

## THE SWITCHBACK OF LIFE

BY W. R. RICKMERS

*Substance of a lecture delivered before the Alpine Club,  
October 25, 1938*

EDITORIAL pressure is responsible for this attempt to freeze into cold print the running commentary on a set of more or less amusing slides which dragged an audience of the Alpine Club over the ups and downs of a mountaineering life that covers well-nigh half a century.

My ancestors were natives of Heligoland, and my grandfather, Rickmer Clasen Rickmers, was a British subject before he sailed to the Continent in his small boat. He built and owned some of the finest clippers of the time. I was born on Labour Day, 1873, in Bremerhaven where Germany is flattest, which may explain why the human upward urge seized the opportunity when orographical uplift was offered. It hardly needs statistical proof that the vast majority of mountaineers live in the plains. Our absolute geometrical plane of existence offers three directions of escape, laterally, upwards and downwards, being the ways of the dog, the cat and the mole. The boy starts by roaming over the level, but soon trees, ruined walls and underground passages make their irresistible appeal. Most of us are driven heavenwards, however, because the bulges of earth are more frequent and certainly more obvious than her hollow insides. Flying may offer a weak substitute where upstanding features are lacking, but digging and mining entail too much heavy labour. Caves are naturally associated with high ground, but whereas many eager pot-holers never climb outside, I have not yet met a mountaineer who did not take an interest in caves where he obtains a negative impression of his daylight endeavours.

My earliest recollections are of getting impaled on a fence with iron spikes and of being found jammed in a ventilating shaft in the cellars of our house.

In the early eighties the family spent a summer in Thun, and I distinctly remember the view of the Stockhorn and the Jungfrau across the lake. Switzerland in those days spelt romance. It was quite an undertaking to reach this new world of rugged valleys filled with English people. Dinner was served at long tables



studded with comfortable old ladies in caps. A file of waiters rushed out from behind a curtain when the bell rang for the next course. I have never and nowhere been able to recapture the peculiar smell, distinct but not unclean, of the early Swiss hotel reading rooms, although my own den has always been full of books and papers. Perhaps the paper or the printing ink of *The Times* may then have been the cause.

The seamy side of life began to take shape when my father built a factory near a small German town and had to send me to the local high school, which harboured the concentrated essence of pedagogic bumbledom and pomposity. Here I acquired a permanent and Freud-proof complex against the Classics in general and Latin grammar in particular, while so-called teachers of German did their best to alienate me from my mother-tongue by impositions such as : ' In how far does the psychology of Schiller's Joan of Arc differ from Shakespeare's characterization of Shylock ? ' Nature, railways, games, in fact anything outside dead literature seemed to be non-existent in these perverted minds. Hence the one exception remains rooted in memory, namely an essay entitled *The Alpine Peasant*, being the heart-rending burial by avalanche of a Swiss family and their joyful rescue. Fortunately I was born a modern and a rebel who instinctively detested the whole atmosphere of the eighties.

My father, East India merchant and man of the world, did not interfere with school but applied the antidote of travel. In the summer of 1887 he took me to England, where I gazed upon the stately cliffs of Margate and became acquainted with a wonderful drink called lemon-squash, which by the way seems to be the only thing the price of which has not changed since then. In the autumn we paid a short visit to Ireland. Glengarriff impressed me with the most romantic landscape I had ever seen, and has remained unforgettable ever since. I caught conger eels in Bantry Bay and trout in the Lake of Killarney.

Two years later I was let loose on my own to hike across Thuringia and the Harz Mountains. The highest hill, the Brocken, enabled me to raise my record to 3000 ft.

In 1890 I wandered alone all over Scotland from the Trossachs to John o' Groat's and climbed Ben Nevis from Fort William. Not yet being a climber properly speaking, I must simply have been attracted by the tallest thing advertised by the map, common talk and tourist folders. The humblest human urge impels each of us to some kind of eminence defined and confirmed by plain figures. Ignoring the bridle path I sauntered up Glen Nevis and tackled the mountain from the rear. At the end of the valley



I discovered a cottage, where a gamekeeper and his wife treated me to oatmeal cakes and milk. The summit seemed near, but the gamekeeper said that it would take me two hours and a half. He also gave me some good advice about not getting lost. I became rather terrified when I stumbled into screees of big granite boulders swept by shreds of swirling mist. They suggested danger, a false step, exposure. I have never lost my respect for the clouds, perhaps because the plainsman only meets them as mist and not as moving spectres. They are the warning spirits of the mountains, sometimes evil ghosts. I am a thorough believer in fine-weather mountaineering without their irritating admonitions. On moorland hog's backs, however, they prove welcome illusionists. I was glad to reach the top and was not unduly shocked by a shanty with ginger beer and a visitors' book. On the way down I was lured from the path by some hard snow, the first I had ever seen in summer. The edge of a precipice made me step warily or I might have been initiated too rapidly into the secrets of cornices and gullies.

