



CLUB AND CLIMBERS

1880-1900

BY GEOFFREY WINTHROP YOUNG

BY 1880 the pattern of the Club had become fixed, a reflection of the social structure of the period. In prosperous days, clubs existed for social meetings ; and the more a man belonged to, the better. The surviving pioneer members pursued their mountains about the world in the individualist fashion of the age. The feats of John Ball, Tuckett, and the explorers on distant ranges enhanced steadily the reputation of the Club, which basked effortlessly and agreeably in a glory reflected from many ranges other than the Alps. Any association of Britons always establishes a tradition and a Rule ; and it is those associates who are more often on the spot who contribute most to these, and perpetuate them. While the dynamic pioneers travelled ex-centrally, in no way concerned with guides or growing conventions or techniques, that tranquil element which had been caught in youth by the new mountain fever, but which had no time or taste for distant exploration, remained the core of the sociable Club. Inevitably, and with the precision of the senior boys in a school, they established the Rule of how Alpine climbing was to be done. All else became not-done.

It is interesting to trace how quickly the word Alpine, taking advantage of the confused beginnings of the sport, absorbed the whole of mountaineering as a secondary meaning. Our founders clearly contemplated including every variation of mountaineering as the province of their new Alpine Club. Foreign climbing clubs, when in turn they were formed in imitation and adopted our Alpine name, from the first gave to the word this wider or universal interpretation. We alone allowed the more contracted meaning, that of a social club existing solely for climbing in the Swiss and French Alps, to establish itself as the oracle of a conservative core, and again and again to hamper initiative and growth, and prevent the premier club of the world from becoming representative even of the mountaineering in its own country. We are free to speculate how much smoother, in later days, would have been the historic path of the Alpine Club, had it been entitled originally—as it was intended by its founders to become—the Mountaineering Club.

The fixation upon the Alps soon showed some natural consequences. While the great new mountaineering sport released upon the world,



ALBERT FREDERICK MUMMERY
(M. 1888-1895. C. 1895.)



CHARLES PILKINGTON, EUSTACE HULTON AND LAWRENCE
PILKINGTON, IN 1882.

(A studio portrait made after the Bernina season of that year.)

On previous page : 'THE GÉANT AND GLACIER DES PÉRIADES FROM THE AIGUILLE DU TACUL (photo, W. F. Donkin,, 1882).



began to develop in general its progressive skills and variable regional standards, our Club tradition crystallised round a single range, and round the way of climbing that belonged to it. The unchallenged primacy of the Club served to fix this tradition, and these methods, as the only true and blue. Nothing, and nowhere, else counted in the same Alpine measure. Members might deviate on to further ranges, and their feats be welcome as exhibiting successful 'cosmopolitanism', but they brought their heretic methods into the Alps at their peril. Home climbing, for the same exclusive reason, was left as something of a fireside Cinderella. The Club, with growing prestige, much sociable amenity, and no organising or representative responsibilities, provided all that its nineteenth-century members could wish, who invested it with all the loyalty and the affection which mountaineers learn to feel for one another during their active climbing days.

This early crystallisation of an exclusively Alpine and social tradition will account equally for the surprising rapidity with which the relationship between the English amateur and the native Swiss as guide became stereotyped. Its form reflected the English social structure of the day, and it was a constant factor in the successful enterprise of the nineteenth-century English traveller and coloniser. In their relationship with a native race and the local inhabitant, our empire builders knew how to live sympathetically and admirably with them, but they were never of them.

In the independent and active hunters and herds of the high Alps our pioneers had found a set of local experts able to undertake the initial difficulties of a new sport, and very ready to be recompensed for any risk in exploring their native scenery. With the self-reliance and self-respect proper to a peasant aristocracy, these first guides contributed their part, and their honourable status was soon established. Theirs was the responsibility for tactics and for safe execution, and they gravely saluted a social superiority in their employers as appropriate ceremonial for hotel guests. It was a status familiar to Englishmen, that of the huntsman or of the head keeper, with a dash of the tiger-tracker thrown in. Upon their side these good guides—and there were many of them—received the almost devotional friendship of their employers. It was a devotion creditable to both parties, if at times inconvenient. Coolidge it will be recalled, refused to climb further with Gardiner upon the Eggishorn unless he undertook in the future only to place hands and feet exactly where Almer had done.

