

LUCABELLA HARE AND THE ST. GERVAIS ROUTE TO MONT BLANC¹

DURING a recent survey of early women climbers in the Alps we noticed the long interval between the ascent of Mont Blanc by Henriette d'Angeville in 1838 and the first ascents by Englishwomen : Mrs. T. Hamilton in 1854 and Emma Catherine Forman with her father on August 1, 1856. In looking through G. R. de Beer's informative *Early Travellers in Switzerland* (1949) we were astonished to find, under 1856, that Lucebella Hare had ascended the Aiguille du Goûter, the reference being to the privately printed biography (Glasgow, 1917) of *George Ferris Whidborne*, the palaeontologist.

In 1856, however, Miss Hare was but fifteen years old. Her mother, Mrs. Marcus Hare, was then living in Switzerland for her children's education. The visit to Chamonix and the St. Gervais side of Mont Blanc was made by Miss Hare and her brother Theodore in the month of August. It is quite evident that the pair not only reached the Aiguille but went on over the Dôme du Goûter, the rocks mentioned being probably those upon which the Vallot observatory was erected. It seems certain that the young couple could have reached the summit of Mont Blanc itself had they not given their word to their mother not to do so. At that time, however, the guides would have descended to the Grand Plateau and remounted by the Corridor and the Mur de la Côte, the Bosses not being crossed until Hudson's party of 1859, and the entire western route not completed until Stephen and Tuckett did so in 1861. In any case, Miss Hare was the first woman to ascend the Aiguille du Goûter and to gain such an elevation on the St. Gervais route.

This event is so little known that we append the note from Whidborne's biography and the description from Miss Hare's diary. [J.M.T.]

"*Note.*—When George was at Chamonix, large parties of people made the ascent [of Mont Blanc] daily—men, women, and even some children, to the great envy of the Whidborne boys—but in 1853 it had only been accomplished by two women and a few men, partly owing to the prohibitive prices of the guides (about fr. 30 per head) and partly owing to the physical strain it involved, before the safe route was found out. Whether any woman had climbed Mont Blanc from Chamonix between 1853 and 1856 besides Marie of Mont Blanc, a peasant woman, and a 'lady' of Geneva named Henriette of [*sic*] d'Angeville, both mentioned by a traveller of that date, is not known to the editor of this memoir, but it is certain that no other women had made the ascent from the St. Gervais side before Lucebella Hare went up, and it was considered a great feat, involving as it did 11½ hours' hard climbing.

¹ We are indebted to Dr. J. Monroe Thorington for the following interesting contribution to the history of the St. Gervais route.—*Editor.*

C. E. Mathews, a well-known member of the Alpine Club, who published a book on the ascents of Mont Blanc, was much interested when he heard of the Hare's expedition in 1899, not having known of it previously. He went over to St. Gervais to enquire into the details of their climb, and wrote to Mrs. Strong in October, 1899, saying : ' The only one of the old guides at St. Gervais who is still alive is F. Mollard, who constructed the cabane in the Aiguille du Goûté. His son keeps the little inn on the Col de Procot. You went higher up Mont Blanc on the west side than any other person had reached up to that date.'

He adds in another letter : ' I will make a reference to your expedition in a second edition of my work. The 30 francs paid to each guide is an important fact to record, and it will be an unusual pleasure to me to meet a lady whom I probably saw at St. Gervais 42 years ago ! I was there in the month of August, 1856, and tried Mont Blanc from the Goûté side, but was driven back by a storm on the Aiguille. I believe your friend Octenier was one of my guides.'

There was at that time a good deal of jealous feeling between the guides of Chamonix and St. Gervais before the final route to the top of the mountain was decided on, and probably that is why the ascent of the Hares was not more known.

The famous climber, the Rev. J. Llewellyn Davies (who died at the age of 90 in 1916), was asked what he would think of a young lady who had climbed Mont Blanc ; he replied : ' She would stand on one leg and play billiards with a cue.' At that time a mace was the correct thing for a lady to use if she were so bold as to play billiards at all !

