an early hour and before ten rain was falling heavily, having kept off just long enough to allow of Walker taking a photograph of a group of the villagers. The chief was a necessary member of the group but required a good deal of persuading before he would consent to undergo the operation ; the others, whom we picked out as the most ragged and characteristic of the crowd, showed less reluctance but were not, I think, quite easy in their minds as to what they might suffer through the mysterious medium of the camera.

School under difficulties

The weather being thus hopeless, and indefinite delay being out of the question, we persuaded ourselves that the best course would be to get across the chain as soon as possible, and that we might possibly find there more serene skies. The pass to the valley of the Tcherek and Balkar proved to be well known ; horses could not pass, though cattle were said to be driven over it, but the chief promised to have eight porters ready for us by next morning, well acquainted with the way, to whom we were to give ½ rouble each per day. The distance was said to be, what we had supposed it would be, a three days' journey,—one day to the foot of the glacier, another over the pass, and a third down the valley of the Tcherek to Balkar.—The absence of all discussion on difficulty about the matter was equally agreeable and unexpected ; it had one disadvantage that it left us with nothing to do,—a serious matter on a wet day which not only kept *us* indoors, but brought in to us an endless string of visitors like ourselves afflicted, no doubt, with ennui. There was a pretence made of carrying on the school work of Gebi as usual, but, with such interesting strangers in the adjoining room, the youth of the village would have been more than human, had they been able to devote much attention to their studies ; the schoolmaster himself, a meek little man, physically incapable, I should think, of inflicting that amount of corporal punishment on his scholars which they must surely want if they at all take after their fathers, could not resist the contagion of curiosity, and more than once joined the crowd which filled our room. At last we could stand this crowd no longer, so begged the chief to clear the room, which he did ; we thereupon closed the door of communication with the schoolroom, and put a table against it, the little window, opening into the verandah, thus remaining the only way of ingress or egress. The move was quite successful, for though we were consistently in or out by this way, not one of the villagers ventured to make use of it ; they would have streamed through the door in company without hesitation and in spite of constant ejectments, but the window was accessible to only one at a time, and each individual man hesitated to lead the way through it. One irrepressible boy *was* caught in the act, but being collared by one of us halfway, received in that helpless position a good humoured but, to him, alarming 'spanking,' which deterred any of his fellows from following his example. Our quarters being thus clear we devoted ourselves for some time to whist and 'beggar my neighbour,' to the

unbounded astonishment of the limited circle who were able to survey the proceedings through the window as from a private box.

At 4.30 the rain held off, the clouds lifted a little, and we were able to form a better idea than heretofore of the real beauty of the situation of Gebi. No high peaks, unless the Schoda count as such, are visible from it, but the thickly wooded hillsides, and the views in three directions, down the main valley, up towards the Schoda, and up the glen of the Tchosura, combine to form a highly picturesque ensemble. We strolled a certain distance up the Tchosura amidst such a profusion of wild flowers as I have rarely seen, roses and honeysuckle predominant; we did not go far, but got glimpses of snow peaks towards the main chain which satisfied me that the pass of the Gebi-vtzek which crosses in this direction to the valley of the Uruch must be well worth exploring. The route is, I believe, well known to the country people, and of much the same character as the parallel pass of the Guedzi-evetzk from China, a variation of which I crossed in 1868, but the latter leads to a more easterly branch of the upper Uruch valley.

A jovial evening

After dinner we compensated our friends for having excluded them during the afternoon by holding a grand reception in the verandah and exhibiting all our belongings; revolvers, knives, drinking cups, compasses, and telescopes were objects of boundless wonder, and admiration. While the 'profane vulgar' were wrapt in us, the elders of the village in the upper balcony were holding a grand palaver on some subject, probably of no importance even to themselves, but which caused enormous excitement and was discussed with the greatest volubility. What with the hum of the crowd below and the noisy eloquence of the debaters above, the uproar was deafening, and the whole scene was really beyond description. High good humour prevailed on all sides, and it was late before the throng melted away, and we were left to ourselves.

Departure from Gebi

The morning of the 10th July was fair, after a wet night, and our porters began to assemble in good time; by 8.0 all were ready, with one exception, and the Chief handed over to me a list of them by name, as part of a formal document defining what they were engaged to do. This document was in an unknown tongue, but its possession gave me a certain hold over the persons named in it, if any were disposed to be troublesome. After a great deal of shouting and running to and fro', the laggard, who resided over the river, put in an appearance, and, quite unaffected by the remarks, probably abusive, with which he was greeted by his fellows, proceeded to take his part in the animated discussion in which *they* had been engaged for some time as to the division of the loads. It is needless to say that this was arranged at last to the

satisfaction of no one, though each man's burden was very small. Our men were on the whole a stalwart and not ill-looking lot, though clothes were certainly *not* their strong point; some of them had made the journey to Svanetia in 1868, and two grizzled old men of these had, I believe, insisted on joining the party now for old acquaintance' sake; they looked rather past work, but proved in the end by no means the least capable of the crew.

The pedlars of the Caucasus

We started at 9.15 after a very friendly parting with the village generally. I must confess to having been far more favourably impressed with Gebi and its people in 1874 than I had been in 1868. Then it had not seemed to me possible to make it a headquarters for any length of time owing to the constant and irritating discussions which were involved in procuring the commonest necessaries of life, and the apparent hopelessness of ever really concluding a bargain. Now they seemed to me much less rude and greedy; after the first display of the old style after our arrival, we had nothing to complain of on the score of prices though, no doubt, we paid high, and, as before observed, the engagement of porters was effected without either discussion or difficulty. This improvement in manners, if real, can scarcely be set down as the result of increased commerce with the outer world, for we were told that between 1868 and 1874 no one in the shape of a traveller had visited the village. With the tribes on the north side of the chain the people of Gebi, as well as those of the neighbouring villages of Tchiora and Glola, do have a good deal of intercourse; they have indeed a monopoly of commercial enterprise in this part of the chain, which they frequently traverse as pedlars carrying the productions of the Rion valley, whatever they may be, for exchange against the cloth and cattle of the Tartar tribes who dwell on the Tcherek, Tchegem, Baksan, and Kuban. In our subsequent journey a 'man of Gebi' turned up at almost every village we visited, and, more than once proved a 'Deus ex machinâ' to us in our difficulties. I doubt whether these petty traders penetrate further west than the Kuban, or further east than the Uruch, and I believe they are recruited solely from these three villages of the upper Rion,—Gebi and Tchiora on the western stream, and Glola on the eastern. Our two horsemen of Oni, though active and energetic men, seemed to have no knowledge whatever of the northern valleys, but I fancy that the people of that place and other villages of the Radscha,—or district lying between the middle course of the Rion and the upper Tzenes-Tzkali,—have a certain commerce with Svanetia, which they reach by the Latpari pass, a horsepath from the Tzenes-Tzkali across the Laila range which encloses the Ingur basin on the south. If this be so, they have far more awkward customers to deal with in the professedly Christian Svanetians of the south, than their cousins of the upper villages have in the Mahomedan Tartars of the north.

Over the river and back again

The Chief of the village started with us on horseback in order to see us safe over the river at the point where the path up the valley crosses to the right bank, where there once was a bridge; this, however, having been carried away some years ago, has never been replaced. In 1868 it had not been possible to cross the river at this point, and we had therefore taken to the right bank at once and made our way along it by a rough and difficult scramble, through pathless thickets and along the bed of the stream, which I had no desire to repeat. A walk of an hour and a quarter brought us to the crossing place, and I went over at once mounted behind the chief, and clasping him tightly round the waist. The river is broad and rapid but not deep, and to a man on a horse to himself the passage would have offered no difficulty; but I was neither comfortably nor securely placed, and was heartily glad to reach the opposite bank, without having emulated Gardiner's performance in the Kal-Tsiteli. But my congratulations were premature, for the rest of the party, or rather the porters, declined to follow, and, after a great deal of shouting between the chief and the recusants, when it became clear that they had no intention of coming to us, we had no alternative but to cross back again to them. I was naturally not pleased, nor did the explanation offered satisfy me; this was that, on reflection, the men considered the path on the left bank to be better than that on the right, and that the streams would be less troublesome. Although I was persuaded that the real cause of the sudden change of plan was simply a desire on the part of the men to postpone the unpleasant job of crossing the Rion for the moment, at the cost of no matter what later inconvenience, yet I could not be sure that their view might not be right in the main; it was useless therefore to insist on the immediate passage,—the more so, as provided we got to the head of the valley by nightfall, it was immaterial by what exact route we might reach it, and my recollections of the path on the right bank were not, after all, very favourable. So we parted, with much handshaking and hearty good wishes from the friendly chief, and went on our way.