It was a form of social relationship and dependence likely to evolve among scholars and academics who found themselves launched upon athletic feats and among physical perils. To the same order of Swiss social phenomena, during the last half of the century, belonged the lesser convention of the Hotel King. He was an English mountaineer,



Photo, John Hunt]

ON THE EAST RIDGE OF THE WEISSHORN.
(IN THE BACKGROUND : DOM AND TÄSCHHORN.)

On the previous page : THE WEISSHORN FROM THE TÄSCHALP (photo, W. F. Donkin, 1880).

generally of the secondary or classic type, who returned romantically every season to the hotel of his choice, and received every privilege from the proprietor, in return for the publicity and for keeping other guests active and in order.

This formal build-up of Alpine convention contributed beneficially to an early establishment of a sound mountaineering practice. It was a force which later was able to repel despoiling influences, such as publicity stunting and mechanised acrobatics, as they developed with the later popularity of climbing. At the same time, its rigidity checked the enterprise of the oncoming amateur, and the experimental independence which could alone improve his technique. The Alps were then still distant from England, and their adventure was costly and exceptional for a young man. He might well hesitate before adding to his audacity, in going so far, a defiance of traditional methods. For the pioneers, no such hindrance had existed; they climbed freely, if they preferred, on their own. By the time of the Pilkingtons and Frederick Gardiner they had, however, frequently to justify in the Club their guideless successes. But for their Alpine successors, the guided convention was already as absolute as the Decalogue. We must remember that, in any case, Alpine climbing was invested for a novice of the later nineteenth century with a romantic awe. For the Alpine Fathers he had a reverence now hard to imagine. For him to be found attempting variations upon accepted mountain routes or modifying method or the standard number of guides and porters, seemed more than a little impertinent to the classic Alpine mind.

By a lapse in logic appropriately British, the firm Alpine Rule never extended to members mountaineering in other ranges. Further afield, the dynamic or 'cosmopolitan' members of the Club might play the game as they pleased or as conditions dictated, guideless, even solitary. But woe betide the climber, however eminent, who brought such errant practice into the Alps and drew attention by any untoward incident. A thunderstorm, shocking the guideless party upon a ridge of the Dent Blanche, a conjecturable act of God, could earn a censure from the Club as solemn as divinity. The absolutism with which our sages decreed that which might and that which might not count as a first ascent; that which might, if made, not count as first because not recorded, and that which might, if made, but not formally recorded, yet count as first, because informally indicated, is refreshing now to read, in our more timid era.

There was no need then for any great clearness or logic in the general treatment of mountaineering. The Alpine Club had only to be a law to itself; and it treated itself, and therefore its law, with the parade of seriousness with which we invest all our games. In an individualistic age, members organised themselves and their own parties, and asked

no collective help or agency. They were obviously free to climb in the Alps or in any other range they wished. But when they met at home, it was as members of the highly selective Alpine Club, accepting its social and climbing conventions and its pundits. Those who could afford the time, and the money, for the slow and costly travel of the day to other ranges, and those who summer-sojourned in the Alps, met upon an equal social footing. They enjoyed each other's adventures, and the glow of them that reflected upon the Club, and there was no reason for them to observe each other's divergent mountain practice. While, as must happen in every social club with no professional responsibilities, our core of club constants maintained the administration and consolidated tradition.

This history must be kept in mind if we are to appreciate the Club's later hesitation in adjusting its traditional structure to the social and economic changes violently imposed by the wars. For a time, the Club, as a mountaineers' sanctuary, was sustained by sentiment and loyalty above the moving tide of contemporary change. In the end, it was to be the ex-centrist and exploratory element, less vocal in Club affairs but continuously active in farther mountaineering, which was ready to take advantage of the new facilities of travel, and restore to the Club its one-time primacy in high mountain exploration.

