

A DAY ON THE GLACIER DES BOSSONS.

By E. W. S.

"WELL, as soon as we get settled I'm going to look for a guide to do Mont Blanc." "You can go. No Mont Blanc for me!" This in sight of the Aiguille d'Argentière, the Glacier d'Argentière, the Mer de Glace and, far in the distance, the white dome of Mont Blanc itself. It was too much for us newcomers. The Chamonix Valley is the most astounding sight to eyes accustomed to the grimness only of the Garbh Choire or the "steep frowning glories." Up, up to the very sky piled trees on fields, rocks on trees, snow on rocks, with monstrous tongues of ice reaching down from the snow-field even through the trees. Days in the lower Alps had not yet accustomed us to the giants, and this sudden entry into the grandeur of Haute Savoie left us dismayed.

After dinner, however, when the first feeling of awe had worn off, a new enthusiasm was abroad, and the prospect of our first day with a real Alpine guide and the possible realisation of anticipated thrills was the new note.

We spent the morning in Chamonix, where glaciers act as back curtains to every street scene, the French version of holiday-making and holiday-makers giving us constant interest and amusement. We purchased a few souvenirs and lots of glacier cream, then back through a thunder pelt to the Pension Belvedere to our appointment with the member of the Corps des Guides. Our hostess at the Pension was the interpreter, the guide being a tried climbing companion of her husband. He was doubtful of the possibility of a climb to Mont Blanc, especially as our time was limited to one complete day; and indeed we did not look a very promising party of climbers, but something might be done. A look at our climbing boots, meantime stowed away in the back of the car, lit a slight spark of hope, and then our

enthusiasm caught up on the guide. In a few minutes it was arranged—4 o'clock that evening by the railway to the Chalet Hotel, and, if it were fine, 2 A.M. from there for the Glacier des Bossons.

The start was not auspicious. A thunderstorm was raging as we set off up the Téléférique Aiguille du Midi—Mont Blanc—and by the time we arrived at the hotel, in reality a fine specimen of Alpine hut, the rain was in torrents. Hutcheon was in his element, thrilling in anticipation of known joys. Alas, I at least was far from keeping him company. The *salle à manger* was not a cheery place. A gramophone—one of the pre-war models with a monstrous horn—was wheezing out French tunes. The hut-keeper's family of daughters of school age were dancing; the wind was blowing through a broken window in the vestibule; but the smell from the kitchen was promising.

Two tables were laid—one with the most marvellous array of wine bottles, the other, obviously ours, with rather better cutlery and crockery. Who would be occupying the first table? This was answered for us as the young dancers took their places, apparently each opposite her particular bottle.

Dinner in company with our guide was a cheery affair after all; a bottle of wine, sweet and sparkling, procured by Hutcheon from the Pension, gave the feeling of funk a fright—temporarily at least. Off early to bed—Norman to sleep like a log, I to listen to the wind souging and wonder what 1 A.M. would bring. Midnight, and still the rain battered on the roof. "Well, if it is raining at 1 o'clock, what a sleep I'll have!" Brrr!! The guide's alarm! "Très bien, messieurs." A slow drawing on of stockings and climbing boots, then downstairs to the smell of coffee, and any feeling of funk had completely gone.

The glacier lanterns were lit, and off we went—the guide, then Hutcheon, while I, being the proud possessor of an Alpine lantern (relic of a midnight excursion on Lochnagar), was third, and Norman brought up the rear. It was a beautiful starlit morning. Our path at first zigzagged over Alpine-covered slopes, then over several tongues of snow, and so

on to the moraine of the Glacier des Bossons. At times the guide would cut a step on a glazed boulder or outcrop of rock, but otherwise it was just a case of kicking steps. After about an hour we roped up, for we were apparently approaching a badly crevassed part. We did not realise this fully until our return, for in the half-light and the rays of our lanterns we could see little more than the next step, but as the guide was leading that meant a carefully chosen route, for he seemed to know the glacier most intimately.

After about two hours' going, the first glimpse of day was seen in the sky. Soon we were abreast the Grands Mulets. Here at the foot of the rocks was a busy scene, dozens of climbers putting on crampons, hauling at ropes, and, early morning though it was, chatting merrily. Our guide left us to climb to the hut to get a balaclava, for the morning was cold and, as we ascended, getting colder. The climbers were a party of Chasseur Cadets on a training excursion. When the guide rejoined us we set off up a steep snow slope at a steady pace. The sky was getting a paler blue and the stars less brilliant. Our track lay up the glacier, over a stretch of snow-covered ice, here and there crevassed, and leading up first to ice walls which glistened and sparkled in the half light. On the left the rocks of the Grands Mulets, and on the right the rock ridge which separates the upper reaches of the Glacier des Bossons from its neighbour, de Taconnaz. Now, the sun must have been rising in the east, for it suddenly illuminated the rocky pinnacles of the Aiguille du Midi and the Aiguille du Gôûter, making them into a more fanciful lighting scheme than has ever been evolved by an electrician. Time stood still; no feeling was possible; the pace was rhythmic, the going easy, the air like wine—and such a sunrise!