The glen of the Zopkhetura

For a time that way was pleasant enough. This part of the Rion valley, though open, is wild and striking, and our track lay over beautiful undulating green alps diversified with woods, at some height above the river, commanding grand views up and down its course, and suggestive glimpses up lateral ravines, of bold rock peaks sprinkled with snow. The general picturesqueness was much greater than I had supposed; in 1868 we had gone up the valley in drenching rain and had, in fact, seen nothing of it; now, the day was fair, though cloudy, and everything looked to tolerable advantage. The proportion of forest to open alp gradually increased, and we were soon following a mere track through very thick woods; at last we began to climb the hillside, and to turn away from the river. The explanation of this move was very plausible,—that the hills here closed in on the river and

that progress close along the bank was impossible,—but it was clear evidence of the folly of having given up the regular way. We climbed at least 700 feet, over ground as steep as it was possible for laden men to climb, and through a tangle of scrub and undergrowth so thick as to be scarcely passable. Then we skirted the densely wooded hillside for a while on a level, and then our friends began to shew an inclination to turn upwards again. But this we would not stand; it had been evident for some time that we were pursuing a very random course, according to the exigencies of the moment, and the course, we now insisted, should be downwards to the river again. So down we plunged, and soon reached the bank. But what was the river? Certainly not the Rion, unless that lordly stream had strangely diminished in volume within a very short distance. A glance at the map showed where we were. We had left the valley of the Rion altogether, and were in a glen watered by one of its tributaries,—the Zopkhetura, having climbed over the intervening spur. It followed, that between us and the head of the Rion valley where we were to pass the night there lay, first, the big and swift torrent of the Zopkhetura, and, secondly, the high ridge on its further or right bank, both of which obstacles had to be crossed. It was already 1.30 and a desperate push would clearly be required if we were to get over the ridge to the pre-determined sleeping place by nightfall.

Reminiscences

On taxing the porters with having misled us, they repudiated the suggestion with much vigour and many appeals to their patron saints. 'Was this stream not the Zopkhetura, and should we not have to get 'over it and the ridge opposite in order to find the Rion once more?' 'Oh yes! All that was perfectly true, but a little higher up we should 'find a bridge, so there would be no trouble about crossing the river; 'then, as regarded the ridge, although just opposite it was high and 'steep, a little further on it became lower and there would be not 'much ascent. We were taking the best way, and should get to the 'appointed halting place quite early.' Somewhat consoled, but not convinced we devoted half an hour to refreshment, and then turned up the valley towards the glacier which closed it in front, following a very faint track at some height above the river, through splendid woods, varied by clearings where the rank vegetation on either hand was over our heads. The men, as they plodded along, kept up a monotonous chant, which I well recollected as having heard from the same lips in 1868 in very much the same circumstances on the upper Tzenes-Tzkali. Now too, as then, each man would make a sudden dart from his place in the line to secure a head of a kind of colossal celery, which he would peel and devour with avidity, not forgetting to press a piece upon us. The whole scene was such an exact reproduction of former ones, that it seemed more like a mere continuance of the old performance than a renewal of it after many years' interval.

Remonstrances

So, for more than an hour, the procession dragged slowly along, my discontent growing at every step. At last, as there was no sign either of the promised bridge or any marked depression in the opposite ridge, I became satisfied that strong measures were necessary if we were to strike the Rion again before nightfall. So I stopped the line, and summoning Paul desired him to listen to me and interpret what I said, word for word, for the benefit of the men of Gebi. I then with violent gestures and every appearance of intense anger declared my disgust at their conduct, and my belief that they were deliberately leading us astray, in order to prolong the journey ; but I would not let their plan succeed ; I would no longer go crawling along the wrong side of a valley which we had no business ever to have entered ; we would at once retrace our steps along the bank to the junction of the stream with the Rion and ford the latter below that point, so as to strike the path which I knew of old ; if we failed, we would return to Gebi, go down to Glola in the lower valley, and make a fresh start with men from there, proclaiming everywhere the baseness and incompetence of the people of Gebi, and not forgetting to send into the Russians at Kutais the names of the offenders which I had in my pocket !

The effect of this harangue delivered with energy, and not losing, I imagine, by Paul's interpretation, was tremendous. Two old men, who might be considered the leaders, replied to Paul, speaking simultaneously, and with great volubility. Prefacing their remarks by an appeal to a long string of saints to witness to their veracity, they begged me to believe that the way we were following was the shortest, the best,—nay, the only way to the source of the Rion ; a little patience and I should be satisfied ; as for going back and finding the river below the junction of the Zopkhetura, that was impossible ; the water would be over their heads. To all this, I shook my head and declared that I did not believe one single word ; whereupon, with much wringing of hands and renewed appeals to their tutelary divinities, they deplored my hardheartedness and again protested the truth of their story. I then showed signs of relenting. Did they understand clearly that we were to cross the ridge opposite and get down into the valley on the other side by nightfall ? Yes they did, and certainly we should do so ; if we did not, might they perish everlastingly, they, their wives, and their children,—might the saints never more listen to their invocations, —and might none of their ventures prosper ! Very well then, we would go on, but there must be no more dawdling, and they must be prepared to walk on the rest of the day without any halts.

The Zopkhetura Glacier

This discussion did not take many minutes, and at its close the old men, after saying a few words to their companions, led off at a great pace up the valley again. This was not a mere spurt. In spite of their years and of loads certainly not less heavy than those of their younger followers they walked quite as fast as we cared to go, and did not slacken

until at 3.35 we came to the point where we had to cross the Zopkhetura to which we had gradually descended. Through this we waded. The stream was of a moderate breadth, and very rapid ; the depth however was not much above the knee, and the passage only required a little care. From the other side we had a good view of the glacier at the head of the valley ; the peaks which surround it were cloud-enveloped, but the glacier itself was clear ; it is a fine one, moderately crevassed, in two branches, of which the eastern rises to the greatest height ; the medial moraine is very well marked ; by a rough barometrical observation we estimated the elevation of the tail of the glacier, from which we were not very distant, to be about 6,400 feet. Speaking *more Alpino*, an interesting pass might probably be made in this direction to the western branch of the valley of the Uruch, but the summit ridge should, I think, be struck as far to the west as possible ; otherwise the descent on the north side might be found precipitous, if my recollection of the ground on that side be correct.

The ridge of Bodurasho

Continuing our way through herbage high above our heads which discharged upon us a perfect army of midges who followed our course like a cloud, we gradually worked round a spur to the entrance of a broad side glen leading up to the ridge we had to cross. The name given to this ridge on the map is ' Bodurasho.' The promised depression was, like the bridge, conspicuous by its absence, and an ascent of some 2,000 feet lay before us. At the mouth of the glen was a hut, from which emerged a shepherd,—of course a friend of our men. ' Here,' said my old friend, ' will be a capital place to stop for the night.'—' Possibly it would be,' was my reply, ' but no halting for the night will there be for you, until we get over yonder ridge, so, up you go ! ' The slopes were both long and steep, completely overgrown by herbage of the same sort as that through which we had been forcing our way for some hours. A track had been trodden through this just broad enough for us to pass along in single file, and so avoid the labour of making one for ourselves ; but the way was very slippery, the down-trodden stalks giving very uncomfortable foothold at such an angle. We naturally therefore outwalked the porters and when we gained the ridge at 6.0 they were still a long way below.

The barometer read 22·05 which would give a height of about 8,300 feet,—an elevation at which we were astonished to find the beautiful white Caucasian Rhododendron in full bloom. The glen too into which we were about to descend was, so far as its upper slopes were concerned, a perfect garden of rhododendron ; those just below us were, in particular, a blaze of flower. Otherwise the view from our position was not extensive,—on either hand, a wild and savage glen. The clouds which had been gathering all day now concealed all the higher ridges, and ominous mists were curling up the hillside towards us. At 6.30 the porters arrived, and at that moment the long threatened rain began. I asked Paul if the men had any idea of finding shelter for

the night, and learned that they knew of ' une espèce de rocher ' down below, where we should be very comfortable. Under the circumstances it was obviously wise to lose no time in gaining this refuge, so we set off at once, sending the porters ahead once more.

Unpleasant descent

Down the first steep grass slopes there was a faint track, but this died away on the rhododendron-covered and broken ground below, and though the men at first led with decision, they soon began to wander, and show that they had lost their bearings. Meanwhile, the fog had closed in on us, darkness was coming on apace, and the rain was falling in sheets, against which our mackintosh capes availed nothing. Groping for the path was obviously useless ; the thing was to get down to the stream somehow by the shortest route ; we went along helter skelter over torrents, stones, and every sort of natural obstruction, crashing through the rhododendron which covered the steep hillside at some points so thickly that we had to swing ourselves down by it. The roots and branches made a very slippery pathway, and there were places where a fall would have been awkward ; at one such, I lost my footing and began sliding down on my back at an uncomfortable pace ; clutching at a branch with my left hand, I stopped myself, but, in doing so, gave my shoulder so severe a wrench as to renew an old dislocation,—the fruit of a fall in Switzerland in 1872. Luckily the joint was not completely out of the socket, and a little manœuvring replaced it, but my arm was for the time rendered quite useless.

The stream at the bottom of the glen was reached at last,—a mere torrent flowing through a waste of stones ; according to the map it has its source in a small glacier, but neither from the ridge above nor any point on the descent did we get a glimpse of it, and I rather doubt its existence. The moment we reached the level of the stream, the men proposed to stop for the night. Considering the nature of the ground, the suggestion was rather comic, and illustrated very completely the indifference of the natives to personal comfort. To lie down would have been impossible, and each man would have had to sit all night on his particular boulder,—the rain meanwhile, coming down in sheets. Needless to say that we negatived the proposal at once. Picking our way along the bed of the stream we at last found a tolerably convenient point for crossing it, where the torrent, never very wide, was nearly choked with rocks. Not that the passage was too good, as one of our party discovered ; for the rocks were slippery, and in stepping from one to the other Walker, though perhaps the most surefooted of us all, managed to slip and so got a thorough ducking,—a misadventure which did not, after all, place him in a much worse plight than the rest, for what with the heavy rain and the saturated state of the slopes by which we had descended, we were all by this time pretty wet through.