There was, I think, always an awareness among the leaders of the Club between the 1880s and 1900 of the risk to vitality and to progress that might result from too narrow an insistence upon the Club's purely Alpine function. This is apparent in the admirable Presidential Addresses, delivered on retirement from the Chair during the last twenty years of the century. They are almost always exhortations in advance of the Club practice. Clinton Dent, for many years the Club law-giver and unique in this period for the amount of thought and writing he devoted to the theory and practice of climbing, wrote an illuminating criticism: 'As the Alpine Club grew . . . a strong conservatism sprang up. Certain districts came to be more and more frequented. . . . And thus places like Zermatt became the great centres of mountaineering. . . . The social nature of our Club brought this about. . . . But the strong social feeling is not without its drawbacks . . . if it tend to check what Hinchliff has termed cosmopolitanism in mountaineering. . . .' Again he wrote: 'It is customary now to hear complaints that it is difficult to find new things "to do". Variety however of some sort must be discovered. . . .' Having reminded us pertinently—'Remember, the High Alps are not the exclusive property of the Club!', he went on: 'If the pages of the JOURNAL fail to tempt our members to climb in other regions than the Alps proper, I can hope for little success in the same line.' But we note that, almost immediately, the spell of identifying all mountaineering with Alpinism fell

upon Dent too, and he devoted the rest to the dangers of falling stones, to rarefied air, and to the novelty mountaineers were to seek in 'outlying Alpine regions.'

The end of the 'seventies had witnessed a fine outburst of novel climbing. Emile Rey and J. B. Bich with Lord Wentworth made first ascents of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey and Les Jumeaux, spirited climbs told in lively fashion. Charles and Laurence Pilkington and Frederick Gardiner had been climbing guideless through Dauphiné and the Lepontines, making a first guideless ascent of the Meije. Pendlebury was active in Cogne and on the Grivola; George Yeld in his well-loved Graians. Dent recounted Burgener's long and victorious flirtations with the Dru as a conclusion to the first Alpine phase; while Ferdinand Imseng with Penhall and a Zurbrücken, and Burgener, Mummery, Petrus and Gentinetta carried through their unique competition upon the North-west ridge and face of the Matterhorn, as a new phase of variation ascents Gardiner chimed in with his gallant defence of guideless climbing, to be genially smothered by editor Freshfield with the already traditional bolster. And Passingham, with again Imseng and Zurbrücken, penetrated the wild West face of the Weisshorn, and described it in an English as gymnastic as his climbing. When Louis and Benoît Theytaz and I were reconnoitring a repetition up that enormous, slabby, and stone-cluttered face, I quoted to them with joy Passingham's simple solution: 'If future climbers make for our first stone man, and thence right up to our second, they will have no difficulty about the route.'

Meanwhile, of the enduring ex-centrist element, G. P. Baker was wandering characteristically over Ararat, Tuckett pursuing his long Odyssey in Greece and Corsica, Coolidge as an exception making proof of winter climbing, and Eccles, whose bold approach to his great climbs and whose unusual and elegant recital of them, inspired me always with deep respect, found in the Rockies a fresh mountain peril, that of the Shoshone Indians; while his companion Wilson had his camp overrun and sacked by the Bannack Indians: these were extra-Alpine perils more appealing to youth than Dent's falling stones.

The impetus lasted into the 1880s; when, as the obvious snow routes were becoming exhausted, the rock ridges suggested the beginnings of a new skill. Petrus again, with Peter, father of Josef Knubel, Francis and Gerald Balfour, made trial of it upon the Aiguille des Charmoz. Oakley Maund, of the same attacking group, with Jaun, Maurer and Dent, traversed anew the Bietschhorn; where Maund, oddly enough, thought 'the Baltschiederthal not a success among valleys'. Whymper was busy in the Andes with aneroids; Gardiner and the Pilkingtons were still guideless in Dauphiné and on the Jungfrau; Conway was on the Saasgrat, artistically producing 'the dearest little book in the

world', and unconsciously implanting with it the illegitimate passion for new routes.

