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CLIMBING IN SCOTLAND:

BEN NEVIS.

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MOUNTAINEERS divide themselves naturally, according to their respective tastes, into hill-walkers and hill-climbers. I do not mean to imply that climbers cannot or will not walk, or that they are insensible to the free and bracing delights of a mountain ramble. The distinction rather is that the climber finds in the mountains a more intense and absorbing form of exercise than mere walking can ever afford. Very often pedestrianism is undertaken for purely hygienic reasons—because it is healthy, and because, of all exercises, it is best suited to the energy of sexagenarian constitutions. But it is not a sport, because the element of competition or the incentive of a keenly pursued object is wanting. Climbing, however, supplies such an object in an intense and most fascinating form. “The passionless resistance of the cliffs” is the obstacle that calls forth the climber’s highest skill and endurance, and they are exercised in the most stimulating surroundings, in the bracing air and ozone of the great mountains whose tonic properties are stamped on the lives of all the great Swiss guides. If there is any difference, climbing is healthier than hill-walking because it is harder work and is so often practised upon ice and snow.

“But”, cries the pedestrian, “climbing is mere gymnastics; the nameless rapture that comes of communion with

the 'eternal hills' refuses to associate itself with the mechanical details of ropes and ice-axes; the reverent study of nature is impossible from the ledge of a precipice; the only faculty employed is the limpet-like one of holding on". This is all nonsense. No doubt there are rabid climbers as there are rabid golfers and walkers. I have known keen climbers who would climb in a coal pit; but they had difficulty in persuading anyone to accompany them. Very dull and unobservant must the climber be whose eyes are closed to the wondrous phenomena into the heart of which his sport carries him. The blackness and grimness of the resisting cliffs; the narrow and fearsome gullies with their black enclosing walls; the weird pinnacles that seem ready to topple into the valley below; the mist billowing up out of unimaginable depths; the sudden rift when the sun comes bursting through, and the eye looks backwards out of the gloom to a far-off sunlit valley with a pleasant stream meandering through it; the sweet contentment of a summer evening on the mountain top when the work is done and a pleasant consciousness of victory lulls every sense—the climber who cannot feel and revel in these things is a mere miserable apparatus of thew and sinew, fit to rank with the "scorcher" and the record-breaker.

One other stone the climber has cast at him, which is a missile dear to the non-climbing-public. "The end of climbing", it is said, "is a broken neck; its chief pleasure", it would appear, "lies in escaping it as long as possible". Without actually adopting the view that one's bed is the most dangerous of all places because more people die there than anywhere else, climbing, it may confidently be said, is very little more dangerous than a dozen other sports that could be named. It claims so many victims because so many tyros attempt to practise it before learning the rules of the game. The accidents befalling properly-equipped and experienced parties are infinitesimally few. In Switzerland you see persons crossing glaciers with goloshes and umbrellas. In this country a more healthy respect for steep places keeps Mr. Tripper from emulating such feats; but I have seen men slide down a steep snow slope, *sans* rope, axe, and even

stick, without a thought as to what might possibly be at the bottom. On the other hand, six years' mountaineering by members of the Scottish Mountaineering Club has produced only one accident—and that not a fatal one—though many of the climbs accomplished have been up to the best Swiss standard.

“‘Swiss standard’”! some one exclaims. “Who speaks of ‘Swiss standard’ as applied to our Scottish mole-hills? Where are the glaciers, where are the crevasses”? The criticism is partly just. Generally speaking there are none, though I have crossed with difficulty a crevasse on Buchaille Etive Mor that was six feet wide and of unsounded depths. But all the other Alpine phenomena are present on a more limited scale on our Scottish mountains in early spring—the frozen snow slope, the ice-paved gully, the glazed rocks, the powdery snow ready to slide down under a clumsy foot, the avalanche\* even, and the deadly falling stones. The same care and the same skill are the conditions of safety; and the same glorious sense of obstacles overcome and perils successfully averted is the prize of victory.