The right bank of the torrent was thickly wooded but the ground was easy, and we gradually worked round the end of the spur which separated our glen from the main valley of the Rion. At 8.10, after we had

fairly turned into that valley, and when it had become quite dark, we reached a spot, where though the undergrowth of weeds was tall and thick, the wood thinned out a little. Here we determined to encamp. We were, I think, rather higher up the valley than the Sassagonelli Alp on the opposite bank of the river, where our party had stopped in 1868. The barometer read 23·70, which would imply a height of about 6,300 feet. To reach this point from Gebi we had taken 11 hours, having lost probably something like 5 hours by our détour up the valley of the Zopkhetura,—a détour which nevertheless we did not regret.

A damp bivouac

Our position where we were was sufficiently miserable ; we were wet through, it was raining hard and there was little or no shelter, and the dense vegetation sent forth clouds of midges which fastened on to us with avidity. Circumstances however which depressed us to some extent and reduced Knubel to despair brought out the favourable side of the Caucasian character ; both the men of Gebi and Paul were completely indifferent to the discomfort of the situation. The former beat down the rank herbage, so as to give space for the camp and soon had a roaring fire alight,—how, I never could find out or understand, for everything was in a state of drip ; while Paul busied himself about preparing supper. We meanwhile managed to get out of our wet clothes into dry ones,—a not very easy operation under the circumstances, and then turned into our sleeping bags ; each man placed his umbrella tilted up on the ground at the head of his bag,—in which position it protected both from wind and rain the upper part of the body which would otherwise have been exposed to both. This was the first time on which we had had occasion to test the value of my idea on this point, and there was unanimity as to its success ; the use of the umbrella simply made the difference between comfort and discomfort, and rendered a position really agreeable which would otherwise have been barely tolerable. The weak point of the bags is unquestionably the cover they afford to fleas, which lie snug in the swansdown all day, and have the occupants of the bags at their mercy at night, unless a very careful ‘ chasse ’ has been made, and with every care some lurkers will escape. This was the case now, and the foes we had brought up from Gebi attacked us fiercely. The experience however was no new one, and we bore it with equanimity during the interval which elapsed before Paul appeared with soup and grilled mutton, cooked to perfection as usual with him when circumstances seemed most adverse ; and supper over, we were soon asleep.

Our slumbers were naturally disturbed, and during intervals of wakefulness the monotonous pattering of the rain on the mackintosh sheets which covered us, and the steady drip from the surrounding trees, prepared us for the sort of morning which greeted us at 4.30 on the 11th, when we finally abandoned the effort to prolong the night.

A thick mist enveloped everything, and the heavy downpour had given place to a drizzle scarcely less penetrating. Any idea of crossing the mountains was obviously out of the question ; nothing would have induced the men to make the attempt, which would indeed have been rather wild. The only thing to be done was to push on to the head of the valley, no great distance in front, and there camp again, as near the glacier as possible, where we hoped at any rate to be out of the long grass and therefore beyond the range of the flies.

Reflections

We did not start till 7.40 and fifty minutes' slow walking brought us to our goal,—the ' espèce de rocher ' where we should have arrived over night (Bar. 23·35 ; height 6,725 feet). This was nothing but a big upright boulder, projecting slightly, so as to give a little shelter,—but so slightly, that, the wind being where it was, we had been better off in the forest. We remained here the rest of the day, in a gloomy state of mind. The glacier from which the western Rion flows was close at hand and descends to a level of about 7,000 feet. It plunges into the valley in a steep icefall, which on either hand has shrunk away considerably from the bounding ranges, and is broken in the middle by what in the Alps is called a ' heisse-platte,' over which avalanches fall from time to time. In clear weather the fine snow dome of the Edemis-Mta is seen very much fore-shortened rising, apparently from the head of the icefall, but really from the snowfield some distance behind. The stream where it issues from the glacier, and for some distance below, is very shallow ; as we should eventually have to cross it, and in the early morning it would be just as well to do so dry shod, Knubel with praiseworthy energy devoted himself to making a rough bridge with some dead trees that were lying about ; we assisted in the operation for some time in spite of the rain, and then returned to our gîte, from which I, for one, did not move for the remainder of the day. I do not think that I ever before sat so long in one position in a state of absolute idleness ; books we had none, save a volume of Shakespeare, to study which I was not in the mood ; so I sat on a stone with my back against the rock, and reflected on the gloomy prospects of the expedition, and vainly sought for some decently practicable plan of operations should the morrow bring no improvement in the weather. Once on the other side of the chain we had many alternatives from which to choose ; if matters mended we could carry out our programme, while, if the weather continued permanently bad we could go down to Piatigorsk and there wait for a chance of making a dash at Elbruz. But on the south side we had no alternatives between staying where we were, and a retreat to Kutais, except a wide détour over the Mamison Pass to Vladikavkaz. The first course was practically impossible, while the adoption of either of the others involved necessarily the giving up of all chance of seeing the glaciers round Dych Tau and Koshtan Tau,—the principal objects of the expedition. So that on the whole it is perhaps

not to be wondered at that, appreciating the position more clearly than my companions, I failed to emulate their cheerfulness, and was, in fact, rather morose.

Mountain Gloom

Facing me, all the afternoon, sat one of the two old men from Gebi, under the shelter of one of the umbrellas of which he had taken possession, with an unvarying smile intended to denote partly personal regard for me, partly satisfaction with his own position. His comrades had fixed themselves under a rock, and in the course of the day made a very good shelter by collecting branches of trees and slanting them against the rock. We suggested that they should do the same for us, but, from sheer laziness they demurred, and when we insisted, carried off our old friend to assist in the collection of material, to his infinite disgust, which was increased when at the end of the operations both his seat and umbrella were appropriated by the second old man, whose grin of satisfaction was as constant and comic as that of his fellow.

During the day some of the men went off to seek some shepherds in the neighbourhood ; they returned with a sheep, so that, instead of the short commons to which as a precautionary measure we had doomed ourselves, we fared sumptuously. Towards evening too the rain ceased, so that what with good fare, better shelter, and some faint hope of improvement in the weather, the moment of creeping into our bags was the most cheerful of the day.

More than once during the night our slumbers were broken by fierce storms of rain driving against our leafy tabernacle, but the morning of the 12th broke fair, and at 4.0 when I turned out to look round, the sky was clear and the air crisp and frosty. The change was too sudden to promise to be lasting, but there seemed a fair chance of getting across the range, or at all events to the top of the pass, while it endured, so we prepared to celebrate my birthday by crossing from Asia into Europe once more.

Up the ridge

The natives, as usual, were by no means eager to move, and it was 6.0 before we got off. Having passed to the right bank of the stream, we at once began climbing the slopes which rise above the glacier into a prominent rocky point, the crest of a buttress which separates the glacier basin from a wide cirque sweeping round to the ridge over which goes the Goribolo pass to the valley of the Tzenes-Tzkali. There was a rough track, at first leading away from the glacier, but it gradually resumed its proper direction, and by 9.0 brought us to the top of what from below had looked like a peak, but now, as is common, proved to be the end of a ridge. The ascent was continuous and steep, but we managed to keep the men moving steadily, if slowly. The weather had already changed for the worse, and clouds hid everything except a rock peak, and the beautiful snow dome of the Edemis Mta, on the other side of the glacier across which we were looking.

We had now merely to follow the ridge whose crest we had gained, and which forms the right bank of the glacier. Mists enveloped us, but the way was luckily obvious, and not difficult ; some scrambling was requisite and the snow-covered state of the rocks rendered care necessary in places, but for bipeds there was no cause of complaint. I confess, however, that I could scarcely believe the way to be practicable for cattle, as we were told ; possibly they may be brought by a more circuitous route, but enquiries thro' Paul failed to elicit anything definite on the point. The snow gradually became deeper, and the slopes on either hand less steep ; at last an unmistakable crevasse shewed that the ridge had come to an end, and that we had struck the névé which supplies the icefall we had circumvented ; at the same moment the fog which had for the last two hours been very thick, lifted somewhat and allowed us to get a glimpse of what must be the pass no great distance in front, a widish opening between two low peaks of rock, of which that on the left was crowned by a small stone man.

Between Europe and Asia

The revelation was opportune, for it would have been easy to miss the direction over the big snowfield whose northwestern angle we were crossing, and the men who had kept on their way cheerfully and well as long as they were on the ridge, were beginning to shew signs of indecision and alarm. An almost level traverse brought us to the col at 11.50. Its existence is indicated on the 5 verst map, but neither name nor height is given to it. The first deficiency we could make no attempt to supply, but an Aneroid reading of 19·45 justifies an estimate of about 11,500 feet for the height ; less than 11,000 feet it can scarcely be.