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The powers that be having marked me down for a commercial career, I left school in October 1890 with a certificate which entitled one to one year's military service instead of three. I was despatched to Oscar Sillig's famous school at Maison Neuve, La Tour de Peilz, Vevey, where I spent one of the happiest years of my life, for here, among a majority of English boys and under the tutorship of a fine teacher and sportsman, I was introduced to sport in general and mountaineering in particular. In provincial Germany even the word 'sports' was almost unknown. People groping for a definition called it a peculiar emanation of English spleen, and 'spleen' was merely another word for madness. Strange rumours about racing, betting, football, cricket (usually mistaken for croquet) had reached the ears of people for whom spectacles meant the crowning glory of man. These spectacles enabled them to sift nothing but grammar out of the Classics. The running and wrestling Hellenes evidently escaped the epithet 'spleeny' because they knew Greek and how to decline hydrocephalos. This absolved them from the sins of body-culture.

Old Sillig, I feel sure, still lives in the memory of many Englishmen. His undying love of horseflesh made new boys forget their insular prejudice against anything foreign. He was a perfect horseman, trained his young horses himself, and about once weekly took us for a drive in his brake with four-in-hand. He



mended all his harness himself, and in the kennel kept four Gordon setters trained to pull a toboggan. Proficiency in climbing went without saying. Besides all this he was a fine pedagogue. As a boy mainly consists of arms, legs and a tummy, words will not reach his heart or mind unless the way is opened by deeds.

In winter the Col de Sonloup above Les Avants was the usual goal of our Saturday outings, luge on back. On the first occasion I was greatly surprised to hear that one went for wintry walks without an overcoat.

One of the most hackneyed views in Europe is my favourite, the view of Chillon with the Dents du Midi. Painted or photographed, it is the most venerable of all Alpine 'souvenirs,' dating back, as it does, to the earliest travellers. There stands the Mountain of Youth. I have climbed every one of its crags. On the Cime de l'Ouest and the Cime de l'Est I trained my young wife in the rudiments of mountaineering.

In Switzerland I became a conscious climber. Before that I had not even known that there was such a thing as the deliberate and skilful pursuit of peaks. The annual *Grand Voyage* in the summer of 1891—in the tradition of Töpffer's *Voyages en Zig-zag*—gave me a taste of the real thing. The Oldenhorn was my first mountain with a guide, a glacier, a rope, and a rock scramble. The diary starts with a two-page attempt at picturesque writing and then boils down to this :

1. La Tour (scorching heat), Les Avants (hay, sleep), Col de Jaman, Montbovon, La Tine (evening coolth, rocky spring), Le Moulin, Château d'Oex.

2. Gstaad (carriage), Gsteig (avalanche tracks, waterfall, fine forest), Sanetsch (racing against Secker).

3. Sanetsch (rain, grumpy, cows), with Sillig to Sublage in mist (milking, edelweiss, beautiful flowers).

4. Guide, glacier, rope, Oldenhorn (3124 m.), first up, small blizzard, Tour St. Martin (precipice, Diablerets, ice avalanche).

5. Giddy path (a steepish traverse along outcrops of slate, probably western flank of Arpelistock), Lauenen, Trüttlisberg, Lenk (earth funnels, bull).

6. At Lenk (glacier cauldron, waterfall).

7. With the famous Jaggi over the Wildstrubel (firn slope, cave, marmots, crystals) to the Gemmi and Leukerbad.

(In the ascent Jaggi cut notches across a very steep névé which still makes me shudder. Six boys to each rope inspired each other with that mixture of fear and confidence which prevents one from slipping.)

8. Ladders to Albigen (village with beer).

9. Torrenthorn.

And so on over the Gotthard to Milan and the Italian Lakes.





*Photo, W. R. Rickmers.]*

KARAUŁ-BEGI AND MAKANDAROFF (EASTERN BOKHARA, 1898).



*Photo, W. R. Rickmers.]*

THE YAKH-SU CONGLOMERATES.

