

Peter Botte's mountain¹

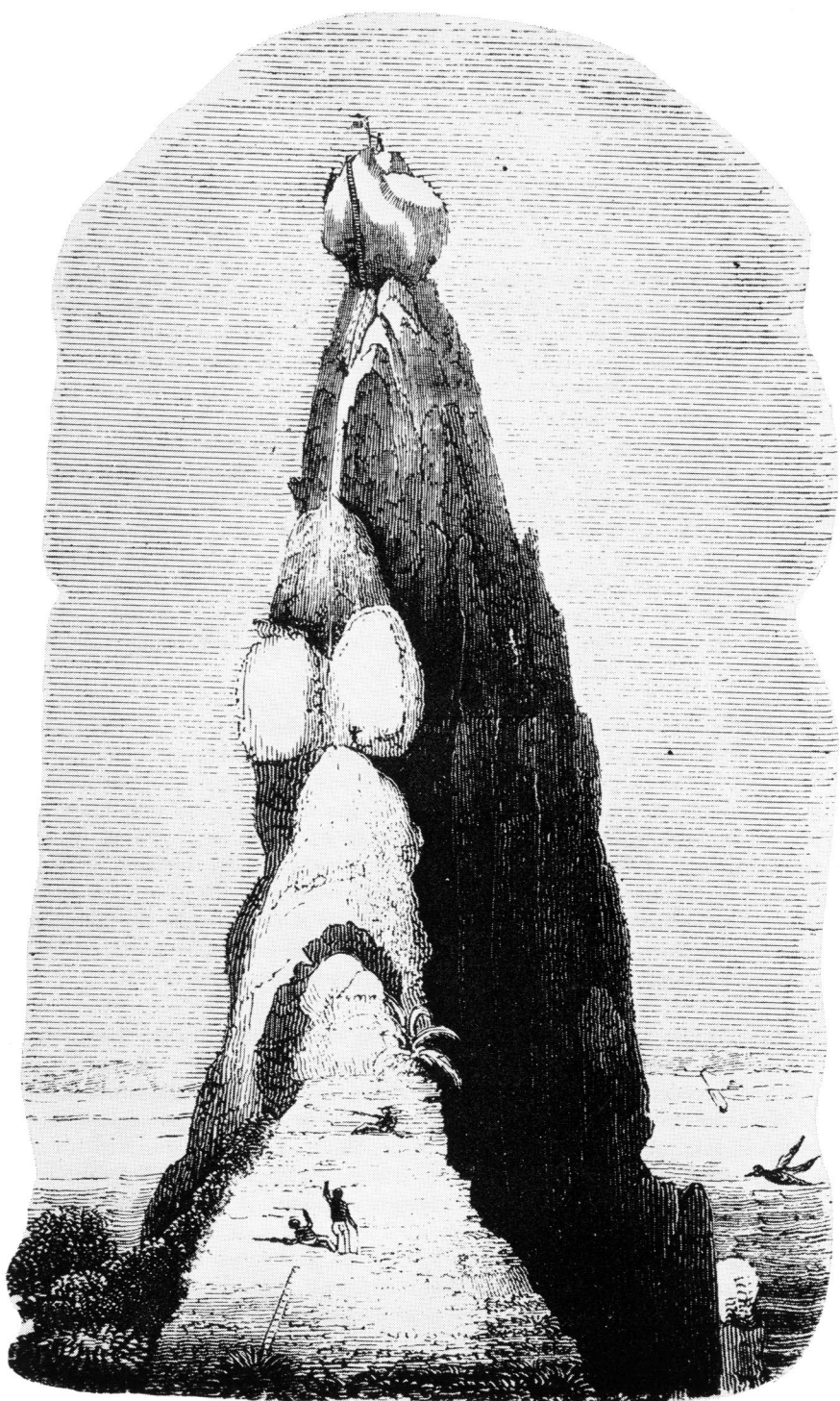
Linney Gilbert

The island called the Mauritius and the Isle of Bourbon, lie near to each other off the east coast of Africa, having, however, the great island of Madagascar between them and that continent. They were first discovered in the sixteenth century, by Pedro Mascarenhas, a Portuguese, from whom the group to which they belong is sometimes called that of the Mascarenhas. Its discoverer himself gave to the Mauritius the name of Illa do Cerus. The Portuguese, however, never formed a settlement here, and in 1598, the island was taken possession of by the Dutch admiral, Van Nek, who called it by the name by which it is now commonly known, after Maurice, Prince of Orange. The Dutch finding it of little use, although they had began to colonize it in 1640, abandoned it altogether in 1712, and in 1721, the French, who had been already for some time in possession of the neighbouring Isle of Bourbon, began to colonize it. From them it received the name of the Isle of France, and they retained it until 1810, when it was taken from them by the English. It still remains a British Colony.