On the north side, a broad glacier swept down from our feet in slopes of névé of moderate steepness slightly crevassed. So much we could see, but all else was veiled ; snow was falling, and above our level the light mist which surrounded us gave place to impenetrable fog, entirely concealing the ridges which bound the glacier and the peaks which rise from them. We could therefore form no idea of the topography of this part of the chain, or of its relation to the great spur which culminates in the peaks of Koshtan Tau (17,096) and Dych Tau (16,925) and, roughly speaking, forms the west side of the valley of the Tcherek into which we were about to descend. This was a great disappointment, but there was obviously no advantage in waiting on the chance of a clearance, of which there were no signs, so we at once prepared for our downward journey by getting out the rope which now for the first time came into play. Of this we had about 80 feet,—a length which was insufficient to allow of the whole party being tied together ; we therefore attached ourselves and directed the porters to hold on.

Putting on the rope

The men of Gebi evidently regarded the descent with extreme apprehension ; from the moment of arriving on the col they began crossing

themselves and ceaselessly muttering prayers. Remembering my experience on Elbruz in 1868, when a sensible man like Sataef Achia, the hunter, had with difficulty been persuaded even to walk alongside the rope without touching it, I was not prepared for the scene which ensued when we were on the point of starting. Far from requiring pressure to hold on to the rope they at once appreciated the absolute protection which it afforded against concealed crevasses, and flatly refused to move unless they were fastened like us. In vain we pointed out that there was not enough for such an arrangement ; their answer was prompt : ' Let us be tied, and you hold on.' This for men who had never seen anything of the kind before was pretty good ! There was really not the least cause for alarm, as it could be seen that the snow was deep and good, and that the crevasses were not numerous ; at last, therefore, we persuaded our friends to move on, at 12.10, the crossing becoming more frequent, and the appeals to the tutelary deities of Gebi more fervent, as we left the col, each man nervously clutching at the rope alongside of him.

Down the glacier

The obvious best line of march was to keep, after the first drop, nearly on a level along the slopes on the left, and then to strike down into the middle of the glacier below the region of concealed crevasses ; and in this direction we started under the lead of one of the porters. But after going a short distance in much trepidation and with absurd precautions, the leader began to make a wide sweep to the right, quite *out* of the way and *into* the line where crevasses might be expected if at all. Of an icefall there was nowhere any sign. We objected to an unnecessary détour, and insisted upon keeping the proper direction ; whereupon, our friends, with one exception, cast off from us, and, with what sounded painfully like maledictions on our heads, went their own way, the merit of which in their eyes was, I imagine, that it was the one they were accustomed to follow when business or pleasure led them across the chain. Left to our own devices, and dragging our somewhat unwilling attendant along at a pace to which he was little accustomed, we were soon on the lower glacier, where the walking was disagreeable owing to slush and moraine, and at 1.35 left the ice on its right bank, the men being a long way behind.

Head of the Tcherek valley

The weather had improved a little and allowed us from here to get some idea of the lie of the country. The head of the Tcherek valley is entirely filled by a glacier of great breadth in proportion to its length, or rather by two glaciers divided by a rocky ridge and a moraine ; each of these two glaciers is, in its turn, divided by ridges into two wide bays, of which we had descended, as it seemed to us, the smallest and least crevassed ; the upper snowfields were still very imperfectly seen but, through the clouds, we got glimpses of several finely shaped peaks, apparently of great height,—certainly what in the Alps would rank as

first-class peaks ; their apparent height may however have been an optical delusion ; the map marks no elevations at this part of the chain, which it makes no attempt to delineate. A very little way down the valley, a vast icefall came crashing down, in shape and purity reminding us of the Bossons, but, as we thought, broader and bigger than that glacier in its best days ; we could not see any part of the snowfield from which it flows, but it must be of great extent ; unlike the glacier we had descended, which dies out in a rather feeble way, this one preserves its vigour to the end, and reaches the level of the valley at a height of about 8,100 feet (Bar. 22).

While we were looking about, the men arrived, not in the best of tempers, as sometimes happens when men are conscious of having the laugh against them ; but they soon recovered themselves, and when a little lower down they met two of their compatriots, on their way home over the pass, were quite jolly and cheerful again, and most anxious to demonstrate to me that they bore no malice for some angry words which had passed up above. This they did in a curious way ; each man got out his scanty store of provisions, broke off a piece of bread, and insisted on my taking it ; Paul assured me that it was their way of ' making friends,' and that a refusal on my part to accept the offering would cause great distress. The two wayfarers, as we understood, had come over on a cattle lifting, or purchasing, speculation, and, by fair means or foul, had become possessed of a bullock, which had somehow come to grief,—at all events they were carrying it over in a dissected state as butcher's meat, of which they offered us a joint. We, however, had doubts and declined, though a relief from the eternal mutton would have been agreeable.

A slight track over steepish slopes of grass and shale took us down to the level of the stream, which had to be forded. The water was not much over our knees, and we picked a way across with little trouble to the left bank which the path thenceforwards kept to. The valley soon became a gorge, very narrow and savage, through which the walking was rough even for human kind ; some corners, where the cliff and the stream touched, leaving no available space for the path, required care in passing, and certainly seemed to us impracticable for cattle, which however are unquestionably taken this way,—at least, as we were positively assured.

A glorious view

On emerging from the gorge we got a view, which coming on us unexpectedly brought us with one consent to a standstill, speechless with admiration. Just below, was a splendid alp, on to which one of the great glaciers of the Nuamquam broke in a grand cascade of séracs ; across and beyond this we looked for miles down the valley, a long series of ravines formed by successive spurs which break down into it from the ranges on either hand, and cross each other, ridge behind ridge, an endless succession, grouped by a master hand. Heavy rain was falling, but gleams of sunshine at the same time pierced the heavy

but scattered clouds, and lit up the landscape in a marvellous way, producing effects which were some compensation for the obscurity in which the great peaks, which ought to have been visible, were veiled.

At 5.0 we reached the alp which lies just above the tail of the great glacier spoken of above, and is dotted with great boulders in picturesque confusion ; in the middle of it we were delighted to see a hut, which it was at once determined, on my suggestion, should if possible be our night quarters. We had intended to get some two hours lower down the valley to the point where our party of 1868 had passed two nights ; but the position fairly fascinated us, and all agreed that, in the state of the weather, it would be a sin to go on, seeing nothing of the exquisite scenery which, as I knew, lay in front of us. The morning might bring better fortune.

Karaul-ka

The point we had reached is no doubt that marked on the map ' Karaulka,' which means ' guard,' or ' post,' and is one of several where the people of these northern valleys station watchmen, whose duty in former times was no doubt to give warning to the villages below of forays from across the chain ; nowadays there is no danger of anything serious of this kind, and cattle lifting is probably all that the natives have to fear. This, however, is an amusement which must be carried on under enormous difficulties and on a very small scale. The only decently practicable route across the chain is the one by which we had come, to get cattle over it must be difficult at any time, and impossible in face of opposition or pursuit. Any other route, if it exist, must lead to the savage defiles of the upper Tzenes-Tzkali, and pass over difficult ground on both sides,—on the north, indeed, either over the snowfields which feed the great glacier like the Bossons beneath which we had passed, or over those which supply the icefall at whose base the guard house is placed. The 5 verst map *does* mark a track over this last glacier, passing to the west of a peak there named ' Tau Gezevtzek ' but locally known, I believe, as ' Maschquar,' and descending into the branch of the Tzenes-Tzkali valley which is watered by the Zesku torrent. But I greatly doubt the existence of anything more than a hunter's pass in this direction, if that ; I have made careful enquiries on both sides, myself and through Russian officers, without being able to hear of anything of the kind ; unfortunately, I have never had a clear view of this part of the chain, but its south side, judging from what we saw in descending the Zesku glen in 1868, must be very steep, while the size of the glaciers on the north indicates at any rate a vast extent of snowfield. Cattle lifting in that quarter is, I am quite sure, impossible.

The Stuli-evtzek Pass

The guard house, where we now were, is at a height of about 7,150 feet (Bar. 22.30), and must be very nearly opposite the glen through which the track of the Stuli-evtzek pass leads to the valley of the Uruch ; when crossing that pass in 1868, we had failed to get any idea

of the real character of the head of the Tcherek valley, and the vast glacier system which fills it, so completely masked is the narrow gorge which alone gives access to it ; I imagine too that perfect as, upon that occasion, was our view of the great spur, comprising Koshtan Tau and Dych Tau, which radiates from somewhere near the Nuamquam, as we learned to call the great peak which towers over the sources of the Ingour, the main chain east of the latter point was hidden from us.

A religious difficulty

On going up to the hut we found one of the guardians ' at home,'—a rather surly old fellow who seemed by no means delighted to see us. Nor was this wonderful. Our personal appearance and get-up must have seemed to him strange to a degree, while our company—the men of Gebi—was in his eyes suspicious, to say the least. He spoke too that one of the mountain languages,—a dialect of Tartar—with which Paul was least familiar, and the explanation as to who we were, where we came from, and what we wanted had in the main to be given through the aforesaid men of Gebi. They doubtless made the best of us, and, at any rate, succeeded in satisfying our host that we had no evil designs, for he soon gave us to understand that we might make ourselves at home. When, however, the first and most important stage in that process, vizt : preparing dinner, was begun by Paul, a novel difficulty arose. We were amongst Mahomedans, and strict ones ; now, our dinner was to consist of a savoury mess of mutton which had once been a Christian sheep, and had been killed in the usual Christian style without much ceremonial. The old man on catching sight of it, bristled up at once, and refused to allow his roof to be polluted by the cooking of meat which had not been slaughtered in an orthodox way and by a Mussulman butcher. He at last relented, so far as we were concerned, on the understanding that the unclean thing should not be allowed to come in contact with anything in the hut ; but as regards the porters, he was inexorable, and they had to perform their culinary operations outside as best they could in a deluge of rain.