Charles Mathews contributed an Address in his characteristic vein, of a liberal classicism seasoned with caution. More sympathetic than many club members with guideless climbing, he refused to think Everest could not be climbed because of any rarity of air ; he extended the Club welcome to distinction in Art and Literature, and, as we know, he led the van in encouraging home climbing. He ended upon an eloquent appeal for a wider interpretation of the Club mission : 'We have created a new sport for Englishmen. Upon you the responsibility will rest that the future of mountaineering shall be worthy of its present and its past.' How distant, and great, this past had been, Freshfield recalled picturesquely at about the same date, in a scholarly account of Placidus a Spescha. Placidus, like Petrarch, had a mind wholly sympathetic to us, in that his feeling for mountains had that pervasive quality which could bring all his other thoughts and feelings into harmony with our own across the centuries. This herdboy of the eighteenth century, turned monk and savant, 'as a mountaineer was very much before his age', and used both rope and axe. He had humour, and daring, and he was the first climber to assert the truth that 'in the choice of companion for a mountain expedition, one cannot be too particular !' Freshfield followed Placidus with the opening of the Hannibal controversy, still enlarging upon the famous past ; and Charles Barrington produced the amazing story of his first ascent of the Eiger, in 1858, when he himself led the way for his guides : an ascent unrivalled until Slingsby finished his first ascent of Skagastølstind alone.

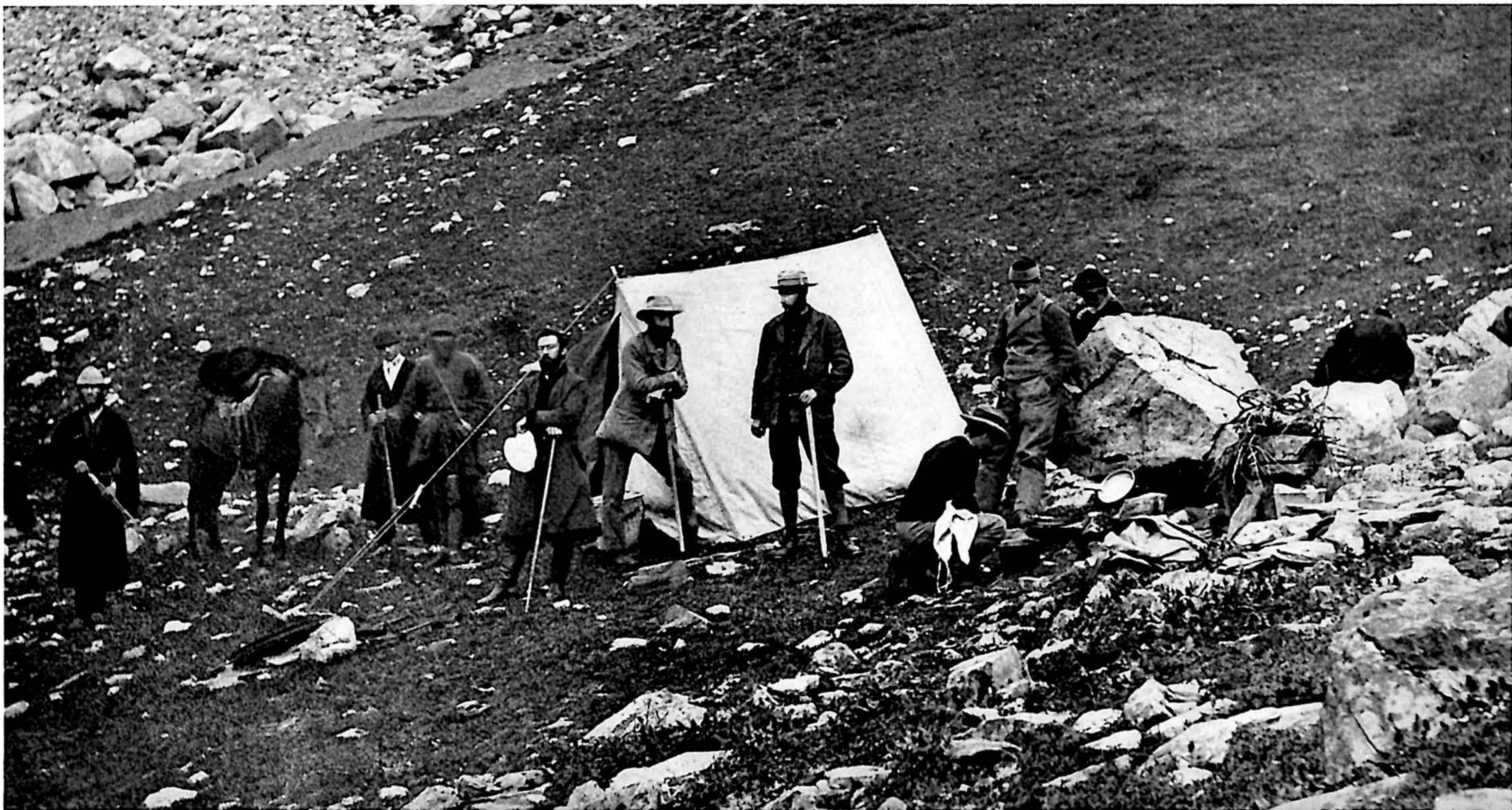
More presently, the Maquignaz family and Sella climbed one summit of the Dent du Géant, 'being obliged to excavate (or mine) the rock in two places' : a formidable mechanised beginning, which Payot, Cupelin and Graham capped, by climbing the other and higher point, making a lighthearted use of 'Sella's Staircase'. Ulrich Almer, Alois Pollinger, Stafford Anderson and G. P. Baker made their memorable traverse of the Viereselsgrat ; and, still following in the same tradition, Ambrose Supersaxo, Emile Rey, Anthamatten and Seymour King made the first ascent of the Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey. But the greater energy was still 'cosmopolitan'. In different years, Graham was challenging height records in Sikkim, Freshfield encircling Kangchenjunga ; Donkin, Woolley and Fox were opening up the Caucasus, Conway was briskly afoot in Spitzbergen and the Andes, Mackinder on Kenya ; Slingsby pursued his omnivolent pioneer climbing in Norway ; Green discovered the New Zealand Alps (and why again 'Alps' ?) ; Gardiner was in Monserrat and the Pyrenees.