It was a brave thing for Mrs. Marcus Hare to do, to trust her boy and girl to go alone ; but the guide Octenier was well known, and he said that the expedition, although ' tres penible,' was ' pas dangereuse,' and that they should go for the small sum of 30 francs to each guide and less to the porters. There were six guides : Joseph Auguste Octenier, Jean Buttoud, Pierre Naviselle, François Gerfeaud, Joseph Duplan, and Henri Jacquemoud.² Unfortunately, although their mother gave them permission to go up Mont Blanc, she made the stipulation that the boy and girl should not go to the summit, which they could easily have managed as regards strength, having become expert climbers on the Devonshire cliffs near their home, Rockend, at Torquay, where they did such dangerous things that a quarryman went and informed their mother of their daring, saying they went ' where the goats would hardly go,' and where they would not dare to go themselves.

The young heroine's diary of the expedition, expatiating on the ' fun ' of the adventure, is very amusing. She also describes her admiration for the head guide, for whom she afterwards ' hemmed a handkerchief,' which was given as an heirloom to his daughter when she married, on which occasion, as it was in Paris, Octenier came over to Ascot to see the Hares, and was taken to Windsor Castle. He told

One is always struck by the absence of any of these surnames in Chamonix. [J.M.T.]

them then that when he had taken some men up the same route afterwards they had refused to believe Miss Hare had done the climb until they found her name in the bottle with her brother's.

Most of the diary is given, as Alpine climbers have been so much interested in it.

August 6th, Wednesday, 1856.

We left St. Gervais about 4 o'clock, I on a mule, Theodore walking, the people coming out of their doors to see us off.

We went for some way along the road to Nant Bourrant, stopping to buy bread at a baker's. We then turned into another road by which we had not been before. It was lovely weather, as good as we could have.

We bought some nails to put in our boots. We went a little out of our way to Octenier's chalet, where we saw his dogs, one of which had been up Mt. Blanc three times, but it could not go up with us, as it had puppies. The nails were put in my boots, and we saw Octenier's wife and two girls. We then left the chalet and went on through fields. We saw an eagle. We got on the Col de Boza, [*sic*] which was lovely with views all down the Valley of Chamonix. Got safely to the Pavillon-de-Belle-Vue, where we were to spend the night near the Glacier de Bionnassay. There were only two rooms with two beds in each. Theodore and I slept in one, and the guides spent their night on straw. There was a very noisy set of French or Suisse people in the room next us, who laughed and talked, which was not very agreeable when we wanted to go to sleep, as we had to set off very early next morning. The food was good—eggs and cream and honey.

In the books was an account of an ascent of Mt. Blanc in which Octenier was the guide, and he was very highly spoken of in everything.

Aug. 7th,³ Thursday, 1856.

Up at 2 o'clock, set off at 3. It was dark, and the stars magnificent. Went carefully. On reaching the mountain Lacha, day began to break, and there was a lovely view of the valley of Chamonix, the village, glaciers, mountains and aiguilles. We saw several pretty little mountain plants, the Arnica, and a little flower, of which one species is white and one purple, which is the last flower met with. Heard a fox bark. Scrambled up rocks, passed the Pierre Ronde, and walked over snow, and at length reached Monsieur L'Oiseau's Cabin. Got some wood and made a fire with wood pulled from another cabin, as our feet were nearly frozen. We had breakfast—sugar dipped in cognac, raisins and plums. Ether is indispensable in case anyone should be ill, and it is excellent for the head.

We passed Sausure's [*sic*] Cabin, and at length reached a slope of

³ This was two days after Henry Fairbanks, an American, ascended Mont Blanc from the Grands Mulets. [J.M.T.]

ice, in which we had to cut footsteps to pass. I was tied round the waist on to Octenier, besides having his arm to help me. One of the guides saw a chamois, and another a marmot, but we did not.

After crossing the 'couloir' we began the ascent of the Aiguille de Goûté. It is composed of large stones and small ones, that slipped in avalanches under the feet, bearing down large and small ones together on their way to the bottom. It takes three hours very hard work scaling these rocks, and it was bitterly cold. Lovely crystals are found on the Aiguilles, some of which we brought home in a knapsack. Their weight is very heavy.