*[To face p. 32.]*





*Photo, W. R. Rickmers.]*

CENCI SILD-FICKER, THE *USCHBAMÄDL*. NOW HON.  
MEMBER Ö.A.K.



*Photo, Dr. Nöth.]*

PEAK KAUFMANN (LENIN) IN THE TRANS-ALAI.



The early death of my father ended the idyll. My uncle without further ado pressed me into the service of the firm and in December 1891 sent me to London, where I became apprenticed to Messrs. A. Runge & Co., East India Avenue. I did my work unwillingly but conscientiously. The magic of London enthralled me with its blend of solidity and romance. Not even the unspeakable Victorian Sunday made me waver in my love for this city with the big soul, with its theatres and music-halls.

The 1892 bill of fare betrays growing ambition : Dent Jaune (of the Dents du Midi), Tour Salière, Perron (2679 m., near Barberine, a wonderful knife-edge of granite, not too high up for the warm and leisurely enjoyment of rocks), Col Durand (fairly difficult in that season), Monte Rosa. My guides were François and Joseph Fournier of Salvan. In a bookshop at Zermatt I discovered Dent's *Mountaineering*, then just out. It proved a revelation ; and for me it remains the gospel of everything essential. There have been improvements of technique and efficiency, but the Old Laws stand as of yore. Zsigmondy, Whymper, Güssfeldt, and the pioneers of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* came next.

Around Easter 1893 Harry Runge, then freshly baked A.C., suggested the Lake District. Wasdale being crowded, Buttermere made delightful headquarters in spite of the longish walks to the Pillar Rock and Scafell Pike. We enjoyed fine weather all the time ; the spring of 1893 was one of exceptional drought, I believe.

In the autumn I visited Heligoland with a school-fellow. A rope in my kitbag meant the secret intention to combine seasickness with scrambling. But the rocks of my native isle are rotten, covered with slimy seaweed at the base, and 90 degrees or mathematically vertical, whereas the picturesque or journalistic vertical, as we know, is anything from 45 upwards. The outing ended tragically. When walking along the top we were struck by lightning, the first discharge of an approaching thunderstorm. There was an absolute gap between being conscious of my upright position in the landscape and a slow awakening with my face flat on the ground. The general stiffening resolved itself into violent cramps, more particularly of the pectoral and abdominal muscles. They told me later that my friend was dead. It was then not generally known that in such cases one should try breathing jerks as with drowned people.

Between the Lakes and Heligoland, however, lay the summer of 1893 when I had decided to cut myself adrift from business and to follow my bent towards the natural sciences. This meant that



I had to shift for myself. Relatives supposed to be responsible for the guidance of an orphan lacked the least spark of understanding, which explains a somewhat chequered career. While confessing to my own failings, I must claim contributory negligence in others. Fortunately, during the most critical time between the bid for independence and a happy marriage, the mountains have proved staunch friends. They gave me a cue and a bearing. Without my being aware of it they have kept me straight on a path of sorts.

Before taking up my studies I set out for a long holiday in the Eastern Alps. Peter Dangl, who joined me at Innsbruck, guided me across the glacier groups (Stubai, Oetzal, Ortler); Sepp Innerkofler took me up the Kleine Zinne; with Zagonel and Tavernaro of San Martino I climbed various Crodas and Campaniles and finally the Winklerturm (fourth ascent). I was insatiable, and within six weeks accounted for about thirty-five peaks. It was a transitory stage. Never again have I offered such a hecatomb or holocaust to Zeus Oromaniacos.

In the Dolomites I met a band of Vienna students, guideless climbers of the Zsigmondy school, who had just accomplished the double crossing of the Fünffingerspitze. They decided my choice of a university. In Vienna I became a member of the Academical Alpine Club (section of the D.u.Ö.A.-V.). A lifelong friendship has united me with most of the leading spirits, such as Hans Lorenz, Ignaz Kaup, Fritz Benesch, the brothers Smoluchowski, Aemilius Hacker, Robert Lenk. Benesch was their star photographer. The old guard, concentrated in the Austrian Alpine Club (Ö.A.K.), consisted of Heinrich Hess, Hans Wödl, Louis Friedmann and others. Norman-Neruda and Albrecht von Krafft were among the occasional visitors and lecturers.

