

CHAPTER VII.

AN ASCENT OF ONE OF THE MISCHABEL-HÖRNER, CALLED
THE DOM.

TILL lately, the name and the situation of the highest mountains which Switzerland could call exclusively her own—Mont Blanc being claimed by Savoy, and Monte Rosa, in part at least, by Piedmont—were unknown to ordinary Swiss travellers; and at this moment there are but few who are aware of the pretensions of the peak which forms the subject of this narrative. This obscurity of so high a mountain is partly due to the uncertainty which prevailed till the date of the latest survey, as to which, amongst several summits of nearly equal height, was actually the highest; but still more to the modest and retiring character of the mountain itself, which is almost entirely hidden from the lower valleys by intervening masses, and is scarcely seen from more than one point of view as a distinct and imposing object amongst its magnificent companions.

Those, however, who have had the delight of studying the panorama of mountains from the Gorner-grat, will remember that in telling off the peaks from the east northwards, after the Strahlhorn, the Rympfischhorn, the Alleleinhorn, and the Alphubel, they come to two fine sharp summits called the Mischabel horns. These are of very nearly equal height, and both higher than any mountain, except Monte Rosa, which can be seen within the horizon. The nearer is called the Täschhorn, from the village which lies at its foot, in the St. Nicholas valley; the farther is called the Grabenhorn, or, by a pleasanter as well as shorter name, the Dom.*

On the opposite side the Dom appears to much greater advantage. It is the highest mountain to be seen from the Great Aletsch glacier, or from the Äggischhorn; and one who has been fortunate enough to be on that glacier before sunrise, and to see the fine snowy mass crowned by the peak of the Dom, side by side with the beautiful Weisshorn, receiving the first rays of the morning sun, will remember the sight as one scarcely surpassed amongst the Alps.

* See map facing page 143.

The Mischabel horns rise with remarkable steepness between the valleys of St. Nicholas and Saas, the distance from valley to valley at that point, as the crow flies, being only some six or seven miles. The village of Zermatt, which heads the former valley, being provided with so many more prominent and attractive neighbours, the Mischabel horns have hitherto received most attention at Saas. The curé of that village, the hardy and intelligent M. Imseng, has made several attempts to ascend the Dom from that side; and in 1856, Mr. Chapman also ascended to a considerable height from Saas. I do not know the particulars of these attempts, which may have failed through want of time or unfavourable weather; but probably, even under propitious circumstances, the ascent would be more difficult on that side than it has been found to be on the western side facing Randa. In the summer of 1858, Mr. Cayley attempted the ascent from the latter village, and would, no doubt, have succeeded, had not a mist come on, which stopped him not far from the summit.

Later in the same summer, while spending a few days at Zermatt, I felt the desire to wind up a happy Swiss holiday with some excursion over untrodden ground. Of all mountains not yet climbed the Weisshorn is perhaps the most fascinating, especially to those who have looked at it day after day from the Upper Rhone valley. I proposed, therefore, to Johann zum Taugwald, with whose experience and resources as a guide I was familiar, and whose honest simplicity and quiet good humour make him a very pleasant companion, that we should try to get to the top of the Weisshorn. He thought we might manage it, and we began to speculate on the route to be taken; but, happening to talk about it to Mr. Clemenz, the landlord of the Mont Cervin hotel, I found that he strongly recommended us to substitute the Dom for the Weisshorn. The worthy landlord was also President of the Council of his canton, and took a zealously patriotic view of an ascent of the highest Swiss mountain, assuring me that such an achievement would have "a quite other significance" for the traveller himself, and for the village of Zermatt, than would belong to the ascent of any other mountain. I yielded to his representations, especially as he added that we should be almost certain to reach the top of the Dom, whereas the Weisshorn was thought by many to be inaccessible from the valley of St. Nicholas. My guide was equally ready for the Dom, of which he knew more than any one else, having been with Mr. Chapman on the one side of the mountain, and with Mr. Cayley on the other. So

we fixed a day; Taugwald engaged a younger Zermatt guide, named Kronig, to act as porter, and on Friday afternoon, September 10th, we walked from Zermatt to Randa, where we were to spend the night.