It is in regard to rock-climbing, however, that our Scottish Bens can hold up their heads most defiantly against the “Horns” and “Spitzes” of Switzerland. Professor Adamson has lamented that the Scottish youth are not more devoted to this magnificent sport. It is very popular in England and Wales, but till recent years at all events has had little hold upon Scotsmen. The example, however, of the Scottish Mountaineering Club is changing this condition of things very rapidly. Year by year young and active walkers are falling within the sphere of influence exercised by club members, are deserting the chrysalis stage of their pedestrian youth and are becoming transformed into daring and skilful climbers whose near haven will be the Alpine Club. Skye, Fort William, Arran, and Glencoe see them every Easter attacking with vigour the ice-paved gullies and serrated rock ridges of the western

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\*In April of this year a party was twice struck and almost carried away by a genuine Swiss avalanche in a gully on Creag Meaghaidh

hills; and scarcely a season passes but some historical precipice, arrogant in its armour of traditional inaccessibility, surrenders to the assault of a determined party.

One of the most interesting chapters in the history of Scottish mountaineering is the conquest of Ben Nevis. The monarch unfortunately has come to be a "show mountain". Being the top of Great Britain it is in theory a most suitable spot for the "Proud Queen of Wilderness" to "plant her lonely throne", but alas! Man has selected it to plant an Observatory upon. Worse still, he has planted an hotel; and round the hotel has grown up a crop of broken bottles and sardine tins, the memorials of the 6,000 odd tourists that visit it every year.

On the far side of the mountain, however, remote from the *profanus vulgus*, stretches a range of stupendous precipices, the most savage thing of its kind in Scotland. Wrapped in the clouds which usually envelop them, they are revealed to the tourists who peer over their brink as an impressionist picture of eddying mist and unimaginable depths—which they forthwith proceed to sound by rolling stones down them.

The classic description of this great cliff has been written by Professor Geikie. "The glen", he says, "that lies far below on the south-west is overhung on its farther side by the vast rugged precipices of Ben Nevis, rising some fifteen hundred or two thousand feet above the stream that wanders through the gloom at its base. That dark wall of porphyry can now be seen from bottom to top, with its huge masses of rifted rock standing up like ample buttresses into the light, and its deep recesses and clefts into which the summer sun never reaches and where the winter snow never melts. The eye, travelling over cliff and crag, can mark everywhere the seams and scars dealt out in that long warfare with the elements of which the whole mountain is so noble a memorial".

In 1894 Mr. Edward Whymper wrote in *The Leisure Hour* (September number), that this great northern precipice had never been climbed. The statement, even at that time, was scarcely correct.

The first recorded ascent was that of the brothers Hopkinson, of the Alpine Club, who, in the autumn of 1892, descended the "Tower Ridge" after an ineffectual attempt to ascend it, and also ascended a ridge further east which it is thought was the "North-east Buttress". The situation of these ridges may best be indicated by mentioning that the cliff is weathered into three great recesses or corries separated from each other by four ridges, viz. (counting from the east) —"The North-east Buttress", the "Tower Ridge", the "Carn Dearg Buttress", and the "Castle Ridge". The first of these is the most continuously precipitous; the "Tower Ridge" is the narrowest, and at one point, close to the summit, the most difficult. The third is really a great bluff or headland, and has never been legitimately climbed; while the "Castle Ridge" is the lowest and easiest, but not the least interesting of the four.

The fame of the Messrs. Hopkinson's exploit was little known in the climbing world when, in March, 1894, Messrs. Collie, Solly, and Collier made the first successful ascent of the "Tower Ridge". It was heavily festooned with ice and snow, and was altogether in an intensely Alpine condition. The ascent took five hours of continuous work, and was described by Dr. Collie as the finest climb he had ever had in Scotland, resembling in several respects the Italian side of the Matterhorn. Up till Easter of this year the "Tower Ridge" had several times been re-ascended in summer when the rocks were free of snow; but no party had ventured upon it under Alpine conditions. Then, however, the occasion being the Easter meet of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, it was climbed by four parties, of which I had the good fortune to be a member of one. The immediately preceding party had encountered very serious difficulties. They got stuck for hours on the ice-glazed rocks of the "Tower", and only reached the top at nightfall after spending nine hours on the rocks. Our party began the climb by scaling a rock pinnacle at the foot of the ridge that had never been ascended from that side before. It proved extremely difficult, and an exciting series of adventures near the top, carried through in a snowstorm,

prepared us for the much-advertised perils of the "Tower". In all conscience they were sufficiently alarming. High overhead rose a sheer black and white wall of smooth porphyry and smoother ice. From its base a steep snow slope plunged dizzily into the mist. "Royal road" there was none; for plainly the upward journey could only be continued by scaling the wall or trusting our fortunes to some sloping snow-clad ledges that ran brokenly round a projecting corner to unknown dangers beyond. We spent nearly an hour balancing probabilities and making tentative sorties upon the wall and the ledges; then having decided definitely upon the former, never shall I forget the way in which R. led us straight up over ice, rock, and snow to the top. He cut a great part of the way with one hand up an ice-paved gully, the other being occupied in holding on to the microscopical projections by which we resisted successfully the operation of the law of gravity. This was the first time this wall had ever been climbed in winter, for the other parties all pinned their faith to the ledges.

