

FIFTY YEARS AGO

By T. G. LONGSTAFF

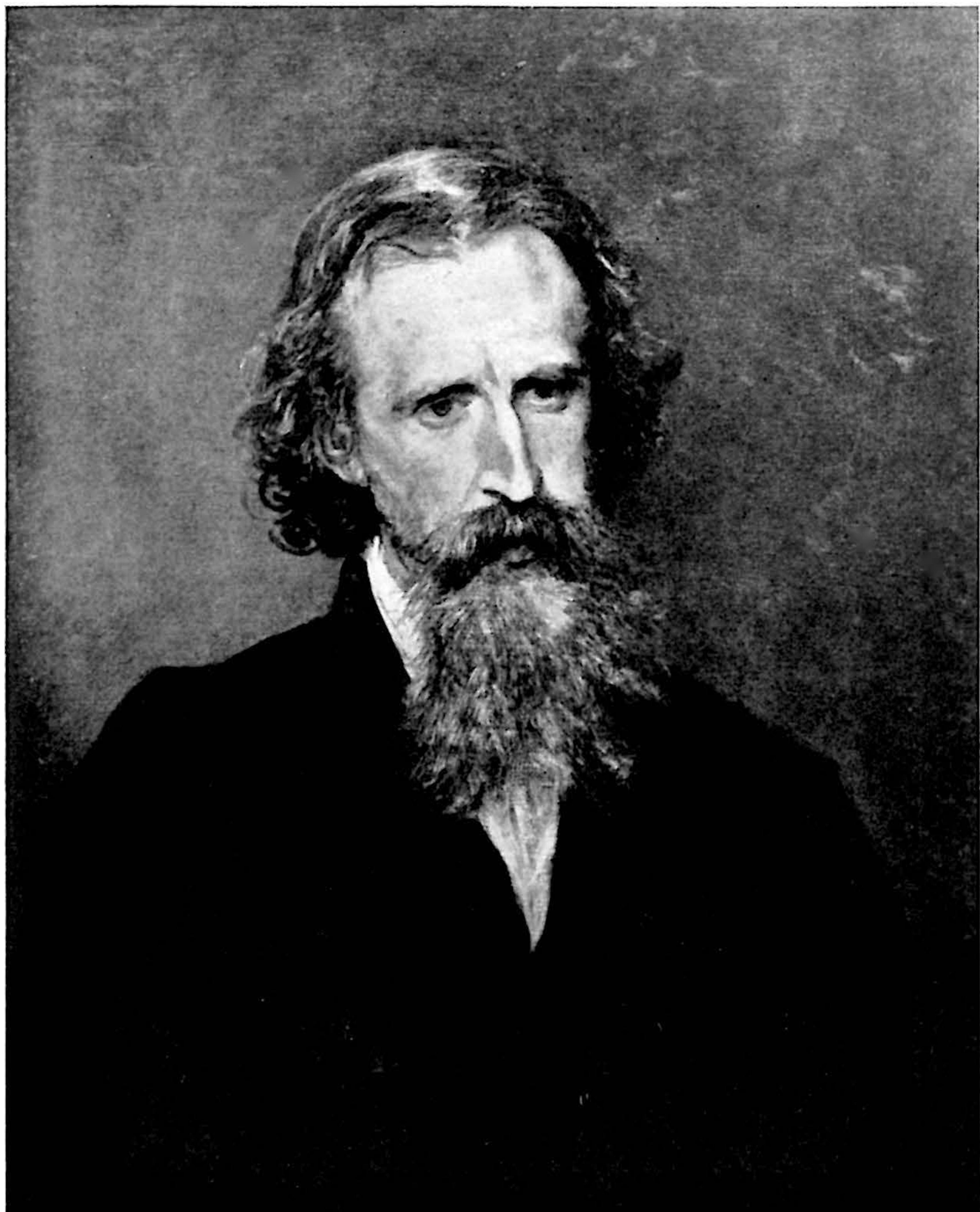
MY first visit to the Club, then in the charming old Assembly Rooms at the end of Savile Row, was as the guest of the late Walter Weston, who is remembered by Japanese mountaineers to this day. Charles Pilkington, one of the first of guideless climbers, was then President. I was particularly lucky because at this meeting Leslie Stephen turned up and I heard him speak. His was a striking figure ; straight and tall, athletically slim as became ' the fleetest of foot of all the alpine brotherhood ', with refined features and a smallish straggling beard untinged with white. His voice had a beautiful resonance. Alas, it was to be his last appearance at the Club.