There is no inn at Randa, but the curé is able and willing to receive travellers into his house, and to give them a bed and village fare. I sat out in the village talking with him, enjoying a delicious evening, and learning something about the educational condition of the country. He had been a teacher for some time at the college at Brieg, a purely ecclesiastical institution, but which imparts a certain kind of knowledge and culture to a good many of the peasants of the valleys. I had been surprised, on an excursion of the previous summer, to hear Johann's brother, Stephan zum Taugwald, say with a smile, as he presented a draught of wine, "Visne bibere, Domine?" and to learn that he spent the greater part of the year at Brieg, preparing to be a priest, and regularly returned to Zermatt for the summer months, to make hay whilst the touristical sun was shining. Many of the priests must be drawn in this way from the peasantry of the country; and there may be some who carry on their studies at the college for a time (the full period being seven years), and then withdraw to take to other callings. I made the acquaintance the next morning of a student of this class, belonging to the village of Randa; and as we sat talking that evening the priest exchanged some short remarks in Latin with a neighbour who seemed to be one of the residents of the place. The education of the young in each parish, at least in the remoter and less populous districts, is carried on by the curé, who acts as schoolmaster, and keeps school regularly during the winter season.

I had every inducement to retire early, as there was nothing to do in-doors when it had become too chilly to stay out any longer, and I had the prospect of an early call in the morning. There was a great height to climb, apart from any difficulties we might encounter, and I had expected to spend the night somewhere amongst the rocks on the mountain side. But this was voted unnecessary, and we lay down for some broken slumber under the curé's roof. Soon after one o'clock the friendly face of Johann showed itself in my room, and brought a good account of the weather—that anxious subject for all Alpine travellers. We drank our coffee, packed up the day's provisions, looked to the rope and the hatchet, marked the time,—ten minutes past two by the curé's clock,—and sallied forth by the light of a lantern.

We were soon joined by a volunteer comrade,—the student whom I just mentioned,—who made up our party to four. It was very dark, and I could see little except the lantern in front of me. But our course from the beginning was a very direct one, varied, that is, chiefly by zig-zags—a style of route by which those who climb steep mountains must be content to have their patience exercised. We passed the first meadows, and took to a path which led through scanty woods to the higher slopes on which cattle grazed, till it grew light enough to leave the lantern behind. Before we left the last trees, the hatchet was put in requisition to procure a small pole to erect as our trophy on the summit, but we were lucky enough to find a substantial branch already cut, which was slung to the back of our Randa volunteer. Then followed a long climbing of rocks, with sometimes a difficult bit giving work to hands and knees, but cheered by the increasing daylight. About the time that we welcomed the first direct rays of the sun, we exchanged our rocks for the short glacier which came down on our right, and then we had a splendid view of the Weisshorn opposite. It was a part of our enjoyment to watch this glorious mass as we rose higher and higher, and its white bosom of snow took so exquisite a tint of soft aerial pink just before the sun shone right upon it, that my taciturn guide, Johann, was himself moved to unwonted enthusiasm. We had everything to put us in good spirits, for the weather was magnificent, the air fresh and serene, the sky without a cloud.

The glacier presented none but ordinary features. We met with something of a wall, which required care and pains to mount; but we were not much troubled with crevasses, and the snow was crisp and not very deep. We made our way towards a rocky ridge which cut into the glacier, where we determined to breakfast.

We stopped here about eight o'clock, to rest and refresh ourselves, and prepare for the stiff part of our day's work. It was already colder than was pleasant, and before we started we buttoned up close, put on gloves, and tied down our wideawakes over our ears. We had not been able to see far above us, and at our breakfasting place, though it commanded a good view, we were not within sight of the actual summit of the mountain. But we knew we had to climb a steep and narrow *arête*, which stretched upwards on our right in the direction of the peak. The cold wind caught us sharply as we tackled these rocks with feet and hands, and as we stopped now and then to cut steps across a hard slope of snow. But we

were soon rewarded by the sight of the Dom, carrying a streamer of powdery snow blowing from its crest.