Accidents formed a heavy cloud, and may have again forced a check. Francis Balfour, most brilliant scientist of his day ; Penhall, a young

mountaineer of outstanding promise ; Petrus, and Maurer : they provided a sad text for Mathews' 'rather heavy' warnings. We may see them now not so much the results of indiscretion or rashness, as the price that could not fail to be demanded, when the enterprise of an oncoming generation began to attempt new degrees of mountain difficulty, while it was still the universal assumption that climbing skill was inborn, and that, except in a general way upon ice and snow, it called for no specific training. By the middle of the 1880s, Dent had indeed in one of his thoughtful papers, reviewed the relative merits, and relative chances of improvement, as between amateur and guide. But again theory was ahead of practice. For lack of travel facilities, and adequate time for development, on ice and snow the amateur in the Alps remained much where he had been from the first. And practice on home cliffs, as the release of a new rock technique, was still non-existent.

The enterprise that sought more distant ranges was now beginning to awaken a new interest in the Himalaya ; where the work of the Survey included 'Mr. Johnson's wonderful mountaineering career'—another of the early and great mountaineers with whose silences we feel an instinctive sympathy across the century. Circumstances, as we have seen, were combining to produce a pause in the Alps. The pioneers were retiring ; a new mountaineering generation was looking further afield for its new conquests. A kindly classic Club core, described caustically by Dent as 'a large body of amateurs . . . whose energy and real enthusiasm for the pursuit have never been sufficient to enable them to rival the proficiency of the mule-driver on the mountains', was the element most prominent in the centrist hotels, pontificating genially, discouraging all but the irreverent from straying from the traditional routes, and perpetuating the dependent relationship with guides. This quarter of a century was, in their own view, the golden age for good guides. But progress in climbing technique was being retarded even among the native professionals by the fact that so many of the best and the young were tied up for the short summer seasons to the more prosperous employers, whose enterprise was naturally diminishing with the years, and whose state demanded primarily security and comfort.