In May 1894 Thaddäus von Smoluchowski, a young student from Zürich, and I attempted a crossing of the Bernese Oberland, using snow-hoops or pattens. We got as far as the Oberaar hut, whence we climbed the Oberaarhorn. Deep snow lay on the ice slope and on the tumbled summit rocks. Thick weather forced us back to the Grimsel. Mere luck saved us from a cold burial. Winter climbs and winter accidents were so few and far between that climbers, especially guideless climbers, never thought of avalanches as a normal danger. Alpine peasants knew of them, but the victims, mostly wood-cutters, were not reported in mountaineering literature. Knowledge came with the vast number of skiers swarming over the middle heights supposed to lie below the level of that 'most dangerous sport,' mountaineering. Those bound for the high peaks went on foot



often led by guides (the peasants aforesaid) and were less likely to start an avalanche, being hole-punchers, not slab-cutters. Many good mountaineers have perished on 'harmless' ground when they took to ski-ing in the early days. I had survived three or four close shaves before I knew better. Experience has made me a confirmed back-turner whenever a slope is not obviously and absolutely safe. It is impossible to judge the temper of a slope to a nicety. Ski-ing is great fun; but the avalanche is about as funny as the cobra when you step on it unawares. Both are wonderful sights from a distance.

A Russian friend suggested the Caucasus. The outcome was a general reconnaissance through Transcaucasia (1894). We ascended Karchkhal, a mountain unknown to the foreign residents of Batum although plainly visible on clear days. At Kars we were arrested as spies. When after the ascent of Ararat we called upon the Katholikos at Etchmiadzin he kindly enlightened us as to the condition of our minds. It appears that we were not the first to suffer from the hallucination of having reached the top of Minghi Tau. The guardian angels of the sacred mountain see to that.

The fleas, bugs, and lice of Armenia suggest a comprehensive despatch of all the jokes concerning these little tormentors of the traveller and unfailing friends of the reminiscent writer. I shall resist further temptation, in this report anyway, although our feeblest efforts bring down the house, no subject coming nearer the skin of the natural human being. The early British mountaineers have practically exhausted the best of these jokes.

From Baku I crossed the Caspian to Uzun Ada, then the rail-head of the new line through the dismal sands of Transcaspia. I revelled in the glories of Bokhara. Never since have I seen such a bazaar in the true Oriental tradition and without any tourists. The half-dozen resident Russians were lost in the crowd. In the course of thirty years I have witnessed the change from a Baghdad of the Caliphs to a miserable Soviet slum where you will look in vain for gaudy costumes, carpets, suzaney, or brass pots, supposing you ever get there. We shall more likely meet in Lhasa.

My faithful interpreter on this and later occasions was Grigor Makandaroff of Batum, who has always served me honestly and well. He spoke Georgian, Turkish, Armenian, and French. I saw him late in 1918 when negotiating about surrender with the captain of a British destroyer at Batum. He was an old man when I met him for the last time on my way through Batum in 1932. Since then correspondence has been out of the question.

In 1895 Aemilius Hacker and I explored Karchkhal and



attempted Ushba, as described elsewhere. Rainy days gave welcome excuses for carousals with the Dadeshkelianis, the princes of Suanetia. They had met Freshfield and described him as a man made of sterner stuff.

In 1896 the lure of gold drew me to the fastnesses of Eastern Bokhara. Russian prospectors induced me to join them in exploring the upper reaches of the Yakh-su, a tributary of the Oxus, where huge terraces of gold-bearing gravel fill the valleys between fantastic spires of conglomerate. The conditions are ideal for dredging or hydraulicking. We pegged out claims, but the Russian government finally decided that it did not want any foreign enterprises near the Afghan boundary. The conglomerate pinnacles were mostly inaccessible, but I managed to outwit one or two by devious gullies.

Owing to an introduction from the Grand Duke of Oldenburg to the Amir of Bokhara, travel was made comfortable in those royal days. We were accompanied by a *karaul-begi* or even *ming-bashi*, that is to say a captain or colonel in gorgeous raiment mounted on a horse with silver-mounted trappings and turquoise-studded reins. At his bidding messengers flew ahead so that upon arrival we might find rooms, beds, and the *dasturkhan* or reception-spread ready for us. The latter consisted of tea, bread, fruit and some fly-blown Russian sweets politely declined by previous distinguished visitors. They evidently corresponded to the uncuttable ceremonial cake known to the older Scottish generation. Shining cavalcades met us half a mile before the gates of provincial capitals.