We had a rather fatiguing pull through deeper snow before we could get to the top. On the side facing Zermatt and Monte Rosa the summit is cut sharply down, and the side at right angles to this, facing Saas, is also precipitous; but in the angle between, facing north-west, the snow lies, though the surface is irregular, and there is considerable choice of precise routes. When you get near the very top, you are obliged to keep close to the Zermatt edge, which resembles the sheer descent from the Finsteraarhorn to the Aar glacier. Such a situation is one of the most impressive to the imagination and to the nerves, but the rope precludes all real danger. So we found ourselves, about eleven o'clock, assembled without any mishap on the actual summit of the Dom.

Unfortunately there is no comfortable seat there. There are no rocks, and though there is plenty of room, the wind blows freely over the snowy platform; so we had to stand in the snow, shivering with the cold, which was sufficiently intense. But what a point for a view we had gained! It seemed ungrateful to think of any drawback to our enjoyment. I had never been at such an elevation before, so it was no wonder that the scene appeared to me grander than anything I had yet looked upon; but Tangwald, who had been very often on the top of Monte Rosa, insisted, with chattering teeth, that our view was greatly superior to that from the higher peak. Certainly it was a point in our favour that we had that beautiful range itself before us.

Perhaps, at such a height, the first curiosity is to see how far you can look *down*. From the edge of our peak, taking care not to trust rashly to the treacherous snow, we could see Zermatt, only a few miles distant, but nearly 10,000 feet below us. It looked very distinct, though minute, and we indulged a hope that some one there might be looking at the Dom, and by the help of a telescope might discern us clustering on the extreme point. We looked down also to the left, upon the broad mass of the Fée glacier, and could easily see the Fée châteaux, but Saas and the valley above it for some distance were shut out by some lower range from our view.

But the really interesting characteristic of such a scene as that we had surrounding us, is the host of mountain peaks set in array before you. Those who speak slightly of the advantages to be gained by ascending to the highest points, do not know what it is

to see mountain tops spread out beneath you, almost like the stars of heaven for multitude. The greater ranges rise in mighty curves and backbones, ridged with shining points, and give distinction to the scene; but in that country of Alps, wherever you look there is a field of mountains. The higher you rise, the more magnificent is the panorama you command. And there is no straining of the eyesight here, to pick out some town or natural object which you ought to see but cannot. You give up the plains at once, and the mountains are visible enough. Northwards, we had the Bernese Oberland in full view. The second mountain of that group, the Aletschhorn, which deserves to be climbed for the view it must command, looks well from the south; and is backed by the Jungfrau and its neighbours, with the Finsteraarhorn a little way on the right. Westwards, we have our friend the Weisshorn separated from us by the narrow valley of St. Nicholas. We cannot see Randa, but we scan the whole side of the opposite mountain, and we determine what would be the best route for an ascent. There are fine mountains south of the Weisshorn, but we look over them, and see the Combin standing out boldly, and beyond that the Mont Blanc range, very compact and distinct. Then we come round to the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa, and look over into Italy, where ranges of Apennines bound our view. Eastwards, we have a broad scene of less distinguishable mountains.

If I were to fill in the catalogue, however, of which I have given the most important names, I could not impress the scene on the reader's mind. I must be content with protesting that there is a peculiar charm in such a view, which secures every one who ascends a high mountain in fine weather from being disappointed; although, it must be admitted, he may have to set against his pleasure considerable fatigue, and what is more disagreeable, extreme cold. We took some mouthfuls as we stood, but agreed it was no convenient place for a meal. Before leaving the summit we plunged our signpost firmly into the snow, and wrapped a blue apron round the projecting branches, which gave it something of the form of a cross; and, having endeavoured to secure the permanence of this our mark for a few days, we adjusted the rope for our descent.