I attended other meetings of the Club as a guest, but did not come up for election until the first meeting in 1900. At these meetings the front row was a memorable sight. There sat Alfred Wills of the Eagle's Nest, from whose ascent of the Wetterhorn the beginning of serious British mountaineering is usually dated : yes, I know this was not the first ascent. Then the veteran Horace Walker, whom I was later to meet in the Tarentaise with his sister Lucy, very unobtrusively visiting their old haunts ; that superb draughtsman of climbers in action, H. G. Willink, whose home I later had the pleasure of visiting ; he was a most charming man but his innate modesty led him to refuse the Presidency. T. G. Bonney, the Cambridge geologist, rather silent but always willing to listen, was another front-row man. Sir Edward Davidson sat there too, scarcely approachable in his majestic self-confidence. Whymper I saw but rarely : an unclubbable man and not forthcoming. Nearly always one saw C. E. Mathews, historian of Mont Blanc, always a very willing and popular speaker ; I used to play picquet with him when he reigned at Pen-y-Gwryd and when dealing he always looked at the bottom card of the pack ; we only played for penny postage stamps, and this was no case of cheating because he explained to me the possible advantage this gave the dealer in choosing the discard for his ' point ' and sequence and he offered to show me the bottom card too, to equalise matters ; it was just an odd habit. George Yeld frequently came down from Yorkshire ; editor of the JOURNAL for so many years, he was friendly and accessible to every member of the Club, despite his most imposing bearded figure. Then the typically Victorian figure of Douglas Freshfield, in his tail-coat, greatest of our mountain explorers ; he was very dangerous to cross swords with and never popular ; but my visits to his house at Wych Cross, a palace combined with a museum of art, gave me unalloyed pleasure. There I was to meet James Bryce

President in 1899 after fulfilling an unusually successful tenure of our embassy at Washington ; a more urbane, friendly and accomplished personality I am never likely to meet : his travels were classic and his reminiscences fascinating. Then how shall I describe Clinton Dent ? A peerless climber ; a most cultivated writer ; a great surgeon ; very much a man of the world ; his malice was delicious without a trace of anger. He was altogether the most intriguing character I have ever known.

Such were the Old Guard : I feel almost impertinent in attempting to write about them. They made the Alpine Club what it is—a unique society of educated men who are yet aware of reality, who have broken their shins against rocks in the dark and know danger, fatigue, hunger and thirst at first hand. Quibbles, shams and make-believes do not get past them.

In the front seats at Savile Row were also a younger but most elect group of individuals, all men of parts and character. There was Norman Collie, the great chemist who juggled with the elements and discovered a new one ; although I went several times to his rooms I felt that I never penetrated his reserve, but then he was notably intolerant of fools ; he urged me to give up climbing and take to fishing, and I took his advice ten years ago. Martin Conway was often there, a great connoisseur of art and with some of the foibles of the great : he told me that he had refrained from setting foot on the actual top of Aconcagua for fear of being considered a record-hunter. I stayed with him in his moated castle in Kent, the interior of which Lady Conway had furnished in Arthurian style and through which she floated in the guise of Guinevere. There, too, I met an angry politician who had just decided to join the Labour Party because the Conservatives would not endorse his candidature in the Ticket Election ; he had no political convictions whatsoever. There sat also the very forthright Percy Farrar, inventor of great new climbs, though always accompanied by guides of the highest class. He had made a fortune in the Transvaal and had been arrested by Kruger as one of the Reformer Outlanders : in the Boer War he greatly distinguished himself with a Colonial regiment and won the D.S.O. for gallantry after he had been badly wounded and lain out untended for many hours. Farrar was our valued link with all the most eminent Continental climbers. Then there was that matchless trio, Wicks, Wilson and dear Bradby, who first set the seal of respectability on guideless climbing. Then Cecil Slingsby and Hermann Woolley, both very popular with us younger members and sympathetic towards guideless climbers. These were still looked at askance by many members, while going only two on the rope was definitely reprehensible. I believe that Hope and Kirkpatrick, with Rolleston and myself, were the first to get away with it.