The Mauritius is extremely mountainous, and exhibits in every part of it the marks of volcanic action. Some of the mountains are between two and three thousand feet in height, and are covered with snow during a great part of the year. Among them are several that assume the most singular and fantastic shapes; but the most extraordinary of any in its appearance, is that which bears the name of *Peter Botte*, from a person, who is said, by tradition, to have climbed to its summit many years ago, and to have lost his life in coming down again. This, however, is mere rumour, and even if the attempt was actually made by the person in question, it is evident that the fate which overtook him must have rendered it impossible to say whether he succeeded or not.

In point of fact, the top of the mountain has been usually regarded as quite inaccessible, notwithstanding the boast of a Frenchman about forty years ago that he succeeded in reaching it. The attempt has also been several times made by our own countrymen, since the island became a British possession, but always in vain, until the period which we are about to describe, and which was accomplished in 1832. The account of it was read before the Geographical Society, by Mr. Barrow, and says, "From most points of view it seems to rise out of the range which runs nearly parallel to that part of the sea coast which forms the bay of Port Louis, (the capital situated on the west side of the island) but on arriving at its base, you find that it is actually separated from the rest of the range by a ravine, or cleft of a tremendous depth. The mountain appears to be about eighteen hundred feet high.

¹ Reproduced from *The Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Science*. London, 1842. See also: *AJ* 6 189.



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"Captain Lloyd, chief civil Engineer, accompanied by Mr. Dawkins, had made an attempt in 1831 to ascend the mountain, and had reached what is called the neck, when they planted a ladder, which did not, however, reach half-way up the perpendicular face of rock beyond. Still Captain Lloyd was convinced that with proper preparations the feat might be accomplished. Accordingly, on the morning of the 7th September, 1832, that gentleman, along with Lieut. Philpot, 29th Regt., Lieut. Keppel, R.N. and Lieut. Taylor, set out on the bold and perilous adventure. 'All our preparations being made' says Lieut. Taylor, who furnished Mr. Barrow with the account, 'we started, and a more picturesque line of march I have seldom seen. Our van was composed of about 15 or 20 Sepoys, in every variety of costume, together with a few negroes carrying our food, dry clothes, &c. Our path lay up a very steep ravine, formed by the rains in the wet season, which having loosened all the stones, made it any thing but pleasant; those below were obliged to keep a bright look out for trembling rocks, and one of these missed Keppel and myself by a miracle.' Along this path, which was not a foot broad, they picked their way for about four hundred yards, the negroes keeping their footing firm under their loads, by catching hold of the shrubs above them, as they proceeded. "On rising to the shoulder of the mountain," continues the narrative, "a view burst upon us which quite defies my descriptive powers. We stood on a little narrow ledge, or neck of land, about 20 yards in length, on the side which we mounted; we looked back into the deep wooded gorge we had passed up, while on the opposite side of the neck, which was between six and seven feet broad, the precipice went sheer down fifteen hundred feet to the plain. One extremity of the neck was equally precipitous, and the other was bounded by what to me seemed the most magnificent sight I ever saw. A narrow, knife-like edge of rock, broken here and there by precipitous faces, ran up in conical form to about three hundred and fifty feet above us, and on the very pinnacle old Peter Botte frowned in all his glory.

"After a short rest we proceeded to work. A ladder had been left by Lloyd and Dawkins last year; it was about twelve feet high, and reached about half way up the face of the perpendicular rock. The foot which was spiked rested on a ledge, which was barely three inches on each side. A grapnel-line had been also left last year, but was not used. A negro of Lloyd's clambered from the top of the ladder, by the cleft in the face of the rock, not trusting his weight to the old and rotten line. He carried a small cord round his middle, and it was fearful to see the cool, steady way in which he climbed, where a single loose stone, or false hold, must have sent him down into the abyss; however, he partially scrambled away, till at length we heard him halloo from under the rock "all right". These negroes use their feet exactly like monkeys, grasping with them every projection, almost as firmly as with their hands. The line which he carried up was made fast above, and up it we all four 'shinned' in succession. It was, joking apart, awful work. In several places the ridge ran to an edge not a foot broad, and I could as I held on, half sitting, half kneeling, across the ridge, have kicked my right shoe down to the plain on one side, and my left into the bottom of the ravine on the other. The only thing which surprised me, was my own steadiness and freedom from all giddiness. I had been nervous in mounting the ravine in the morning, but gradually I got so excited and deter-

