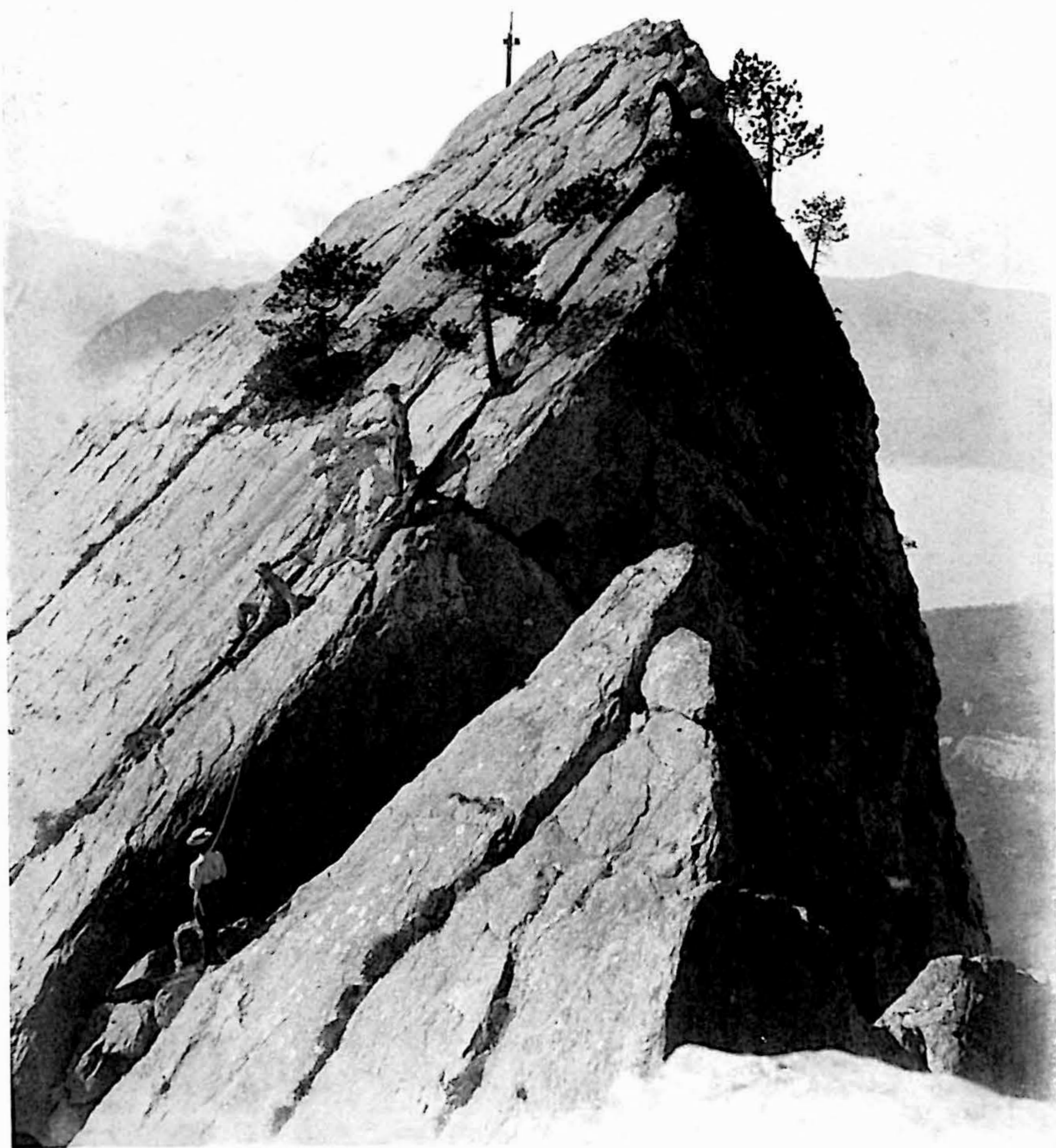
which journey I was more than once on the brink of losing consciousness. After three months' treatment and an operation, I was all right again, retaining as a souvenir a slightly curved arm with limited stretching powers and flexion but with no loss of strength.

Years ago I took part in a geological excursion of the Thoune Section, S.A.C. Their aim was that very attractive and thoroughly Alpine chain of the Sigriswyler Rothorn. Its last southern summit above the lake of Thoune is the Spitze Fluh. From its top, which we visited—an amusing little climb—you have the impression that you might just about jump into the blue lake. Another curiosity of the chain is the ice-cave of the *Schafloch*. It has been measured and described at length in the *Jahrbuch* S.A.C. of 1884 by the late Messrs. Gosset, Körber and Wyttenbach. Its length is 206·8 m., of which 107 m. are icy. Its small glacier contains a sort of little bergschrund on one side and there exist also several big ice columns, parts of them hollow, so that you can step inside. There is also a description of this interesting cave in Bishop G. F. Browne's *Ice Caves in France and Switzerland*. Its height is from 3 to 7 metres. It is frequently visited; an axe and a rope are useful.

