

AN EARLY ADVENTURE ON ROCK.

BY A. W. CLARK.

Ignotum pro magnifico est, said Tacitus long ago, with the brevity and finality typical of his style, meaning that the unknown assumes in man's imagination all the proportions of the unattainably splendid and magnificent, and adding thereby a corollary on the dictum that knowledge is power. How long it was ere man overcame this trait of his imaginative powers and set to work to reduce and master the unknowns (in the physical world, at least) makes fascinating reading as the tale of exploration and travel unfolds itself down the ages. It is well known, however, that the quest and conquest of the high hills are a comparatively recent phenomenon, connected doubtless with the more comfortable circumstances and greater ease of transport ever more widely enjoyed in the last hundred years. Yet the writings of the ancients are not without signs, faint gleams though they be, of things to come.

It would be interesting to find out from members of the Club what first impelled them to climb mountains, for among most people (fortunately?) and not least shepherds, keepers, and foresters, whose work brings them into daily association with the hills, mountain climbing is regarded as hardly a sane activity. Many, perhaps, would cite the example of relatives or friends, some the joy experienced from active effort in proximity to untamed and unspoilt nature, others the triumphant sense of achievement after the challenge of a difficulty has been successfully met. But there might possibly be a few, a very few, who could recall a day in school when they were inspired by an anecdote or tale of adventure, encountered oasis-like in the arid deserts of class textbooks, to make the acquaintance at first hand of the treasures of the hills.

For some weeks we have been making slow and laboured

progress through the succinctly phrased and at times lengthy periods of Sallust, when the other day we were vouchsafed the following :—

“ Not far from the River Muluccha, which constitutes the frontier between the kingdoms of Jugurtha and of Bocchus, there rises a mountain of rock amid a sea of plain. Despite its great eminence there is a plateau on the summit spacious enough for a moderately sized fort, access to which is made by one extremely narrow path. This rocky mass, so precipitous by nature as to suggest artifice and design, Marius strove to capture, the more steadfastly because the king kept his treasure there. His aim was achieved, however, less by strategy than by accident.

“ The fort was amply manned and provisioned. The locus was unsuitable for the use of ramparts, turrets, and lofty siege-engines, as the path to the fort was narrow to a degree, with a sheer drop on either side. In vain were shelters brought up at great risk, for whenever they made even a little advance, they were overwhelmed by torches and stones hurled on them from above. The soldiers could neither maintain a footing for siege operations owing to the precipitous slope nor attend to the shelters without hazard, and while all the bravest men slipped or were wounded, the others steadily grew more fearful. Marius, however, after a vast expenditure of time and effort, was anxious to reach a decision as to whether he should give up the attempt as hopeless or await a stroke of luck such as he had frequently enjoyed.

“ He had been debating this alternative for many days and nights in a fever of indecision when a Ligurian, a ranker from an auxiliary cohort, happened to go out of camp to fetch water from the opposite side of the fort to that which was being assailed. Noticing snails creeping among the boulders, he picked up one or two, then more and more, until in his enthusiasm for collecting he gradually worked his way up until he emerged not far from the summit. Realising his solitary situation, he was overcome by the desire, natural to the human spirit, to create difficulties.

“ As it chanced, a huge oak had taken firm root among the

rocks at this point. Growing a little outwards at first it then curved upwards, following the nature of all growth. By taking advantage now of its branches now of holds on projecting boulders, the Ligurian won his way to the fort plateau unseen, as all the Numidians were preoccupied in watching the efforts of the attackers. There he carefully surveyed everything likely, in his opinion, soon to prove useful, and returned by the same route, not at random as on the ascent but circumspectly, and after every move had been tested.

“ Without loss of time he sought an audience of Marius, detailed his experiences, and urged him to attack the fort on that side by which he himself had made the ascent. At the same time he offered to act as guide up the hazardous route. Marius sent some of his staff to accompany the Ligurian and report on the possibilities of his suggestion. Some thought the ascent would be difficult, others easy, according to the disposition of each, but the consul's interest was roused. Selecting, therefore, the five flute players and horn-blowers, who were fleetest of foot, and four infantrymen to act as their escort, he issued instructions that everyone was to obey the Ligurian's orders and appointed the following day for the attempt.

“ On their guide's advice the infantrymen had laid aside their weapons and equipment and proceeded with head and feet bare to ensure a firmer purchase on the rock and less restricted vision. On their backs were swords and shields, light Numidian leather targes, not only to save weight but also to deaden the sound should they strike against the rocks. The Ligurian led the way, and, to facilitate the progress of the soldiers, lassoed projecting rocks and tree stumps. Sometimes, indeed, he gave a helping hand to those who were awed into immobility by the unwonted nature of the route. When the angle of the climb steepened a little, he made the infantrymen move first ahead of him, one at a time, then followed up himself with their weapons. Wherever there appeared a pitch with doubtful holds, he was the first to tackle it, and would inspire the others with fresh heart by frequently ascending and descending the same route, then

immediately standing aside. Thus, after great and prolonged exertions, they at length reached the fort which they found deserted on that side, since everyone was facing the enemy, as before."

Bell. Jug., §§ 92-94.

It came as no surprise when we consulted the Classical Atlas to find that Liguria was that sickle-shaped strip of land which bounds the Gulf of Genoa, its sharp, cutting edge fronting the Ligurian Sea, the back reinforced by the massive line of the Ligurian Alps. Who doubts but that the hero of Sallust's tale was renewing in ungrateful Numidia happy memories of youthful scrambles in his native Apennines ?