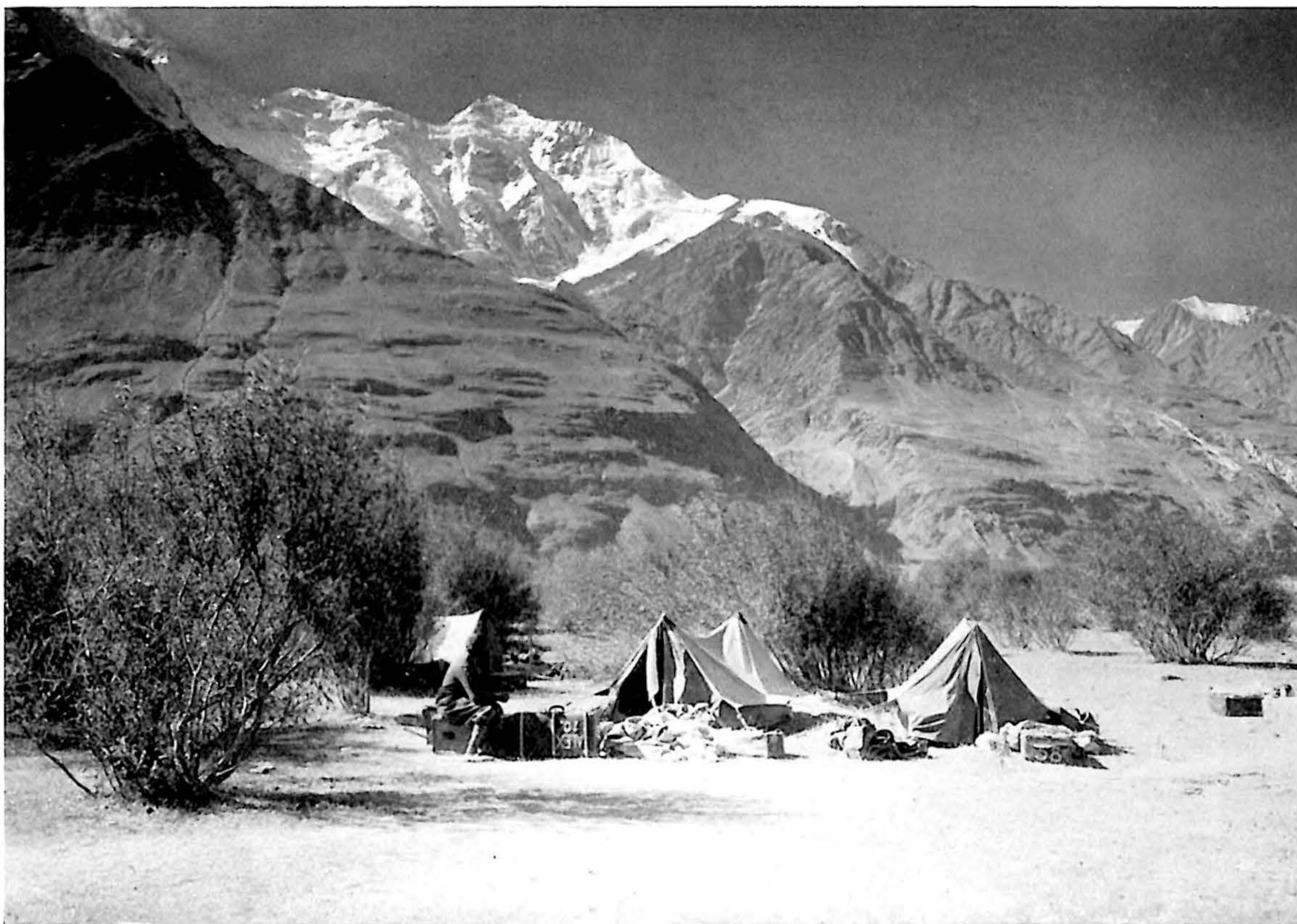
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My marriage in 1897 was, of course, the most important event of my life, and the most satisfactory, I may truly add. It was *our* switchback henceforth. She took to climbing like a duck to water. Woman and the Mountain go naturally together, both representing the highest aims of male ambition in the eternal quest.

At Zermatt in 1899 we formed a jolly party. Those inveterate and inventive jokers, Hans Lorenz and Eduard Wagner, founded the Fly Club, devoted to the fine art of killing flies with india-rubber catapults. It kept people busy when rainbound in huts. When one day the game failed through overshooting, they sent a porter down to Seiler with a message, 'Please send flies.' The porter duly arrived with a cardboard box containing several hundred brace—*dead* ones, however.