In 1886 Conway made another characteristic and diverting survey, on the matter of New Routes. 'It is advisable', he wrote, 'that every possible route should once be followed, in order that climbers may be sure for the future which routes are worth avoiding.' And again, with truth : 'The main usefulness of early climbers was not the routes they found out, but the craft they invented by the way. . . . I call that climb the best which leads through the finest scenery, lacks the most disagreeables, affords the greatest variety of scrambling, and without being dangerous, is continuously difficult.' At much the same date,



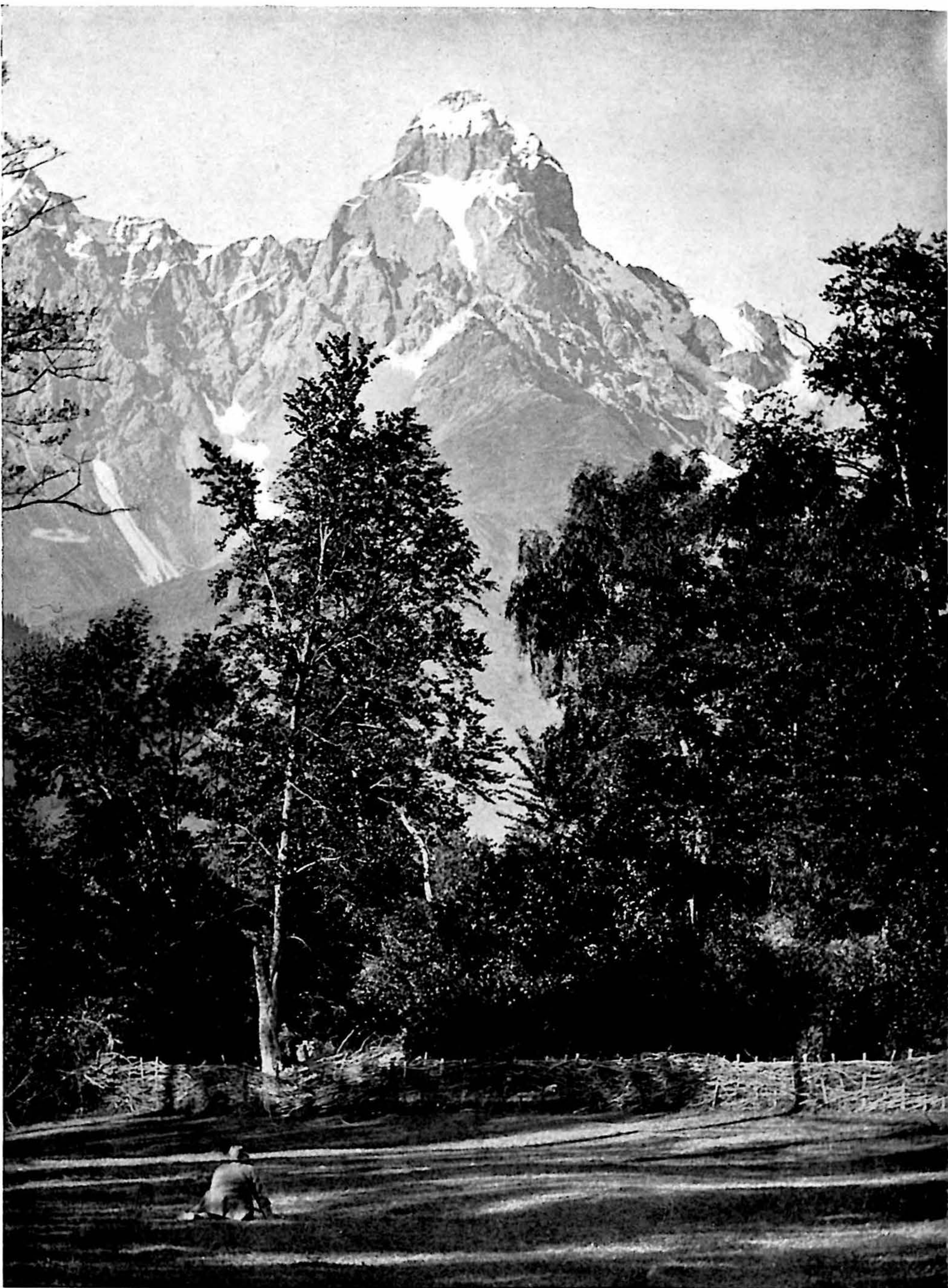
CAMP NEAR THE MORaine OF THE GULBA GLACIER, CAUCASUS.