A pleasant evening

Gardiner and I were soon driven to follow them by an enemy who could not be conciliated,—in the shape of the keenest and most pungent wood smoke I ever suffered from. We stood it for some time with streaming eyes, but, at last, suffocation was imminent, and we fled. Shelter of some kind was indispensable, but we calculated that some sort of a hole, which would do, would be easily found amongst the surrounding boulders. Nor were we deceived. Not a hundred yards from the hut, two immense rocks had fallen together and made a splendid cave ; the entrance was narrow, but within there was room for a dozen persons, perfect shelter, and a dry but fairly soft floor. Here we lay snug until dinner was announced. During our absence the second guardian had turned up,—the hunter of the party, a fine, active, fellow,

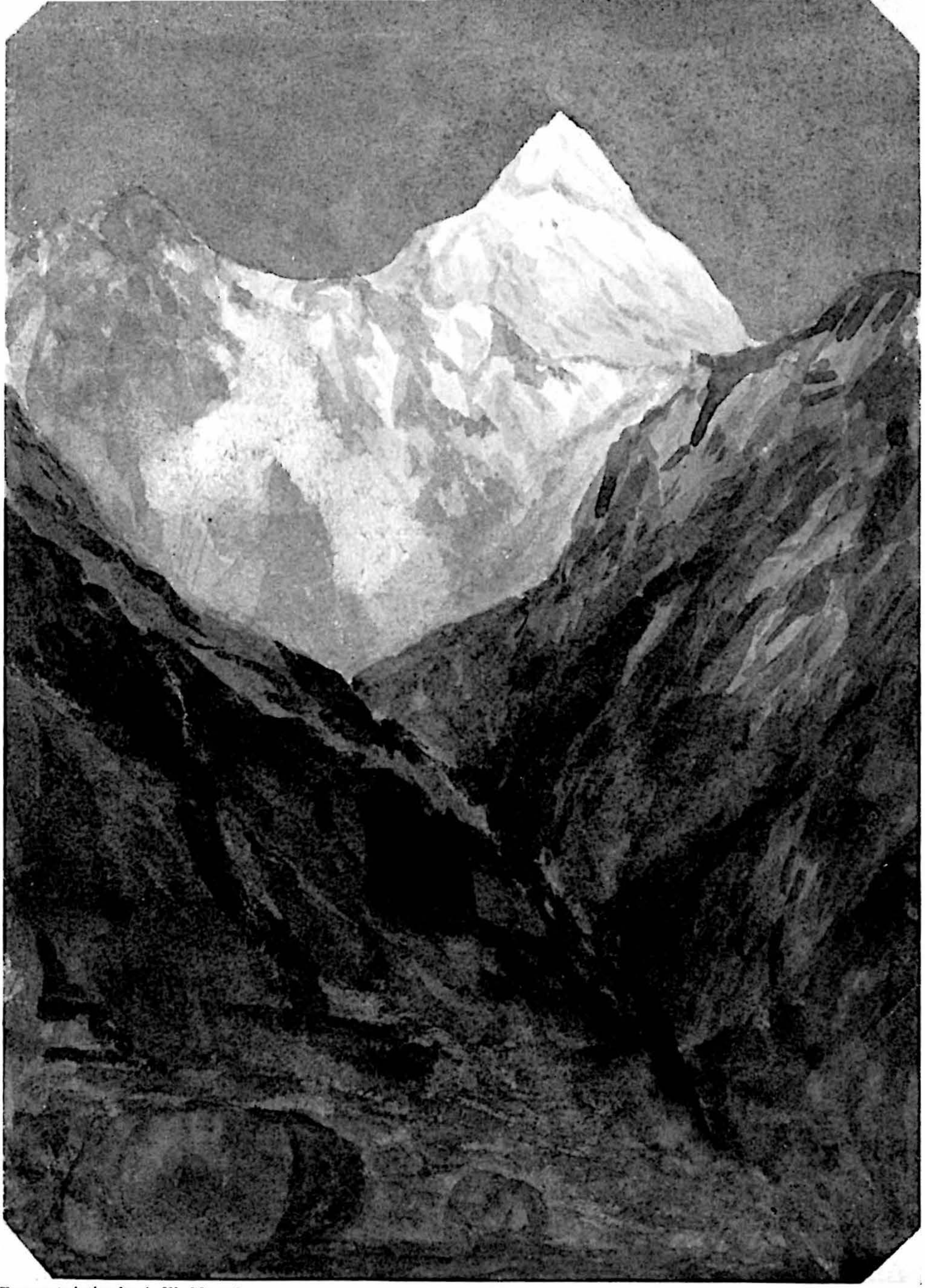
far more cordial in his manner than his companion was disposed to be ; with him was a second and younger man, who was also friendly. Altogether, that evening inside the smoky hut was a pleasant one ; we had the agreeable consciousness that during the day we had made a long step on our journey, and had attained a position in which we could afford to be,—if not quite indifferent to bad weather,—at all events patient while it lasted ; if the worst came to the worst, Piatigorsk was within four days' march, and, without going so far, we were in any case sure of tolerable quarters amongst the friendly Mahomedans of these valleys ; the men of Gebi in their corner of the hut kept up a ceaseless gabble among themselves, while we made use of both them and Paul to cross-examine the hunter as to his knowledge of the neighbouring mountains, and their capabilities from a sporting point of view ; upon the first point we did not elicit much of a practical kind ; but upon the quantity of bouquetins to be encountered he was eloquent, and gave accounts which excited Grove a good deal. I can't help thinking that Paul and the men of Gebi between them did not trouble themselves to give a strictly literal version of the answers to our questions, and that the numbers did not diminish in the process of double translation. But there certainly are bouquetins in these parts, for, in 1868, we not only saw one which had been shot, but had the satisfaction of dining off a part of it.

When the conversation slackened, Gardiner and I carried our bags off to the cave, where we preferred to sleep ; leaving Grove, Walker, and the others to do the best they could for themselves in the hut. The heavy rain had given place to a drizzle, and the air was raw and cold, but once inside our bags we were comfortable enough and soon asleep.

First view of Dych Tau

When we first opened our eyes on the morning of the 13th July, the cave was filled with fog and the general aspect of affairs seemed unpromising ; but by the time we turned out, at 4.30, the fog had cleared off, and the sky was cloudless. The first object that greeted us, looking to the north, was the grand final spear-head of Dych Tau, soaring above the intervening ridges in the most defiant way, and brilliant with fresh snow. I hailed it joyfully as an old acquaintance, while certain doubts which Gardiner, and perhaps Grove and Walker also in a less degree, had begun to entertain as to the existence in the Caucasus of any peak comparable to the greater of Alpine summits, were summarily dispelled.

The night had been intensely cold, and the air was still so keen that we were glad to take refuge in the hut, where the others had scarcely fared as well as we had, and were now preparing for breakfast. At 5.30 we started down the valley having first gratified our hosts by an exhibition of our various belongings, which, as usual, excited unbounded wonder and admiration ; the revolvers, in particular, were appreciated,



From a painting by A. W. Moore.]

DYCH TAU [= KOSHTANTAU].

[*To face p.* 352.

and the hunter could scarcely contain himself when allowed to fire a round, and, that done, to possess himself of the empty cartridge cases which he carefully collected.

The Dych-Su 'Karaul'

A delightful walk of $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours through scenery of the first order, over luxuriant, if somewhat swampy, alps, with grand views on either hand —first, of the great icefall before mentioned,—then of Dych Tau and the adjoining ridges,—and lastly of a very precipitous peak on the right side of the valley, in the range between it and the Uruch, the Tau Tuluchi of the map, brought us to a second 'guard,' stationed in the very mouth of the gorge through which the torrent of the Dych-Su flows to join the Tcherek, and at the point where a bridge closed by a gateway carries the path to the left bank of the united streams. Here I was again on familiar ground, having in 1868, passed two nights under a rock some 400 yards lower down the valley. The position is that marked on the map by the word 'Karaul.'

Up the Dych-Su gorge

During our walk I could not help regretting that what promised to be the first 'blue' day we had had should be spent in walking down a valley, beautiful though that valley might be. The considerations which were in my mind at Gebi had certainly not been weakened by the events of the past three days; on the contrary, the character of the season seemed to be so fixed that clearly our game should be to lose no opportunity of 'seeing,' and not calculate upon 'doing,' in the Alpine sense of the word. I therefore now proposed to my companions that *we* should not descend the valley any further, but should send down Paul and the porters, and ourselves pass the day in an excursion to the glacier from which the Dych-Su torrent flows, returning to the guard-house to sleep. In 1868 we had climbed the ridge which forms the left bank of the lower glacier, and from it had got a view comparable to that from the Eggischhorn, except that the Aletsch glacier with its tributaries is puny compared with the Dych-Su and its feeders, and that the Aletschhorn and Jungfrau would be dwarfed into insignificance if set alongside the Nuamquam and Koshtan Tau. We had not then descended on to the glacier, or explored the gorge through which its torrent pours into the Tcherek,—having understood that it was impracticable. I had always been rather sceptical as to this, and my present idea was to reach the glacier by following up the torrent, and, when on the ice, act according to circumstances.