In the forenoon of August 30 I sauntered up to the Staffelalp,





*Photo, W. R. Rickmers.]*

CAMP AT ALTIN-MAZAR (1928).

*[To face p. 36.]*





*Photo, Ernst Baumann, Bad-Reichenhall.]*

PROFESSOR DUSTSUCKER, DISCOVERER OF NOAH'S ARK.



*Photo, W. R. Rickmers.]*

MATHIAS ZDARSKY (1904).



where I was to wait for my friends and to proceed with them to the Dent Blanche bivouac. Just beyond the bridge across the Zmutt torrent I met a man who impressed me with a subconscious mental picture. I barely noticed that he carried a short bit of rope in his hand and that his face showed some sort of strain. A few hours later, at the Staffelalp, I received word from my friends: 'Return at once; Jones and three guides dead.' Then it dawned upon me that I had met Hill, the only survivor of the tragedy.<sup>1</sup> The same night we joined a party of Zermatt guides to cross the Col d'Hérens for the last grim task.

A trip to Persia had to be given up because my companion, J. K. M. Shirazi—and I with him—became entangled in a plot to murder Abdul Hamid, the Unspeakable Turk. Shirazi, an Assyrian by birth, was a journalist, an English and Iranian scholar, and a Persian subject. He was waiting for me in Constantinople when no one less than Nejb Melhame Pasha himself arrested him at the Pera Palace Hotel.

This outrageous frame-up by the Yildiz gang landed Shirazi in the vaults of the Ministry of Police. Fortunately he regained his liberty during the revolution two years later, or he might be there still.

The Armenian secret society 'Droshak' had planned to blow up the Sultan in a victoria charged with dynamite when he drove to the Selamlık; and informers had simply assumed that Shirazi was an Armenian. When this went on in Constantinople my wife and I were closely questioned by the Vienna police. The Turks had found letters of mine on Shirazi. It so happened that the daughter of our landlady was employed in the very carriage works where the explosive victoria had been ordered. Thus I became a potential Sultan-killer. Shirazi sent me several letters written on bits of shirt and cigarette paper and smuggled out of prison. I saw him again in 1918 in Tiflis, where he acted as Iranian consular officer.

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Since early youth I have been a founder of clubs and organizer of parties. The object of the first club was fighting the boys in the next street, I am sorry to say. But as human ingenuity vainly sought for other means of letting off steam, and as guerrilla war went on anyhow, organization seemed called for. It bore the fruits of victory. The first personally conducted tour was a raid by the President and nine members of the 'Society for the Advancement of Natural Science' (fourth form) on the

<sup>1</sup> *A.J.* 19. 590.



peaceful homes of relatives or friends within the fifty-mile circle of our town. The simple tactics were those of the locust : Eat and move on. From such lowly antecedents sprang the Great Caucasus Raid, when Ushba<sup>2</sup> was conquered and nearly all the big peaks were climbed or traversed during one of the finest summers Suanetia had ever seen.

Comradeship is the secret of success in team work. Luck in the choice of companions has favoured me in the three enterprises of 1903, 1913 and 1928. The principle implies some sacrifice on the part of the leader, who must be content with serving as housewife and switchboard in the centre of a wide-flung net. Almost daily he receives urgent messages demanding transport, porters, or food—above all food. There may be accidents or requests for medical aid. Now and again he may snatch a holiday for climbing or hunting. I can recommend surgery as a pleasant and useful hobby in base camps. My speciality was pulling the teeth of natives. A course in painless extraction at a dental clinic had prepared me for this noble pursuit. I became quite a successful quack whose fame spread far and wide.

The Caucasus Club came to a timely end in 1907 after a run of seven years, when it seemed to have outrun its reason for existence. It was never more than an informal association of old visitors. Its patron was the Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovitch. The number of honorary members was restricted to three : D. W. Freshfield, Gustav Radde and Vittorio Sella.<sup>3</sup>

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In 1900–1 we became ski-mad after a visit to Mathias Zdarsky, the Hermit of Lilienfeld. To-day people ski as a matter of course ; in 1900 ski-ing was a revelation, especially to mountaineers, and nothing can describe the rapture and enthusiasm which filled us. Zdarsky was the first man to invent a really dependable binding and the first to present a complete analysis of ski-movements. He was a great teacher, and his pupils were then the only ones to master *steep* Alpine ground without tumbling about. We delighted in precipitous slopes studded with trees and rocks. In spite of their great skill even the Norwegians did

<sup>2</sup> The Alpine Museum at Munich preserves the parchment in which Prince Tatarkhan Dadeshkeliani solemnly presents the freehold of Ushba to Cenci von Ficker, the *Uschbamädl*.