mined to succeed, that I could look down that dizzy height without the smallest sensation of swimming in the head; nevertheless, I held *uncommonly hard*, and felt very well satisfied when I was safe under the neck, and a more extraordinary situation I never was in. The head, which is an enormous mass of rock, about thirty-five feet in height, overhangs its base many feet on every side. A ledge of tolerably level rock, runs round three sides of the base, about six feet in width, bounded every where by the abrupt edge of the precipice, except in the spot where it is joined by the ridge, up which we climbed. In one spot, the head, though overhanging its base several feet, reaches only perpendicularly over the edge of the precipice, and most fortunately it was at the very spot where we mounted. Here it was that we reckoned on getting up; a communication being established with the shoulder by a double line of ropes, we proceeded to get up the necessary *materials*, Lloyd's portable additional coils of rope, crowbars, &c. But now the question, and a puzzler too, was, how to get the ladder up against the rock. Lloyd had prepared some iron arrows, with thongs, to fire over, and having got up a gun, he made a line fast round his body, which we all held on, and going over the edge of the precipice on the opposite side, he leaned back against the line, and fired over the least projecting part. Had the line broken, he would have fallen at least 1800 feet. Twice this failed, and then he had recourse to a large stone, with a lead line, which swung diagonally, and seemed to be a feasible plan. Several times he made beautiful heaves, but the provoking line would not catch, and away went the stone down below; till at length Æolus, pleased, I suppose, with his perseverance, gave us a shift of wind for about a minute, and over went the stone, and was eagerly seized on the opposite side. "Hurrah, my lads! steady's the word." Three lengths of the ladder were put together on the ledge, a large line attached to the one which was over the head and carefully drawn up, and finally, a two inch rope, to the extremity of which we lashed the top of the ladder, then lowered it gently over the precipice, till it hung perpendicularly, and was steadied by two negroes, on the ridge below. "All right, now hoist away," and up went the ladder, till it came to the edge of our ledge, when it was lashed in firmly to the rock. We then hauled away on the guy to steady it, and made it fast; a line was passed over by the lead line, to hold on, and up came Lloyd screeching and hallooing, and we all three scrambled after him. The union-jack and a boat-hook were passed up, and old England's flag waved freely and gallantly on the redoubted Peter Botte.

No sooner was it seen flying than the *Undaunted* frigate saluted in the harbour, and the guns of our saluting battery replied; for though our expedition had been kept secret till we started, it was made known the morning of our ascent, and all hands were on the look out, as we afterwards learnt. We then got a bottle of wine to the top of the rock, christened it "King William's Peak", and drank his Majesty's health hands round the Jack, and then hip, hip, hip, hurrah!

"I certainly never felt any thing like the excitement of that moment; even the negroes, down on the shoulder, took up our hurrahs, and we could hear far below the faint shouts of the astonished inhabitants of the plain. We were determined to do nothing by halves, and accordingly we made preparations for sleeping under the rock, by hauling up blankets, pea jackets, brandy, cigars,

&c. Meanwhile, our dinner was preparing on the shoulder below, and about 4 p.m., we descended our ticklish path, to partake of the portable soup, preserved salmon, &c. Our party was now increased by Dawkins and his cousin, a Lieutenant of the *Talbot*, to whom we had written, informing them of our hopes of success; but their heads would not allow them to mount to the head or neck. After dinner, as it was getting dark, I screwed up my nerves, and climbed up to our queer little nest at top, followed by Keppel and a negro, who carried some dry wood, and made a fire in the cleft under the rock. Lloyd and Phillpots soon came up, and we began to arrange ourselves for the night, each taking a glass of brandy, to begin with. I had on two pair of trousers, a shooting jacket, waistcoat, and a hugh flushing jacket over that, a thick woollen sailor's cap, and two blankets, and each of us lighted a cigar, as we seated ourselves to wait for the appointed hour for our signal of success. It was a glorious sight, to look down from that giddy pinnacle, over the whole island, lying so calm and beautiful in the moonlight, except where the broad black shadows of the other mountains intercepted the light. Here and there we could see a light twinkling in the plains, or the fire of some sugar manufactory; but not a sound of any sort reached us, except an occasional shout from the party down on the shoulder (we four being the only ones above). At length, in the direction of Port Louis, a bright flash was seen, and after a long interval the sullen *boom* of the evening gun. We then prepared our pre-arranged signal, and whiz went a rocket from our nest, lighting up, for an instant, the peaks of the hills below us; and then leaving us in darkness. We next burnt a blue light, and nothing can be conceived more perfectly beautiful than the broad glare against the overhanging rock. The wild looking groups we made in our uncouth habiliments, and the narrow ledge on which we stood, were all distinctly shown, while many of the tropical birds, frightened at our vagaries, came glancing by the light, and then swooped away, screeching into the gloom below; for the gorge, on our left, was as dark as Erebus. We burnt another blue light, and threw up two more rockets, when our laboratory being exhausted, the patient-looking insulted moon had it all her own way again. We now rolled ourselves up in our blankets, and having lashed Phillpots, who is a determined sleep walker, to Keppel's leg, we tried to sleep, but it blew strong before the morning, and was very cold. We drank all our brandy, and kept tucking in our blankets the whole night, without success. At day-break we arose, stiff, cold, and hungry; and shall conclude briefly, by saying, that after about four or five hour's hard work, we got a hole mined in the rock, and sank the foot of our twelve foot ladder deep in this, lashing a water barrel as a land mark at the top, and, above all, a long staff, with a union-jack flying. We then, in turn, mounted to the top of the ladder, to take a last look at a view, such as we might never see again, and bidding adieu to the scene of our toil and our triumph, descended the ladder, to the neck, and casting off the guys and training lines, cut off all communication with the top."

The adventurous party descended in perfect safety from this perilous attempt, which was one of the most daring that ever was accomplished.