With their usual good nature the others at once agreed to my proposal, and it only remained to examine the state of the commissariat, and explain our intentions to the occupant of the guard-house upon whose hospitality we should be dependent. We proved to have sufficient bread and meat to furnish us with a moderate mid-day meal; then

our supplies would be exhausted. Paul however had no difficulty in arranging with the guard that in the evening and again in the morning he would supply us with bread, as much as we wanted, and a limited quantity of milk ; also that we might pass the night in the hut ;—we, on our parts, agreeing to pay 3 roubles for board and lodging. As we should be unable to communicate with our host except by signs, it was necessary that everything should be clearly explained ; this having at last been done, we started Paul and his train down the valley with orders to make for Mukhol, the village where we had stopped in 1868 ; on arrival there to pay off and dismiss the porters, giving each man an extra rouble ; and to expect us by mid-day on the morrow.

Gorge of the Dych-Su

At 8.30 we moved off, the weather being still everything that could be desired. The guard had told Paul that we should have no difficulty in getting through the gorge, and such proved to be the case ; indeed, a rough track—first on the left bank of the torrent, then on the right, saved us even the trouble of picking and choosing a way. The ravine is narrow and savage ; in front we got an occasional glimpse of a great snow peak far away near the head of the Dych-Su glacier which was itself invisible ; behind, across the Tcherek, Tau Tuluchi rose grandly, —a steep and shattered icefall, streaming from a flat basin of névé from which the final peak rose precipitously to a great height. It is quite one of the most remarkable isolated mountains that I know. When halfway up the gorge we halted 20 minutes for our mid-day meal, —some fragments of mutton which Grove divided with admirable impartiality. In spite of the delay, we reached the foot of the glacier at 11.0, at a height of about 6,750 feet (Bar. 23·40) ; the height of the guard-house we estimated at 5,750 feet (Bar. 24·25). The glacier ends in a vertical cliff of ice, perhaps 150 feet high, and shows no signs of retrogression of late years ; the torrent issues from a regularly formed arch. The slopes of shale on the right bank gave us easy access to the ice which was covered pretty thickly with moraine ; one great block, perched on the very edge of the terminal cliff, we tried to push over into the torrent, but it defied our efforts.

Although it was satisfactory to be standing on probably the biggest glacier in the whole Caucasian chain, our position had not otherwise much to recommend it ; the ridges on either hand shut out all view of the upper snowfields, and a long walk would evidently be required in order to attain any point from which any extensive prospect in front would be opened out. The weather already gave signs of changing for the worse, and it was plain that our best chance of seeing something was as quickly as possible to climb the slopes on one side or other of the glacier. We had no difficulty in deciding to scale the ridge which forms the left bank, and which in 1868 I had ascended by its reverse slope ; once on its crest we should only have to descend to the guard-house by the route which I had then followed.

Disappointment

I was aware that the ascent would be both long and steep, but was certainly not prepared for the continuous climb of $2\frac{1}{4}$ hours which was required before we reached the summit. Difficulty there was none, but simply a 'grind' of the most wearisome and disheartening kind up endless slopes—first of grass, then of grass and shale, and finally of shale alone; each successive slope looked like the last, until it was climbed, when another equally illusive, appeared behind. It was 1.30 before we really gained the top, if the Barometer (20·10) can be trusted, no less than 4,150 feet above the level of the glacier, or a height of 10,800 feet. Except in the way of exercise our manœuvre had been fruitless; as we climbed, we found with disgust that the weather was much worse than it had appeared to be from below, and that the upper and middle regions of the glacier were filled in with mist, through which the narrow and steep icefall in which the southern branch joins the main stream revealed itself occasionally; all else was invisible, and of Koshtan Tau and the Nuamquam we never got a glimpse. By the time we reached the ridge, which we struck, I think, pretty much at the same point as in 1868, the clouds had extended to it, and snow was falling. We remained till 2.0, hoping for a clearance, when the weather getting worse rather than better, we started down the slopes on the opposite side, and descended leisurely to the valley, during the latter part of the way, in rain, reaching the guard-house at 4.0 after an absence of $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours, and a walk which, beyond establishing the feasibility of getting on to the glacier by way of the gorge, had not added much to my previous knowledge.

A frugal meal

The evening turned out raw and unpleasant, though not actually wet, and we spent it lying on our bags in the hut, listening to Grove's reminiscences of banquets enjoyed by him in various parts of the world; certainly, our friend, if any one, could

'cloy the hungry edge of appetite
'By raising bare imagination of a feast,'

and, whenever short commons was the order of the day, his mind reverted instinctively to the fascinating details of many a well arranged ménu, with which he fairly made our mouths water. Upon the present occasion our bill of fare had at least the merit of simplicity, while the culinary process was primitive; our host took some flour and water, kneaded it into a number of round flat cakes, in size and shape resembling large bath buns, and covered them up with hot embers to bake. We were, I imagine, eye witnesses of the precise operation, the unsuccessful performance of which brought the great King Alfred to grief. In our case, there was no failure; in a very short time, the cakes were placed before us hot and smoking, and done to a turn. With a draft of milk,

they constituted our dinner. One quite satisfied me, but Grove would have liked a second; his pantomimic imitation to this effect was, however, thrown away upon the old man, who shook his head with an expression of countenance which indicated that never in his life had he come across such greedy people; luckily, for the hungry members of the party, one of our hunter friends of the upper guard turned up in the course of the evening to pass the night, and his arrival led to a second lot being baked of which we had the benefit.

The hut was rather draughty, but, thanks to our bags, we passed a fairly comfortable night. The morning of the 14th was bright and clear, and again raised delusive hopes of a change of weather, so that at 5.45 after more bread and milk we started in good spirits. The valley, for a long way down, is a grand and savage gorge between the finely shaped spurs of Dych Tau on the left and Tau Tuluchi on the right; many torrents come down from the former peak,—one, very big and strong, must have its source in a glacier of no mean size. Looking back we had, from successive brows, splendid views of an elegant snow peak at the head of the valley which can be no great distance from the pass we crossed on the 12th, and also of a fine mountain which rises like a wall on the south side of the Dych Su gorge. Two attempts to photograph were made but, unluckily, proved failures; it is very difficult with a small lens to get a satisfactory view of a distant snow peak.

Farewell to the men of Gebi

We shortly met our Gebi porters coming up the valley on their homeward way; the sound of their voices, all going at once, announced their approach before they appeared in sight. They insisted on shaking hands all round, and my two old friends embraced me with tears in their eyes; one of them at the same time addressed me in a long speech, of which the burden, I had a shrewd suspicion, was: 'Please give us a little more money.' There are circumstances when ignorance of a foreign language has its advantages, and I now assumed an air of absolute incomprehension of what was meant; the old fellow was not the least disconcerted, and went on his way with his comrades in none the worse humour because of his failure. With many faults, the men of Gebi have undoubtedly virtues; they accept defeat on a disputed point without bearing malice; their good temper is rarely ruffled and quickly restored; although, when acting as porters, their inclination is to dawdle as much as possible and make three days' work into five, a judicious mixture of blandishment and bluster will get them along somehow; and, whatever disagreements may have occurred on the way, it is certainly difficult to part with them on any but friendly terms. So I found in 1868, and so I found now; it was therefore with sincere regret that I saw their ragged forms disappear, and heard the sound of their chattering, which had quickly been resumed, become fainter and fainter.

