

TABLE MOUNTAIN.

BY WILLIAM BARCLAY.

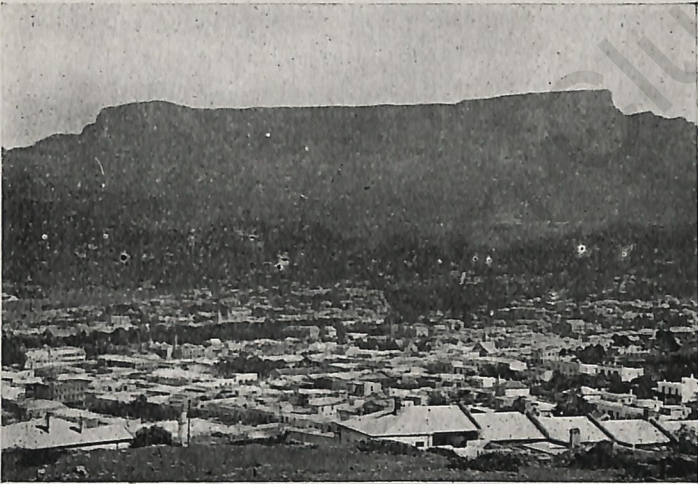


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TAKING advantage of a two days' stay in Cape Town of the mail-boat in which I was making a journey to the homeland, I thought one of the days might be profitably spent in an ascent of Table Mountain.

Rising as it does to a height of 3,582 feet, Table Mountain, with its satellites running out on each flank—the Devil's Peak (3,300 feet) and the Lion's Head (2,000 feet)—forms a sort of rough horseshoe, enclosing a valley, in the hollow of which Cape Town lies. It has a most majestic appearance as viewed from the harbour; and to the hillman the impulse to ascend it is irresistible.

The mountain itself, rising immediately behind the town, shows an almost unbroken front of precipice, nearly two miles in length, and from 1,500 to 2,000 feet in height; and the easiest and quickest line of ascent,

especially for a stranger, is by a deep ravine—the Platteklip—which runs diagonally from left to right up the face of the rocks. The bottom of this gorge can be reached by a path running along the hillside below the cliffs, which gives off a track towards the gorge. The path begins in the Kloof, between Table Mountain and the Lion's Head. There is no mistaking the Platteklip—it is so deep, and offers the only obvious line of ascent to the chance visitor; though I believe the Cape Mountain Club have charted out a hundred or more different climbs on the mountain.

It was Good Friday; and from the harbour I struck right up through the town, in as straight a line as I could, for the middle of the mountain, and, after passing the highest-perched houses, I entered the pine woods covering the lower slopes. Here, I soon lost the track I had been following, but I just kept on through the wood, which was thickly floored with pine needles. Later, I encountered a heavy growth of underwood, plentifully sprinkled with large buried stones, and this made the going rather heavy and treacherous; however, I soon topped the trees and struck the path running along the hillside. The ravine was now in sight, and I speedily discovered a faint track leading up to it. The sun was very hot, and the scramble up this scree-covered and rocky gully was rather warm work. The gully was also pretty steep, and there was no water about; but when I entered the upper half I got into the shadow of the cliffs, and the climb was then much pleasanter.

Just after 1 o'clock—four hours from my start from the ship—I stepped on to the summit plateau, and then I had a walk of about a mile along a practically flat tableland before I reached the highest point.

Table Mountain reminded me somewhat of Braeriach, from its deeply-indented precipitous face and the large extent of its flat summit; only here I noticed clumps of dwarf pine trees growing in different parts of the plateau. The rest of the surface was covered with long

coarse grass, and a peculiar kind of plant like large rushes. The highest point is crowned with a circular concrete pillar, bearing a few loose stones on its summit, and is about half a mile from the edge of the precipices.

After exploring the precipices, I made tracks for the saddle connecting the mountain with its larger off-spring, the Devil's Peak; but found to my dismay no passage there for a solitary climber, so I kept farther round to the east, and got on to a track which led me to another ravine—Skeleton by name—on the eastern face of the mountain. Here I passed one of the reservoirs in the catchment area of the Cape Town Waterworks, and also a small hut erected for the convenience of visitors. Then I entered the gorge proper, and it led me steeply down a thickly-wooded ravine for perhaps 1,600 or 1,800 feet. Thereafter I enjoyed a pleasant walk through the old pine woods lying on the slopes of the Devil's Peak to Claremont, where I got a train for Cape Town.

A notable feature of Table Mountain is that its summit is often shrouded in cloud, while great wreaths of mist pour down its precipices, overlapping them like a tablecloth. "Sometimes," to quote a description, "the cloud is still and white and fleecy, and sometimes one would think it a cataract of foam as it rolls over and descends in mighty convolutions." There is a delightful legend of how Table Mountain "comes to have its tablecloth." Long, long ago, a Dutchman, who was supposed to have accumulated a large fortune as a pirate and to have retired from business, lived in a lonely house on the eastern slopes of the Devil's Peak. He used to spend his days drinking and smoking by himself. He was a mighty smoker and prided himself on smoking more than any man alive. One day there suddenly appeared to him a mysterious stranger, who wagered that he would smoke more than the Dutchman at one sitting, suggesting in the good old fashion of diabolic wagers that the stakes should be the Dutchman's soul against the kingdoms of the world. The prudent Dutchman, however, declined the bargain,

because in his view he had no soul to barter, and on the other hand had no desire for more wealth ; but said he was agreeable nevertheless to enter into a smoking competition with the stranger for the love of the thing. The contest was carried on for days and nights on end, with the result that the smoke emitted by the valiant competitors from their pipes (which were refilled as fast as they were emptied) accumulated in a dense cloud, which swirled and eddied all about. At last the devil—for the stranger was no other than his Satanic Majesty—owned himself vanquished, and disappeared in a tremendous crash of thunder, taking the victorious mynheer with him, however : hence the name, Devil's Peak, and the common saying, when the cloud rests on the mountain, that "the Devil is smoking to-day." The cloud, of course, is accounted for in a perfectly natural way—by the congealing of the moist cold wind from the sea when suddenly brought in contact with the warm land. It appears so often as to have become a familiar feature of the mountain to dwellers in Cape Town. To those who happen to be on the mountain when it descends, it is a source of considerable danger ; and I was warned by two or three people about the danger of going up the mountain alone, in case "the wet blanket" should come down.

There is not much to say about the view from the summit. Cape Town with its harbour lies at one's feet, with the expanse of Table Bay beyond, while looking eastward one catches a glimpse of False Bay, backed by a noble range of hills in the distance. The Lion's Head is a prominent object in the landscape, and on one of the lower slopes of the Devil's Peak stands the striking memorial to Cecil Rhodes.