I cannot at all agree with those travellers who think that any part of a descent is worse than the ascent. It seems to me always easier to come down than to go up; but when you are upon snow the difference is something marvellous. On the Dom, as on the

Finsteraarhorn, you can choose, for considerable distances, between rocks and snow; therefore, if you struggle up on the solid rock, you will be sure to come plunging or sliding down the soft snow. Looking cautiously before us, we descended at a rapid rate, and scarcely paused till we arrived, hot and breathless, at our breakfasting place. There we again rested; and from this point we followed exactly the same path by which we had ascended in the morning. I believe we took each way the best and shortest route, as indeed the time of our excursion would indicate. Our pace quickened as we got gradually nearer to Randa; and when we again entered the curé's parlour his clock was at twenty minutes past four. We had, therefore, been absent fourteen hours and ten minutes.

Of course, we had to give an account of our proceedings to our worthy host and some of the other good folks of Randa. We rested and conversed for about half an hour, and then started for Zermatt, which we reached in time for the evening *table d'hôte*, to which there was one traveller at least who did justice. I need not say that we were welcomed with kind congratulations. Every community has its own public interests, and a population of guides naturally finds its account in any event which gives it an additional hold upon tourists. I believe Johann zum Taugwald was regarded, in a small way, as a patriotic citizen who had advanced the glory of his commonwealth, and I am sure his own quiet satisfaction was that of a member of his village society rather than of an ambitious individual. I make this remark, because there is a peculiar interest in the simple unartificial *socialism*, or linking together of private fortunes, which prevails in the Alpine valleys. Sometimes, as at Chamouni, in the guide-system maintained there, the principle is strained till it threatens to break; but generally it does not interfere unreasonably with the convenience of travellers; and for the people themselves it must be very healthy and beneficial.

I am sorry to confess that I have no scientific observation to contribute to geology or botany as the result of my day's climbing. It would, however, be rather hard if an unscientific lawyer or parson out on his holiday were to be forbidden to ascend lofty mountains; nor can I quite agree with the censors of such tourists that their ascents may not be useful or interesting to any besides themselves. The particulars which it is in our power to give may be of some service to travellers better instructed than ourselves,

and may spread the taste for a pursuit which is as healthful to the heart and mind as it is to the body. The fellow-feeling which animates all who have once become interested in Alpine travel is my excuse and my encouragement for offering the foregoing account of an expedition so deficient in adventure, and so barren of scientific fruit, but proving the accessibility of the elevated centre of one of the finest Alpine panoramas.

I have only to add that the height of the Dom, according to Berchtold, is 14,941 English feet above the level of the sea. It may be mentioned, by way of comparison, that the heights of Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa are, respectively, 15,784 and 15,223 English feet. The valley of St. Nicholas, at the bridge of Randa, is, by Schlagintweit's measurement, at a height of 4,754 feet, so that the height to be ascended—the village being a little above the bridge—is almost accurately 10,000 English feet.

J. LLEWELYN DAVIES.

NOTE BY THE EDITOR.

The range of the Mischabel-Hörner, which is also known as the Saas Grat, includes four peaks, arranged in a line nearly due north and south, and separated from each other by a nearly equal interval of a little more than an English mile. Passing from south to north, the names of these peaks most generally adopted are—the Täschhorn, the Dom, the Gasenriedhorn, and the Kleine Mischabelhorn. M. Berchtold, the Canon of Sion, to whom we are indebted for careful measurements of the Valais Alps, has given the advantage of four metres, or thirteen feet, to the Täschhorn, over its twin-brother the Dom. Both are decidedly higher than the two northern peaks. The general opinion, however, both at Zermatt and Saas, is in favour of the superior claims of the Dom, and in that opinion M. Gottlieb Studer concurs. There remains, therefore, some shade of doubt which of the two may rightfully claim supremacy among the Alps exclusively belonging to Switzerland. It is certain that the difference between them cannot amount to more than a few feet. A small spirit level, provided with a sight, an instrument easily carried in the pocket, if carefully observed, would often help to settle such questions in regard to points moderately near together, of which the distance is approximately known. In the "Suggestions for Alpine Travellers," included in this volume, I have entered more fully upon this subject.