Arrival at Kunim

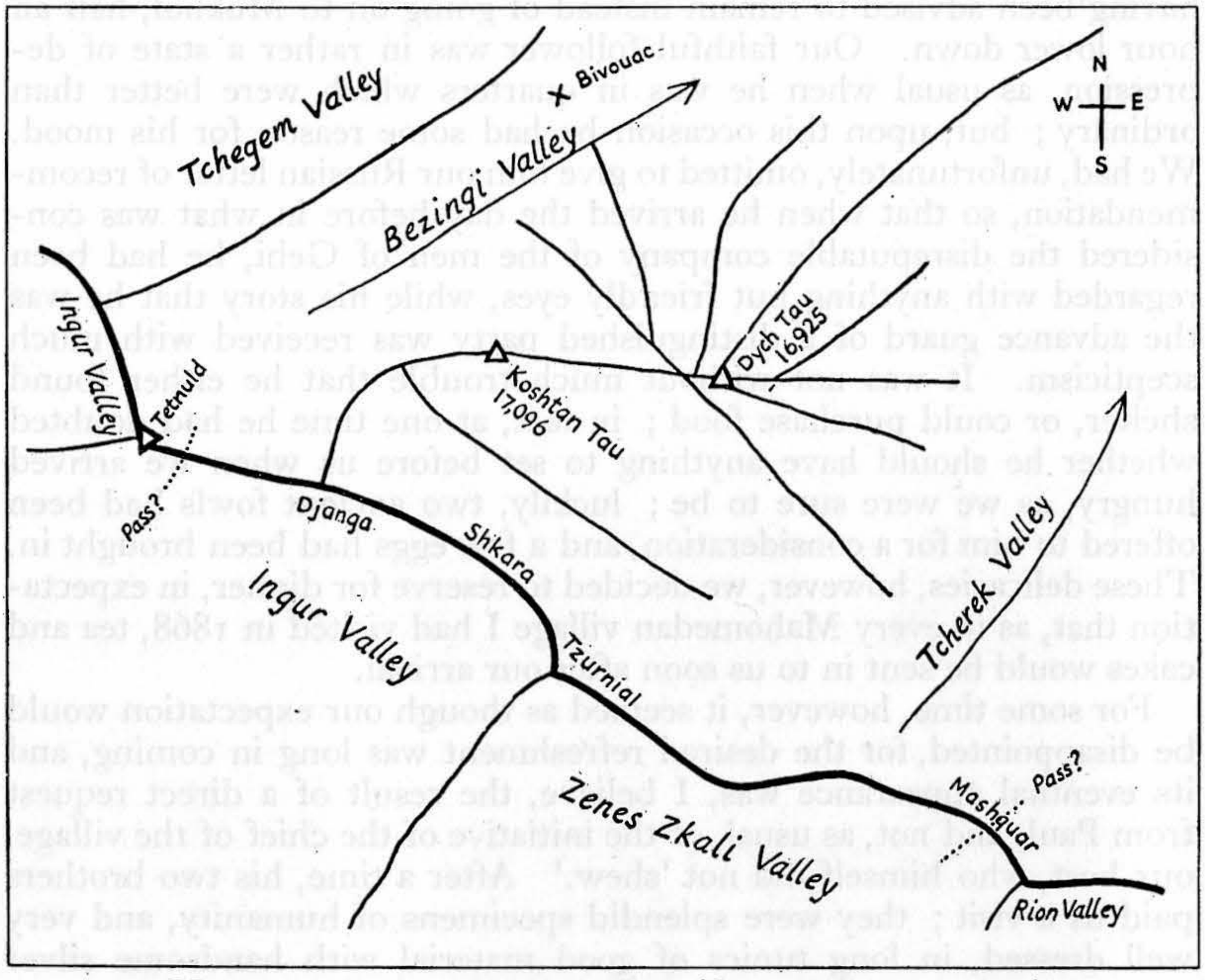
About four hours below the guard-house, the character of the scenery changes suddenly ; the gorge opens out into a broad stony valley, the sides of which are no longer picturesque broken cliffs, but monotonous grass slopes, long and steep, but utterly unattractive. Shortly after entering upon this stage of the route, we met a horseman evidently on the look out for us, as he made signs of welcome and turned back with us ; under his lead we reached, at 11.30, the small village of Kunim, the first in the valley, at some height above the left bank of the stream ; here, in a decent one-roomed house we found Paul and our baggage, he having been advised to remain instead of going on to Mukhol, half an hour lower down. Our faithful follower was in rather a state of depression, as usual when he was in quarters which were better than ordinary ; but, upon this occasion he had some reason for his mood. We had, unfortunately, omitted to give him our Russian letter of recommendation, so that when he arrived the day before in what was considered the disreputable company of the men of Gebi, he had been regarded with anything but friendly eyes, while his story that he was the advance guard of a distinguished party was received with much scepticism. It was not without much trouble that he either found shelter, or could purchase food ; in fact, at one time he had doubted whether he should have anything to set before us when we arrived hungry, as we were sure to be ; luckily, two ancient fowls had been offered to him for a consideration, and a few eggs had been brought in. These delicacies, however, we decided to reserve for dinner, in expectation that, as in every Mahomedan village I had visited in 1868, tea and cakes would be sent in to us soon after our arrival.

For some time, however, it seemed as though our expectation would be disappointed, for the desired refreshment was long in coming, and its eventual appearance was, I believe, the result of a direct request from Paul, and not, as usual, of the initiative of the chief of the village, our host, who himself did not 'shew.' After a time, his two brothers paid us a visit ; they were splendid specimens of humanity, and very well dressed, in long tunics of good material with handsome silver cartridge pouches, belts, and daggers. The well-to-do look of all the people in this part of the country is remarkable, and contrasts strangely with the primitive character of their dwellings. The latter, one-storied stone buildings, against the steep hillside, with their flat grass covered roofs, when seen from a distance or from above, look more like the burrows of animals than human habitations, though inside they are comfortable enough ; our house had a substantial inner roof of timber, but was not floored, and had only a small opening for light ; the fire, for cooking purposes, was lit in one corner and the smoke escaped as it could.

A friend from Mukhol

Our two visitors were civil, but not cordial, and seemed relieved when the interview was over. In the course of the afternoon, I had a visit from one of the horsemen who had accompanied our party in 1868,

—a man from the neighbouring hamlet of Mukhol; always a big, burly fellow the interval of six years had not reduced his size, and the grunts of satisfaction with which he embraced me were not less portentous now than they had been then. He appeared really glad to renew our acquaintance, and intimated that he was quite ready to horse our party and go with us in any direction we wished. I did not, however, commit myself to him, having a vivid recollection of our experience of 1868, when he had proved himself by no means a specially agreeable escort. Later, the Chief of the village appeared, and, like his brethren, was reserved to a degree; he made excuses for his previous



(NAMES TO ACCORD WITH TEXT; *vide* FOOTNOTE, p. 307.)

absence, but they were of a formal kind, to which I did not attach much weight, although I, of course, received them with every shew of satisfaction. Through Paul, I tried to extract from him some information about the glaciers which surround Dych Tau and Koshtan Tau and about those peaks themselves. With the names he seemed familiar, but it must be considered doubtful whether he knew them as applicable to the two great peaks so called on the map; Dych Tau he declared it possible to get to the top of, and he added that the great glacier which we had reached from the guard-house was the same glacier we should see in the adjoining valley of Bezingi. This was a curious statement, and may point to the existence of a hunter's pass over the lofty ridge which in fact lies at the head of the Dych-Su glacier. That a passage might be forced over it, is certain, but that is a different thing; I should

certainly be greatly surprised to learn that any native had crossed at any point between Koshtan Tau and Dych Tau, as the ascent on the east side would be of a very formidable character; on the west, it is less so.

During the afternoon Grove and Gardiner rode down to see the great gorge through which the Tcherek pierces the limestone strata to gain the plain country to the north. I had come up through it in 1868, and had brought away the impression that nothing grander could be imagined. I should have liked to revisit it, but thought it better to devote myself to the arrangements for our onward journey. Walker elected to remain with me, partly, I believe, out of good nature, partly in the hope of finding an opportunity for going through a ceremony which had been omitted for some days, vizt: washing. At none of our recent halting places had nature provided facilities for such an operation; we, therefore, now sallied forth with sponges, and a little way above the village found a spout which answered our purpose perfectly, in the absence of any stream suitable for a plunge.

Plans

We were not less successful in making the necessary arrangements for the next stage in our journey. Our first point was the village of Bezingi in the valley of the western Tcherek, an easy day's journey over the range of hills behind Kunim, which is, in fact, a prolongation of the range of Koshtan Tau and Dych Tau, and separates the two branches of the valley, precisely as the range of the Mischabel with *its* prolongation separates the valleys of Saas and Zermatt. From Bezingi it had been our original intention to cross the main chain into Svanetia, and re-cross from that district direct to the village of Urusbieh at the head of the Baksan valley. But the reports which we now heard of the character of the pass from Bezingi to Mulach in Svanetia, the very unsettled season, and the limited time at our disposal decided us to abandon this plan and content ourselves with an excursion from Bezingi to the head of the valley, and to pass on to Urusbieh by tracks over the northern spurs of the mountains which would be practicable in all weathers. To have got across the chain on a chance fine day, and then to be detained on the south side by a relapse of bad or doubtful weather, would have been most embarrassing, while my experience of the Svanetians in 1868 had not been such as to encourage me to expect a hospitable reception from them. We regretted having to give up all hope of meeting Telfer's party, but were agreed that under all the circumstances it would be foolish again to put the great chain between us and Elbruz, the ascent of which we had all come to regard as *the* feature of the expedition which must not be missed.

This modification of our plans had one considerable advantage: we were able to engage horses to carry our baggage the whole way to Urusbieh. Paul arranged with two pleasant looking men for the services of themselves and their steeds for a lump sum of 15 roubles; we were to be at liberty to halt two days at Bezingi without extra charge; if we stopped longer, or at other places, we were to pay 1 rouble a day.

Departure from Kunim

Late in the afternoon Grove and Gardiner returned, having ridden through the best part of the gorge of the Tcherek, with which they were much impressed; we then dined off the rather tough poultry which Paul had succeeded in buying, and at no very late hour betook ourselves to the mattresses which were brought in for our accommodation. We had enjoined upon our horsemen to appear in good time next morning, without much idea that our injunctions would be attended to; but to our surprise, not unmingled with annoyance, they roused us up at 3.0 o'clock, almost before daylight. A start at such an hour for a short day's journey was unnecessary, so we did not respond to their call till 5.0, when we found the usual dull and threatening weather. Packing the baggage was a long job, and it was 7.15 before we moved off, after remunerating our host who shewed less reluctance, than is ordinarily professed amongst the Mahomedan tribes, to accept our offered roubles. The parting was civil but no more. The reason of the coldness of our reception at Kunim remained a mystery; we were at the time inclined to attribute it to our disreputable appearance, and to a possible suspicion that, in spite of our passport, we might not be favourably regarded by the Russian authorities; we subsequently heard, however, that the latter had written up to the heads of all the villages, warning them of our coming, and directing, not only that we should be well received, but that everything we wanted was to be given to us 'for nothing.' Perhaps this last piece of vicarious liberality may not have been appreciated at Kunim and have been the real cause of our host's reserve; in fact, we paid him and others liberally for everything we had.