On the way to this cave my brother and I were once nearly killed by stones loosened directly above by chamois. The hard snow of the couloir we were just crossing was quite riddled with stones round us of all calibres and I believe we have never been so near death as on that occasion.

To return to the said geological excursion. Before taking the path a general halt was agreed upon. During this, one of the participants and I went to collect some *Flühblumen* (*Primula auricula*) which were then in full bloom and fragrance. We found some on a green wall quite close to the path. My companion, a schoolmaster, was standing about 10 ft. above me and near to some shrubs. I just heard a faint noise and then found myself jammed, 10 or 12 ft. lower down, more to the left, in a sort of rocky angle. Without my seeing or feeling anything whatever my companion had fallen with his feet directly upon my head, his bootnails inflicting thereon wounds which subsequently turned out to be infected. He fell altogether about 30 ft. over the rocks and at their base rolled down much farther over steep grass mixed with stones. When rescued by his companions they found that he had no limbs broken, but had sustained a serious fracture of the skull and had lost consciousness. He was carried down upon a stretcher, improvised on the spot. When leaving the hospital, several weeks afterwards, he had not, and never did recover, the slightest remembrance of the whole thing and of what had happened during the preceding morning.

As for me, I at once consolidated my somewhat precarious position by taking hold of some dry branches and then carefully walked over horizontally to the path near by. There I was attended to. My inventory of wounds resulted in the said injuries to my head, a broken rib and some other damage of lesser importance. With the aid of two



Photo, P. Montandon.]

SPITZE FLUH FROM THE N.

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sticks I walked down into the valley (the Justistal). On reaching home the disinfection of the wounds was of course not altogether a pleasure.

What is interesting in this accident is that in fact I had, as said above, never seen or felt anything at the critical moment. My conviction, therefore, is that death under such circumstances is quite exempt from all fright or pain. It would, in fact, be an ideal one. Returning to the spot a month later, I saw that my companion had had near him some good branches to hold on to if necessary. As I knew him personally to be a good climber, the case is somewhat mysterious. I suppose he must have been the victim of some sudden indisposition or inattention.

An adventure of a rather different kind happened to our party of five, about forty years ago on the rocks of the Aiguille du Goûter. From the Tête Rousse we followed an arête leading up on the true left side of the big couloir which splits higher up into two. It being rather late we wanted to avoid losing time in step-cutting across the icy couloir. The highest rocks appeared, so far as some fog permitted, as being steep but dry. I was climbing up the last 60 ft. to almost under the arête, whence a short traverse would have brought us to near the *cabane*. But the very steep rocks were full of ice, which I had to knock away with a stone to free hand and foot holds. The second man, X, on the rope, invisible to me, began following the leader . . . but dangled *twice* (!), as I was told afterwards. He then asked me to give him some more rope. Holding myself with the right hand I did that with the left. But the rope instantly gave me a violent shock (causing a lasting wound), it was torn out of my hand and X fell down about 40 ft., pulling after him not only my wife, who was of the party, but also the third member, both being in an insecure position. At the critical moment I had placed both forearms into a cleft behind good rocks, stemming my legs outside against a small projection. The last man, a porter, had also been swept away from his stance, but only for about a yard. So we finally helped each other to hold the rest of the party, and as my rope was not laid over a rigid belay but was held by my elastic body it remained intact. I could hold my three comrades pretty well for a short time, although I was glad, of course, when they had recovered their stance. My wife, in falling, had struck the rocks twice; a small injury to her lung took a fortnight to heal. The others escaped all damage.

We bivouacked on our respective spots. It was a warm night, and although the porter lamented that I should not be able to join them on the morrow I found a somewhat better way down to my companions. All of them had slept part of the night, as I also did. The rucksack of my wife had fallen down about 2000 ft., but we recovered it almost intact and a carefully slow descent brought us down to Chamonix. All is well that ends well!

X was a very good mountaineer and most agreeable companion, with whom I had succeeded in making a good many fine ascents, alone

or with others. But now and then he had, without our suspecting it, some shortcomings due to reasons we were ignorant of, and to this and perhaps to some misunderstanding must be attributed his failure on the said occasion.

With these little narratives let me close my reminiscences and avowals. All sorts of adventures happen to climbing people, of which only a small portion ever becomes known. If fate is clement, we may survive without any serious mishap. But it is well to learn something from each of them and better, I suppose, not to provoke the gods twice in the same manner.