Another climb which I remember well was on the "North-east Buttress". At Easter, 1895, it bore the character of being inaccessible, and the shining masses of blue ice which depended from its upper rocks fostered the delusion. Parties came out and looked at it, shook their heads, and went sadly home. I believe, however, that at that time it actually was well-nigh impossible.

But the month of May came with accounts from the Observatory of rapidly-melting ice and fast-vanishing snow. On the 20th, winter was represented only by a few grimy wreaths along the edge of the precipice. It was in these circumstances that T. and I, who had long yearned to vanquish it, prepared for an attack upon the terrible buttress.

Very early, owing to our respective arrangements refusing to square, we were forced to adopt most heroic measures. We took the night express from Edinburgh to Kingussie and attempted to cycle across to Fort William in the early hours of the morning. The Nemesis, however, of a punctured tyre punished us for this outrage upon sanity. My bicycle broke down, and I had to run 16 miles to Inverlair,

where we caught a train and so arrived at Fort William at 12:30 p.m. It was a thundery afternoon, and our punishment continued as we toiled up the steep grass slopes of Carn Dearg, floundered, tired and hungry, amidst the bogs and rocks of the Allt a' Mhuillinn glen, and finally came in a rainstorm and saturated garments to the foot of the "North-east Buttress" at 5:30. Without counting the possible cost we put on the rope and commenced the ascent. Several hours passed in comparatively easy climbing, till at 8:45 we were confronted, 200 feet below the summit, by a rock wall that, in our tired condition, we were absolutely unable to climb. An hour passed in fruitless attempts to turn it; a cold bivouac on the rain-splashed rocks seemed inevitable, and then, just as night was falling and our thoughts were reluctantly turning from visions of a warm supper in the Observatory, a way was found; we wriggled up a dark, slimy chimney above a nearly perpendicular precipice, and at 10:5 stood, victors, on the summit. The last hundred feet were climbed in pitch darkness.

The conquest of the "Castle Ridge" was accomplished under less sensational conditions. At Easter, 1895, a party, led by Dr. Collie, went quietly and easily up it, and I had the pleasure next day, along with two friends, of following in their footsteps. It is a delightful little climb; but, save for one place where the weight has to be trusted to a projecting stone of the most unstable appearance, there is no particular difficulty. As the stone, however, overlooks 1,000 feet of precipice, the mind of the climber is not entirely free from disturbing visions of "everlasting smash".

The "Carn Dearg Buttress" was climbed first on 9th June, 1895, but this climb can scarcely be considered as a legitimate ascent of it. Recently two attempts have been made to scale the cliff on its steepest side, but they have both ended at the same point. The party that passes it will probably reach the top.

It only remains to mention that the precipice is pierced by six snow gullies, all of which, with the single exception of the steepest branch of the Observatory gully, have now been climbed. In these great clefts ice-axes are indispens-

able even in summer, when adamantine relics of the winter's snowfall may still be found ; and if he values his life let the climber beware of the Maxim gun-like discharges of stones which the summer tourist rolls over the top, and which on Lochnagar also, last autumn, were found to be an unpleasant accompaniment of cliff-climbing there.

Climbing on Ben Nevis will go on increasing in difficulty year by year. New and more interesting routes will be discovered ; and the exploits of one season will be the commonplaces of the next. It is one of the finest climbing grounds in Britain, and the West Highland Railway has established easy access to it from every part of the kingdom. This is the golden age of climbing in Scotland, when all the joys of the unknown and the unexplored reward the venturesome mountaineer who penetrates their mysteries. You cannot, of course, eliminate all risk. Accidents will occur, and in proportion no doubt to the number and venturesomeness of the climbers. But an honest respect and regard for the obvious canons of the sport will enable any ordinarily prudent and vigorous man to spend years of healthful activity, realising on his own Highland hills most of the pleasures and excitements of the Swiss Alps.