A mysterious stranger

Our way led by a gradually ascending path which wound round the hillside, dipping into successive ravines, above the village of Mukhol; when passing a scattered group of houses we were furiously attacked by dogs, one of whom,—a real master of strategy, as shewn by the skill with which he got to our rear,—nearly succeeded in pinning Paul; he was only stopped by a big stone dexterously delivered by Grove straight in his face just at the critical moment. We shortly turned into a grassy glen watered by a stream called on the map 'Tchainashki'; the flowers here were luxuriant,—otherwise the scenery was without special feature, for although on either hand the ridges were broken by quaint spires of rock, they are on too small a scale to be remarkable, while of distant prospect there was none. The path, at first on the right bank, soon crossed to the left by a bridge so shaky that it was declared unsafe for the horses, who did not re-join us until 11.30, when we made the usual mid-day halt for an hour.

We were here joined by a mysterious individual on horseback, who announced himself to Paul as having been sent by the chief of Kunim to be of use to us and see that we were properly received at Bezingi. This seemed an odd proceeding on the part of the Chief who had shewn so little interest in us when we were in his own village; still, the new

arrival was well dressed, and of decidedly prepossessing manners, so that we were disposed to put faith in his account of himself and, at all events, to accept his offer of service. Paul, however, was rather distrustful, and suggested that our friend was commissioned by no one but himself, and that he was a mere 'cadger' on the look out for roubles. We could never quite satisfy ourselves on the point during the few days in which the man remained more or less attached to our party; Paul's view was finally adopted, and we consequently treated our would-be attendant with scant courtesy; but I have always had an uncomfortable suspicion that we may have done him an injustice.

The pass in mist

By the time we moved on again the clouds had come down upon us, and our journey was continued in a regular Scotch mist, which occasionally developed into drizzling rain. An apparently endless ascent by a scarcely perceptible track over not very steep grass slopes on the north side of the Tchainashki glen brought us at 2.0 p.m. to the crest of the ridge between the two branches of the Tcherek valley. The Barometer read 20·80, equal to about 9,850 feet; possibly in clear weather the pass may command some view of the mountains to the east and west, but now the fog was impenetrable, and the air so still that a clearance was beyond hope. We therefore made no halt. The descent was gentle over ground of the same character as before. On emerging from the mist we found ourselves on the crest of a spur, having on our left a deep ravine, green sided, and very precipitous, and at our feet the main valley, an uninteresting-looking trough. In the latter, on the left bank of the torrent, we could see a small collection of burrows,—the village of Tubenel of the map, and higher up on the hillside the still smaller village of Shaki in the same style. Tubenel was our destination, it being the principal village in the commune of Bezingi. Steep zigzags took the path down into the glen we had been skirting just above the junction of its torrent with the main river. We crossed both streams and at 5.0 walked into the village, which proved to be as poor a place as it had seemed from above.

Arrival at Bezingi

A small crowd soon collected, and stared at us in open mouthed astonishment; no one appeared in the least disposed to shew us to quarters, and our enquiry for the Chief of the village elicited that he was away from home. In his absence, no one would take the responsibility of receiving the strangers, and we were rather at a loss what to do, when the 'Cadger' come forward and asserted himself; he would see to everything; true, the Chief was away from home, but his wife 'the Princess' was not; he would arrange with her that we had everything we wanted;—and off he went. Our first want was a house; just off the path was a long low sort of shed, which took our fancy; the floor was earth, and the interior generally was dark and dismal, but

outside was a verandah sheltering a low stone bench which ran alongside the wall. This was an irresistible attraction ; so we went in and took possession, no one making any objection. We had not been long installed, when the servants of the Princess appeared bearing the usual three-legged table with tea and cakes, and a message that everything possible should be done to make us comfortable. Mattresses followed in due course, and we began to feel that we had fallen on our legs ; when the villagers brought in fowls and eggs for sale, even the usually hard-to-please Paul expressed a modified content with the situation.

The village Mullah

We were at an elevation of some 5,150 feet (Bar. 24·80), i.e. a thousand feet above Kunim ; the valley therefore is, naturally, bare. There is too nothing picturesque in the village itself ; the houses are externally mere hovels, and, if our own may be taken as a fair specimen, the interiors correspond, differing in this respect from those in the adjoining valley. The only feature new to us was an arrangement of upright ladders, just in front of our door, on which at the orthodox hours the village Mullah, or someone on his behalf, mounted and called the faithful to prayers,—the call, as far as we observed, not receiving the least attention from any one of the admiring crowd which, during our stay, surrounded our dwelling.

The people seemed to us to be altogether poorer than those of Kunim ; they were certainly less well dressed. In the course of the evening we tried, through Paul, to extract some information from visitors about the mountains at the head of the valley, but met with small success. There was a general agreement that it was possible to cross the glaciers into Svanetia, but as to the character of the route and the distance to the first village on the other side, no two persons told the same story ; according to one the way was practicable for a horse, and Muluch only a day distant ; while, according to another, the passage was difficult even for a daredevil hunter and required three days at least. We saw no one who spoke from personal knowledge and, from this circumstance, inclined to the opinion, which our after experience confirmed, that there was practically no communication between the two sides of the chain at this point, but that a hunter occasionally made his way across, and that the dotted line indicated on the Russian map, represented nothing more than the impression derived by the officer responsible for it from conversations similar to what we had ourselves engaged in.

The result satisfied us that we could not do better than adhere to our latest plan of an excursion to the head of the valley, a bivouac, and an ascent next day of any high point within reach. I was myself particularly anxious to identify the beautiful pyramidal peak which, on one glorious summer evening in 1868, our party of that year had, from Latal in Svanetia, seen towering into the sky. We had at the time supposed it to be the Tau Tetnuld of the map, but subsequent consideration had led me to suspect that it might really have been the same

mountain which, when seen from the opposite direction, we knew as Koshtan Tau. It *must* lie somewhere at the head of the great glacier filling the Bezingi valley, but there were difficulties in the way of my hypothesis which could only be solved on the spot. If the supposed Tetnuld turned out to be a peak distinct from Koshtan Tau we were not without hope that its ascent might be practicable, as it would probably be entirely over snow.

Preparations

We awoke on the morning of the 16th to find the valley filled with clouds, as it had been overnight, with every prospect of rain. The prospect was soon realized, as a drizzle shortly commenced which continued on and off throughout the day, and, towards evening, gave place to heavy rain. Immediate prosecution of our plan was out of the question, but all preparations were made in anticipation of an improvement on the morrow. As we contemplated two days' absence at least, the commissariat had to be attended to. We succeeded in purchasing 25 of the small round flat loaves of the country and two chickens for 4 roubles, as many eggs as we wanted for a copeck apiece, and a small sheep for 2 roubles ; for a large one 8 roubles were asked.

Our immediate wants were well looked after by the Princess who, at 8.0 in the morning, sent in a liberal supply of tea and cakes, and supplemented this at 11.0 by a huge dish of boiled mutton served up with a sauce made of onions and sour milk, and followed by a species of soup which was also too strongly flavoured with onion to be palatable to me.

Moody meditations

In the afternoon, tired of inaction and glad to get away from the crowd which jostled us as we sat on the stone bench under the verandah, and watched our every movement, we strolled up the valley for an hour or so. Clouds hid everything, and our walk would have been without incident, had it not been for the dogs in attendance on various flocks of sheep which we passed ; these brutes attacked us furiously, their masters not attempting to call them off, not I think from malicious indifference, but from sheer speechless astonishment at our appearance. Rain coming on heavily, we took refuge under a high bank by the side of a lateral torrent, and there for half an hour reflected moodily on our melancholy prospects ; cheerfulness under such persistent climatic persecution was impossible, as day after day of the short time at our disposal slipped by with no sign of real improvement in the weather.

On our return to the village we found that another guest had arrived ; —a tall, handsome, well dressed Chief from the village of Digor on the upper Uruch. He was very civil and anxious to talk ; but Paul was intent on culinary operations and therefore even more than usually loth to do mere interpreter's work, so that our communications were carried on with difficulty, and we failed to make out exactly what was the new arrival's business in this secluded spot. Quarters for the night were found for him in another house.

Before retiring for the night we arranged with a rather good-looking native, Mahomed by name, to accompany us to the head of the valley whenever weather permitted, with a horse for our various impedimenta, at the price of 1½ roubles a day. Our own horsemen did not care about the job, and as a man with local knowledge would have been wanted in any case, it was no use pressing them to go against their wish. There was nothing in the look of the weather overnight to indicate a change, and the aneroid was stationary with a downward tendency; great therefore was my surprise on turning out at 6.0 a.m. on the 17th, to find the sun shining in a cloudless sky, and every promise of a fine day. As now seen, the situation of Bezingi is not so utterly unattractive as we had supposed; the valley itself is, indeed, narrow and commonplace, but the range on its east side is much broken, and shews several finely shaped rock and snow peaks, with at least one considerable glacier, while in front a glimpse of the great wall which stretches from Tau Tetnuld on the west to Koshtan Tau on the east; this is not well seen, owing to a curve in the valley, but is sufficient to excite curiosity.

(To be concluded)