One of Donkin's last photographs, taken in mid-August 1888. *Left:* Suanetian Escort. *Centre:* C. T. Dent, then President of the Club, and H. Fox. *Right:* The Guides Streich and Fischer. A few days later, Fox, Donkin, Streich and Fischer were killed on Koshtantau.

Craufurd Grove was declaring presidentially that 'the Alps are exhausted, and have been exhausted for long. We must go far afield, or perish !' If we had looked farther afield, we should have seen Donkin and Freshfield in the Caucasus, Stutfield in the Sierra Nevada, Mrs. Jackson winter-climbing, the Pilkingtons opening up the Cuillin, and Slingsby discovering Norway. Every Welsh climber would have noted too with pleasure that in 1888 the great Stocker and Wall of Lliwedd fame were active on the Natal Drakensberg. The Alpine moral, of the dangers of guideless or variation climbing, which was emphasised by the catastrophe to Lammer and Lorria guideless on the Matterhorn West face, was tragically balanced by the loss of Donkin and Harry Fox in the Caucasus. It would have been by exception that we should have noted that Eckenstein was producing the first Alpine claws, for ice technique, and that Leslie Stephen had suddenly modified his views on guideless climbing : 'Every vigorous young man should place himself in the class which can dispense with guides.'

With the beginning of the 1890s, Conway was again alert, with pungent comment upon Exhausted Districts. As usual he is worth quoting : 'Your famous guide nowadays is almost always a centric guide, the fleshpots have ruined him. . . . Your one object must be to see things you have not seen, and to enjoy the unexpected and unknown. In fact in a mild way you must go exploring. To make the fun complete, you had better write a guidebook beforehand to the district you are going to explore.'

Conway himself went off on his notable Karakorum explorations, and Charles Bruce made a first appearance, in Chitral. The mountaineering picture remained the same. Cozens Hardy wrote gaily of Albanian peaks, Packe of the Pyrenees ; Cockin was in the Caucasus, Weston in Japan, Norman Collie in the Rockies or pioneering in Scotland ; and Haskett Smith gatecrashed the JOURNAL with Cumbrian climbs. But in the Alps, a quiet movement was being begun, on to rock 'inaccessibles'. Wicks and Morse had started their guideless partnership on the Mont Blanc Aiguilles ; Burgener and Mummery, with Venetz as acrobat, attacked the Charmoz and Grépon, Norman Neruda the Fünffingerspitze. Ulrich and Hans Almer seemed an exception, when they took Cornish up the Weisshorn West face, a fantastic story that ended not unbecomingly in 'a check shirt and an enormous Gladstone collar'. Clinton Dent continued his admirable services to Alpine theory, practice and signalling ; and commented in a presidential farewell, 'In 1880 the Club came of age. . . . But it is to be feared that the number of our countrymen in these [the outlying Alpine] districts do not increase. The tendency of the Alpine fraternity is to centralise !' A few years later he completed his work by producing the 'Badminton on Mountaineering', a first formulation of



Photo, Hermann Woolley, 1896]

USHBA FROM THE MEADOWS ABOVE BETSHO.

known technique, of unique importance, with the added charm of Willink's witty illustrations.

It was the 'cosmopolitans' returning to the Alps who became most noticeable in this decade. Slingsby and Collie became associated with Mummery in guideless campaigning. They ended the long siege of the Requin, and they traversed Mt. Blanc by the Brenva ice-ridge. Their 'Two Days on an Ice-slope', written by Ellis Carr, as climbing technique at its limit was the sensation of the period, and it made an impression on my own mind that the years have never dimmed.