<sup>3</sup> The list of members reminds me of many of our 'Classics' whom I was privileged to meet at the A.C. : Ellis Carr, Norman Collie, C. T. Dent, G. Hastings, C. Pilkington, G. A. Solly, Horace Walker, Claude Wilson, Hermann Woolley, G. H. Morse. Outside Britain we had Beauclair, Blodig, Cajrati-Crivelli, Benesch, Hess, Hoek, Lorenz, Montandon, v. Saar, and many others.



not feel at home on these mountain sides, although they acquitted themselves creditably with long dashes and sudden swings.

Zdarsky at once became the butt of mean jealousies and venomous enmity. I threw myself heart and soul into the great ski-war between the German or Swiss 'Norwegians' and the Lilienfelders. To-day the systems have merged; the bindings have become as stiff as Zdarsky's reputed 'leg-breakers,' and the stemming-turn, his undisputed invention, forms part of the general technique and of every beginner's curriculum.

Ski-ing apart, Zdarsky has always been a thorough all-round sportsman, a leader of youth, a reformer and inventor in the realms of building, housekeeping, cooking, and agriculture. During the war an avalanche crushed or twisted nearly every bone in his body when he led a patrol as instructor to the Austrian army. For years he suffered unspeakable agonies, gradually overcoming them by dint of almost superhuman energy and various ingenious devices by which he supported his dislocated spine. He is now over eighty. A few years ago he was still ski-ing and diving into his self-built swimming pool with a double somersault. The Sports Leader of the Third Reich has recognized the great services rendered to German sport by Mathias Zdarsky by the grant of a life pension and by having his name inscribed on the Roll of Honour.<sup>4</sup>

The new-found joy and my gratitude to Zdarsky caused me to spread the gospel by teaching. I began and ignominiously failed at St. Moritz, which had attracted me by its world-wide fame as the premier winter sports place. The fashionable crowd only yielded a dozen pupils. Ski-ing seemed too plebeian, which means that it demanded too much hard work. We should have gone to Davos where E. C. Richardson, adversary and friend in one, pioneered the British Ski Club.

I had the good fortune later to meet Sir Henry Lunn, who invited us to Adelboden. He personally conducted us to this place. Many a happy winter did we spend there, and there was no lack of men and women game for the new sport.

Later I drifted to Kitzbühel, where Burgomaster Franz Reisch and his henchman Josef Herold, the leading photographer, offered me the chance of some good pioneering. They had been ski-ing all over the place and considered it the best of the Eastern Alps. A few tours with them convinced me that such was the case. Moreover the valley is a regular snow-trap. When I started activities Kitzbühel was a summer resort almost exclusively

<sup>4</sup> See *Deutsche Alpenzeitung*, February 1939, p. 62, with portrait and *Ehrenbrief*.



visited by Austrian families. Three years later it was being talked about in England, which means that it was pushing its way to the forefront of international ski-ing resorts. It goes without saying that even here I must needs found a club to disturb the peace of the mountainside and more particularly of the hotel. The nucleus of the Old Kids, who wore a black cap with a red tassel, consisted of English friends, the *Simplizissimus* gang from Munich, and a famous Austrian parliamentarian.

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High jinks could not last for ever.

In June 1914 Freshfield asked me to dragoman him to the Lower Caucasus, Bokhara, Samarkand and the Zarafshan valley. I came to London, but about a week before our start I got a bad attack of appendicitis. In answer to a wire my old friend Hans Lorenz in Vienna promised that he would make me fit for travel within a fortnight. Freshfield, who kindly consented to a short postponement, was to pick me up in Vienna. I had just begun to walk about after the operation, when war broke out. This is strictly true, although some of my English friends suspected me of being in the know. As a matter of fact I suspected nothing at all.

I volunteered as a civilian and spent some months in a prisoners' camp without catching cholera, typhus or itch. Subsequently I was pulled in, and after the usual milling in barracks was sent to the Interpreters' Academy in Berlin, where I excelled in the art of making my bed. Owing to the marvellous condition of my couch the commission of inspection gave me an afternoon off. The contents of the mattress had to be worried and fluffed until the thing formed a rectangular prism without anatomy concavities or body vales. This may also have speeded my despatch as interpreter to the military court at Lille. I remained a simple private in the Guards all the time, as I never applied for promotion, thinking that the war would not last long enough for me to become a temporary general. Anything less seemed hardly worth while.