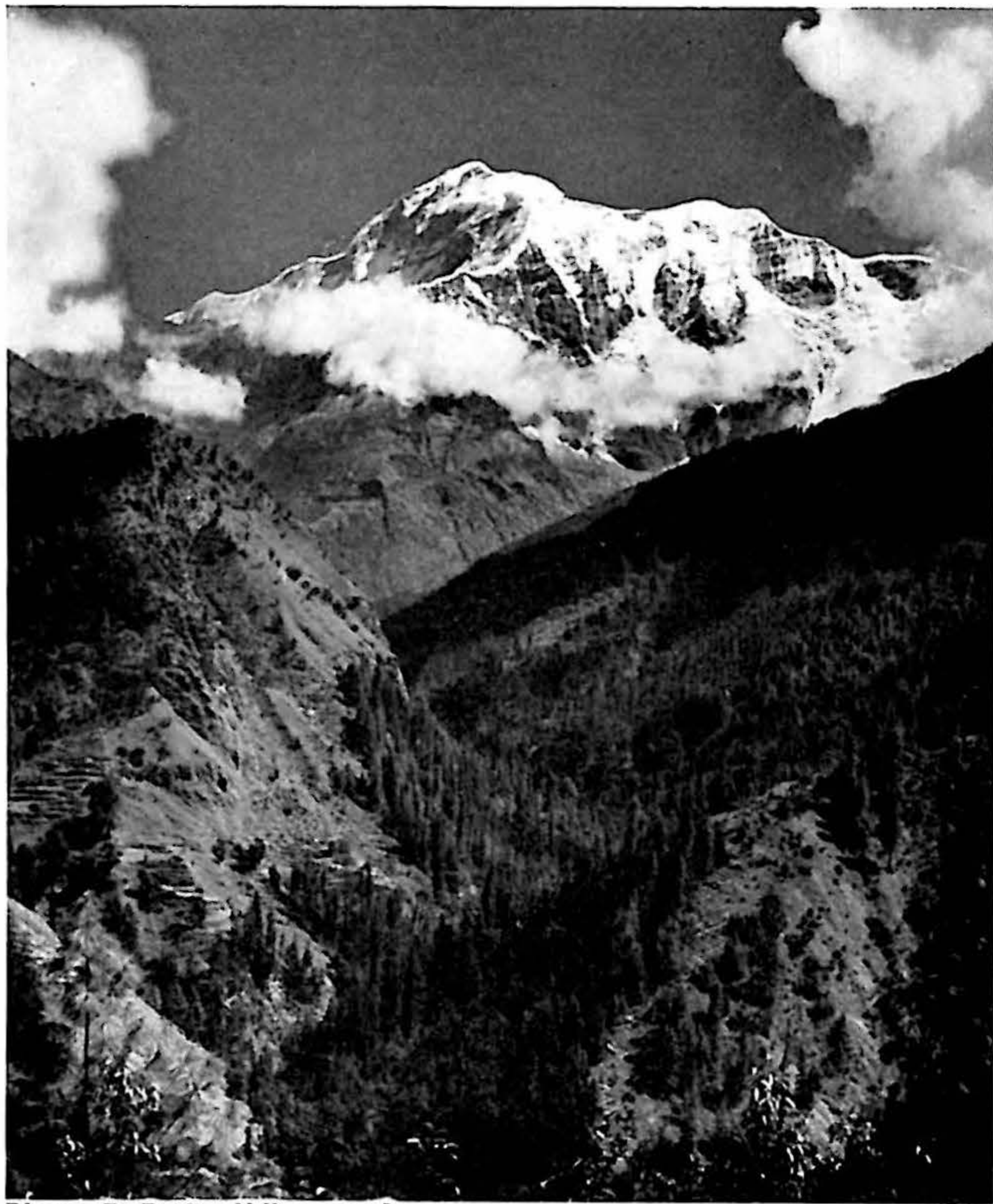
LESLIE STEPHEN, 1832-1904.
(*from the portrait by G. F. Watts.*)

Member 1858-1904.
Vice-President 1863-5.
President 1866-8.
Editor 1868-72.

Good Victorian as I am, I must admit that fifty years ago the traditions of the Club were exclusive to the point of snobbery. All those distinguished clerics, doctors, dons, schoolmasters and lawyers were quick to close their ranks against 'outsiders'. Elections were by ballot, and blackballs frequent, though I cannot actually remember casting one myself. Mummery was rejected on the allegation that he was a boot-maker. Ryan, acknowledged the finest climber of my early days, was blackballed on the grounds of incivility in the Alps to some older members: he was Irish and always a difficult character. But a few years later I was present at a very different scene. The elders of the Committee proposed a titled financial magnate as the new president: the younger members supported Hermann Woolley, because of his superior mountain record and also for his personal charm of character. The head of one of the big London banks objected that Woolley was only a Midland manufacturer. Instantly Douglas Freshfield retorted, 'That's a queer thing for *you* to say; you're only "something in the City" yourself.' There was no answer and Woolley was proposed and duly elected.