The heroic age, with its classic Alpine figures, had all but passed; and the pioneers and protagonists were leaving the stage; J. A. Carrel on the Matterhorn, Emile Rey on the Géant, John Tyndall, the great John Murray, T. S. Kennedy. Of the second generation, already Mummery's short but brilliant career had ended on Nanga Parbat. By the end of the 1890s, Freshfield in a considered Address was laying almost equal stress upon the contribution made by 'climbers for pleasure', in asserting recognition of the value of 'the party' as a whole, and on the importance of the Club itself, as 'founded upon two of the most primitive and deep-rooted instincts in mankind. It is connected both with the physical and the moral side of human nature'. But metaphysic could not check the Alpine pause, and there was leisure for little Club rifts to loom large. The spelling of the word Jungfrau, or the claim to priority on a Weisshorn ridge, led to huffs, or haughty rejoinder. So great was the authority vested in the Club that it felt able to adjudicate magisterially between its own members and those of a club as distant as in New Zealand, without very adequate knowledge, and yet have its censures or lectures gracefully accepted. Socially, the Club meetings can never have been pleasanter, or attended by more distinguished mountain-lovers, than during these felicitous years at the end of the century. But its limited responsibility, and the absence of function which it preferred, left it too long dependent upon the tradition appropriate to a past age, and on a tenacious and static core. In 1898, Charles Pilkington, in his Presidential Address, felt he must still be defensive of his Alpine guideless mountaineering, and he stated the position as it was known to climbers of my generation when we joined the Club: 'Guideless climbing came to be recognised as a necessary evil, and the older members of the Club slowly yielded their assent.'

One classic element in the Club continued to maintain that the Alps were exhausted; another, and official, element that the Club existed only to climb the Alps; a paralysing contradiction. But during the same years mountain climbing was slowly but surely gripping a wider interest. Local cliffs and local climbers were appearing, and local clubs were impending in the near future: clubs with the character of organising associations rather than social meeting-places, which were constituted

to take responsibility for the country's mountaineering. With a faint premonition of what might be coming, Percy Farrar was brought back from his cosmopolitan mountaineering and contacts, to start his magnificent work on the *ALPINE JOURNAL*,¹ and to act as the personal link of the Club with the mountaineers of many lands. His work, which once again established the high authority of the *JOURNAL*, through the *JOURNAL* restored its early leadership to the Club itself. It could not, however, suffice to alter the traditional character of the Club, or the Alpine fixation of its methods. At the turn of the century, our Alpine ways seemed as immutable as Rome's everlasting roads, and as undeviating. I can recall protesting to the editor against the temerity of sending in notices of new climbs done in the Alps, because it was absurd, and might be thought pretentious, to seem to expect that any member would ever revisit them. The time had not come when other countries began at last to enter the high mountain lists, and to compete with our long monopoly; by so doing challenging us to new heights. Not only in the Alps, but in further ranges, this was only to happen when the social and economic changes produced by the wars should have enforced a basic reconsideration of our Club's function, and refashioned its utility.

But the old order was changing, if imperceptibly. It might still be taken for granted that any keen-feeling mountaineer could have only the two ambitions, to climb in the Alps as soon as he could afford it, and to join the Club as soon as he was alpinistically qualified. But in the meanwhile, mountaineering as an idea, and climbing as an elementary technique for its own sake, were taking root all over the country, and adumbrating future demands for guidebooks and for climbing organisations. The Alpinists themselves were the first founders of these new local clubs, themselves still tied by personal loyalties to the Alpine Club. But the loyalties of members of the new clubs, and of the new local climbers, were naturally to be to their own organisations. The Alpine Club, with little responsibility accepted for mountaineering other than Alpine, and no organic connection with the new and wider climbing movement, risked being left in somewhat isolated dignity, stoutly supported by sentiment and still strong in its guardianship of the original and great tradition. We may attribute, I think, this pause in Alpine activity at the close of the 1890s, which contrasted so markedly with the vigorous social life of the Club, with the high estimation in which it was held, and with its still invisible nursery of future explorers, to the failure to absorb the revolutionary idea that the adventure of climbing for its own sake was slowly substituting itself for the adventure of the Alps.

¹ Farrar did not officially become Assistant Editor till 1909, but his hand was at work earlier.