We saw the footmarks of chamois, and were very sorry not to see the animals themselves. At the top, which we reached at half past 11, we had dinner and rested, and then began the snow work. One guide was fastened with a rope to sound the crevasses. We walked over this snow a good way, only passing small crevasses, till at length I began to suffer from the rarity of the air. It takes away your strength. I was not tired, but I could only go a little way, and then pant, and be exhausted. The guides proposed to carry me, and asked if we should turn back, but of course I was not so stupid, and we went on. I found out that the best way was to shut my eyes, as they had no protection, and the snow affected them, and to trust to the guides. They helped me by passing alpine-stocks under my arms, and a guide before and one behind held the ends.⁴ Octenier would have taken us to the top, but we had promised Mama not to go there. We saw a most beautiful view of Italy, the clouds being on the other side. We saw Monte Rosa, the Aiguille du Midi and Piedmont. It was magnificent. The top looked close to us, and the Dôme far below our feet.

We left a bottle with our names in it in some rocks above the Dôme for the next comers.

The Descent

took 6 hours, much less than the ascent. We passed the crevasse where one of the guides got in, but being tied with ropes there was no danger. We came slipping and sliding down and rested on top of the Aiguille. I was not at all tired, and quite fresh, as it was only the rarity of the air which affected me. Octenier held me up by a cord and let me down the rocks. At the bottom I could not think why he hurried me over the 'couloir' of ice. I made the best of my way across, as I was then told that as the sun was now hot the snow was now much softer than when we went up, and some cause or other, a chamois for instance, might have sent down a stone, and even a little one on the 'couloirs' of ice came down with such tremendous force that it would knock anyone over to the bottom of the precipice. It is curious to watch the stones whizzing down and then flying over the rocks at the bottom. It is the greatest danger of the ascension.

⁴ The *barrière ambulante* had evidently persisted from de Saussure's time. [J.M.T.]

The guides ate in the cabin while we rested, and then came the fun. I, between Octenier and Naviselle, set off sliding, tumbling and slipping at a great pace. We got some of the last flowers at the Pierre Ronde to bring home. After leaving the snow we had a long wearisome way to go, and the guides whistled and sang to amuse us.

At last we got to the Pavilion, and found a party of people, who would stare at me . . . Then we went to bed. My feet were sore from jumping over stones ; we had crossed a valley full of them in the dark.

Friday, August 8th.

We had our breakfast, and started for St. Gervais, I on a mule and Theodore walking.

We had sent on a guide to tell Mama that we should not come back until next morning, but we heard afterwards that he had gone to sleep in a hay-stack, and left her the whole night in suspense.

We retraced our Wednesday's steps, and as we neared the village we saw one of the guides running, and then cannons began to fire, and as we came nearer my mule was stopped and a band struck up, and a man came forward and made a speech, for which I had to thank him, then the band went before us, and a crowd assembled, and as we went through the village people came to their doors to look at us, and when we reached the hotel we were presented with nosegays, and received much welcoming and rejoicings.

All this fuss was because I was the first lady who had made the ascension on this side of Mont Blanc.

The guides had a good dinner, and before they went we thanked them, and told them that we were very much satisfied with everything, and I sent a message to the 'chief Guide' at Chamonix, as he had laughed at my wanting to go to the 'Grand Mulet.'

The next morning Mon. and Madame Saladin (people staying in the hotel belonging to a good old Swiss family still well known near Geneva) wrote an account of our expedition to all the 'gazettes.'

The guides also took them to the glacier of Trait la Tête, which they said far surpassed any of the Chamonix glaciers in size and beauty, much larger than the Mer de Glace, with the purity and blueness of the Glacier de Bossons.

They walked on it 'for 5 hours, and it would have taken 6 hours more to reach the top.' Octenier milked some cows for them so that they might have something to drink on the way home. He promised to send them 'honey, marmots, chamois skins and pheasants.' The pension at the hotel was 6½ francs a day.

It is not surprising that little Miss Hare's diary ends on Tuesday the 12th :

'A fine day, but a day of sorrow, because we left St. Gervais, where we have had such pleasure.' "