Our party led for a long time, the guide kicking steps with an ease and precision delightful to watch. Then he waited, lit a cigarette, and let the leading rope of our fellow-climbers pass us, so that he could follow their steps. We were thankful for the rest, but were to regret it later. Now the sun was riding high, and the altitude starting to tell,

for this was the first time Norman and I had been over 12,000 feet, but with it all we kept up a steady pace. The glacier cream which smeared our faces was running off my helmet and stuck to my lips. Soon we were legging it up the slope leading to the Grand Plateau. The summit appeared in the distance, but, alas, waving a gigantic plume of blown snow. The Chasseurs were making good going up the gentle slopes of the Grand Plateau, and Mont Blanc seemed to be conquered. The guide, seeing me hitch my rucksack, told us that about a mile away was the Caban Vallot, where we could leave our rucksacks whilst we made for the summit.

The Chasseurs ahead seemed to be stopped—were they resting? The guide stopped, looked at the flying banner of snow and ice particles, and said, “Mauvais.” Even yet we didn’t see our not standing on that dome. The wind was certainly increasing, but we had often experienced worse on Ben Macdhui. But surely the Chasseurs are turning! Now our guide got really gloomy. Still, after a pause, he would kick on up the last slopes before the Caban; then when we got to the edge of the plateau, over which the Chasseurs were now making good going, but downhill, the force of the wind made it necessary for us to thrust our ice-axes deep into the snow and hang on to them, while the guide contemplated. Here at last we found our shortcomings in the way of language. We couldn’t help in the decision. Amongst ourselves we saw no reason for not going on, and at least we would have liked to explore the Caban; but no, the plume was not only on the hill, it was in the guide’s mind, and finally, within a thousand feet of the summit and with only the Bosses du Dromadaire to traverse, he gave it up. Once the decision was made—and it had to be a one-man decision, for we couldn’t discuss it with the guide, nor could we refuse to respect his decision—we simply turned round, and in a few minutes had given up the altitude that had been won in an hour, and with this our hope of rounding up our first tour of the Alps by standing on the highest point in them. We estimated that we had reached 14,300 feet. Disappointment clouded our outlook on the way down and detracted from what otherwise would have been a glorious

view. The heat of day was now being felt. The tracks down churned up by the Chausseurs made the going simply laborious, and we were very glad to reach the rock of the Grands Mulets. This again was a busy spot. It is reached from the glacier by climbing on to a rib of rock ending in a small Aiguille, near the summit of which is the hut. The route up is supplied with an iron hand-rail. The interior of the hut itself was anything but attractive. Our Chausseur friends had turned the small *salle à manger* into a barrack-room. However, with the usual French hospitality, they made room for the visitors. We were supplied with a pot of miserable tea, but, strangely, had no appetite, so that the only part of the lunch (supplied by the hostess of the Pension Belvedere) that we touched was a tin of sourish greengages.

Leaving the hut behind, the most interesting and thrilling part of the journey commenced. We had covered the ground from the Chalet Hotel in the starlight, now we were to cross the lower reaches of the Glacier des Bossons in broad daylight, the snow softened to the consistency of sticky white toffee. We had to make detours to avoid crevasse after crevasse, snow bridges had to be crossed, and, worst of all, what looked like rather deep footprints, such as we leave on the Ballochbuie slopes leading to Lochnagar, pitted the surface of the glacier—a horrible pot-hole type of crevasse.

The view, when we could find freedom of thought to look at it, was magnificent. The Valley of Chamonix stretched before us, with the little town lying at the foot of the Aiguille Rouges, and the glacier stream over the nose of des Bossons seeming to climb uphill. The Chausseurs had left the hut before us, and it was a very dilapidated track we followed. Eventually the guide suggested unroping, but Norman and I preferred to stay put.

Then on across the moraine to where, turning a corner, we could see the Chalet Hotel, and, better still, we could see Malcolm taking it easily across the boulders and ice to meet us. About a mile below the Chalet Hotel the glacier ends in a dirty-looking stream, and down the side of this runs the Téléférique, which carries you over what we knew

would have been a hard slog over beds of Alpenrose and grassy slopes.

Malcolm had spent the morning with his eye glued to the telescope (supplied by the thoughtful Maitre d'Hotel) at Pension Belvedere. He had seen the flying pennant of snow, and knew from his knowledgeable host that, although it was a gloriously clear morning, with that pennant flying it was unlikely that we would reach the summit of Mont Blanc.

Next morning from the Sallanches road we looked again on the Bosses du Dromadaire and the summit dome; Mont Blanc had hauled down the flag.