Then suddenly came a telegram making me a higher official in the Foreign Office, 'higher' being something just below high or highest. As such I travelled in state to join the Caucasus Delegation under Kress von Kressenstein in Tiflis. On Sundays a small band went out climbing on Mta-tsminda or David's Mountain. From the city it seems nothing more than a view-point with a funicular, but it really extends to an unbelievable distance in a series of rising hog's backs that offered fine walks and some



rocky ribs. One of the party was Karl Gruber, the well-known Freiburg ski-runner and jumper, who served in a regiment of the Green Jägers.

After the war I settled down to odd jobs such as writing and translating.<sup>5</sup>

The crowning achievement of my career was the discovery of Noah's Ark on the First of April 1933 and fully reported in a leading German illustrated weekly of the same date. This account is authenticated by irrefutable original photographs and a wealth of scientific evidence.

The idea came from my friend Walther Schmidkunz, who also arranged with the publishers for adequate funds (about £250) to defray the cost of the 'expedition.' My task consisted in playing the part of Professor Dustsucker, director of the excavations and writer of a long scientific article. In this I set forth that ancient manuscripts did not speak of *Mount* Ararat, but of the *Land* of Ararat. A Flood 17,000 ft. in depth was manifestly absurd. Patient sifting of the geological, archaeological and historical evidence led to the inescapable conclusion that the peak of the Flood stood at exactly 863 ft. above sea-level. All one had to do therefore was to search along this level in the neighbourhood of the great mountain. Along these systematic lines the success of scientific prediction resolved itself into a mere question of time. The Ark was found at a height of 867 ft. (error 4 ft.), in excellent condition, surrounded by potsherds, the dung of animals and some uneaten eggs of Noah's hens.

The actual scene was the top of the Predigtstuhl near Reichenhall, where a cable lift and a summit hotel facilitated operations. Architects from a film studio set up the towering remains of the Ark, while forty natives of Reichenhall in suitable fancy dress supplied the excavating Kurds. Skilled photographers did the rest. On the day of publication Professor Dustsucker in a workmanlike topee sternly gazed at a world of April fools from the front page of the illustrated journal, with the prow of the Ark in the background.

So here we are. If there is too little about climbing and too much about myself in these pages, the friendly atmosphere of the Club has encouraged me to run the risk of random reminiscences. Our jumbled memories are mists fading and re-shaping amongst the ups and downs of an Alpine landscape.

<sup>5</sup> The translations into German include nearly all the official Everest books, the Americanization of Edward Bok, Young's *Mountain Craft*, Ronaldshay's *India*, the *Arctic Adventures* of Stefansson, all the books by Admiral Byrd, the *Travels* of Hassanein Bey, MacCreagh, Banning, Kuhn de Prorok, and many others.



What do the mountains mean to me now ? Once I loved them passionately. Now I am married to them. They stand for companionship, solace, for something the soul can no longer do without. All this means more than passion. It means friendship and constancy.

## A LIST OF THE MORE ACCESSIBLE ARTICLES

### ALPINE JOURNAL

- 'Ushba.' *A. J.* 19. 524.
- 'The Alpine Skee.' *A. J.* 21. 441.
- 'Personally Conducted (Suanetia).' *A. J.* 22. 243, 339.
- 'On the Fringe of the Pamirs.' *A. J.* 41. 156.
- 'Black Forest Mountain, Pamirs.' *A. J.* 41. 261.
- 'The Highlands of Cantabria.' *A. J.* 44. 216.
- 'From Titlis to Bitlis.' *A. J.* 46. 282.

### CLIMBERS' CLUB JOURNAL

- 'Coaching Her.' 1901.
- 'The New Sport.' 1905.

### SCOTTISH MOUNTAINEERING CLUB JOURNAL

- 'Aquatic Sport on Ben Nevis.' 1908.

### GEOGRAPHICAL JOURNAL

- 'Travels in Bokhara.' 1899.
- 'The Alai-Pamirs in 1913 and 1928.' September 1929.
- 'Lazistan and Ajaristan.' 1934.

### BOOKS

- The Duab of Turkestan.* Cambridge University Press, 1913.
- Ski-ing.* Unwin, 1910.