In the Alps membership of our Club conveyed a very definite *cachet*. Inns welcomed us and would cash our cheques: even as guideless climbers we were tolerated in foreign huts and the best guides were free with friendly advice. Because of this some of the younger members suggested the authorisation of a Club badge. I remember vividly the storm raised by this proposal. Old-fashioned members spoke of vulgarity, ostentation, self-advertisement, and cited the wearing of showy Continental badges, often by mere tourists. However, on a division, the motion was carried, due to the abstention of a number of objectors out of deference to the wishes of the younger generation. This showed the friendly fellow-feeling prevalent in the Club. But this is not to deny that there were violent quarrels between individual members; some of them are historic in the bye-ways of alpine history. I remember one evening sitting next to Clinton Dent at the A.D.C. when he drew on the menu a sketch of Sir Edward Davidson erupting as a volcano over some dispute with that old curmudgeon Coolidge, who was threatening to resign failing an apology. That sketch is something I shall always treasure.

I remember, too, the commencement of the disputation concerning the use of so-called 'artificial aids'. Yet ladders had been used before the foundation of the Club, and even in 1899 the old ladder used regularly to overcome the ice Nollen on the northern ridge of the Mönch was visible in the snow-slope below it: we left it there. I really cannot see that an *étrier* is more despicable than a ladder and it is certainly more convenient to carry, even by modern tigers. Then there was Whymper's grapnel on the Matterhorn attempts: surely pitons are only a refinement of this unorthodoxy? Alpenstocks and



Photos, B. R. Goodfellow, 1944]

TRISUL FROM THE UPPER GORGE OF THE NANDAGINI RIVER.



TRISUL FROM 15,000 FT. ON NANDAGHUNTI.

hatchets were early combined into one artifact. The use of the rope was positively advocated. Boot nails were immensely improved and Mummery invented ice-spikes which could be screwed into the soles of boots, which, incidentally, seldom bore the strain. By 1899 Eckenstein had perfected the crampon used by generations of Bavarian and Tyrolese chamois-hunters. His had unusually long and very sharp spikes. In that year, during an off day at Montenvers, and with the assistance of the peculiar Crowley, already notorious and in full Highland kit, Oskar gave me a most valuable lesson in their use. Squatting on very steep ice above a crevasse he insisted on my sitting on his shoulder to prove the security they gave. This was a new artificial aid which gained early popularity, although stalwarts like my old friend Bill Strutt continued to abuse them mercilessly. In the Alps, Caucasus and Himalaya they have saved me much time, and speed often equates with safety in the mountains. But every member of the party must have and be able to use them. I still think it is preferable to learn to climb without crampons before adopting their use, though even in ice-steps one is far safer with than without them. I have found them good on glazed rock. Further, I would like to emphasise that the phrase 'artificial aid' is itself ambiguous and extremely difficult to define. What are we to say of tents, wind-proofs and duvets—not to speak of oxygen! On the high peaks we enter an environment which is quite unusual to us and we can but exercise our inventive ingenuity to overcome this. But for myself I have found that free climbing gave me all I wanted.

Above all, when I look back fifty years, I see a world far more civilised than it is now. Foreign travel was easy. The cautious traveller armed himself with a passport, obtained quickly and with no formality. Visas were unnecessary, although those intending to enter Turkish or Russian territory would obtain them because the local officials usually could not read Latin characters; but these also were issued automatically at the cost of five shillings each. Such a thing as a permit to *leave* a country was inconceivable because no nation had yet thought of surrounding itself with prison bars. No part of the world was closed to mountaineers and only small areas were closed to explorers. In short, frontiers could be ignored by all but smugglers. Gold was in circulation and there were no exchange restrictions. How lucky we were in those days.

I cannot close these reminiscences without an expression of thanks for the many pleasures which membership of the Club has given me throughout my life. Long may the Club flourish. From its records and traditions there is much to be learned by the young. The old are equally in debt to the young, for they have advanced our art almost beyond recognition: good luck to them.