PEAKS, PASSES, AND GLACIERS.

SECOND SERIES.

VOL. II.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BERNESE, VALAISIAN, AND URNER OBERLAND.

I. ASCENT OF THE SCHRECKHORN.

By the Rev. Leslie Stephen, M.A.

Each of the three best known glacier systems of the Alps is distinguished by characteristic beauties. The mighty dome of Mont Blanc, soaring high above the ranges of aiguilles, much as St. Paul's rises above the spires of the city churches, is perhaps the noblest of single mountain masses. The intricate labyrinths of ice and snow that spread westwards from the Monte Rosa, amongst the high peaks of the Pennine range, form the greatest stretch of continuous glacier in the Alps, whilst the unrivalled obelisk of the Matterhorn rises like a monument from their centre. But neither Chamounix nor Zermatt can, in my opinion, show such a variety of the noblest scenery as the Bernese Oberland. The stupendous fortress of mountains whose battlements overhang in mid air the villages of Lauterbrunnen and Grindelwald; the pasturages of the Scheideck and Wengern Alps; the broad streams of ice, many miles in length, that pour down the gentler southern slopes towards the valley of the Rhone; and the seven great summits that overlook unnumbered hills and plains throughout the whole of Switzerland, compose a mass of incomparable beauty and grandeur. Four of these summits, the Jungfrau, the Mönch, the Eiger, and the Wetterhorn, stand like watch-towers on the very edge of the cliffs. Of these the Jungfrau was first ascended by

some peasants in 1828; the Mönch*, by Dr. Porges, of Vienna, in 1857; the Eiger, by an English gentleman in 1858; and the Wetterhorn, by Mr. Wills in 1854. The three other summits stand in the very heart of the snow-fields. Of these the Finsteraarhorn was first scaled by Herr Solger, in 1841; and the Aletschhorn, by Mr. Tuckett, in 1859. The Schreckhorn still remained unconquered till 1861.

The Schreckhörner form a ridge of rocky peaks, forking into two ridges about its centre, the ground-plan of which may thus be compared to the letter Y. The foot of this Y represents the northern extremity, and is formed by the massive Mettenberg, whose broad faces of cliff divide the two glaciers at Grindelwald. Half-way along the stem rises the point called the Little Schreckhorn. The two chief summits rise close together at the point where the Y forks. The thicker of the two branches represents the black line of cliffs running down to the Abschwung; the thinner represents the range of the Strahlhörner, crossed by the Strahleck pass close to its origin. Mr. Anderson, in the former volume of "Peaks and Passes," describes an attempt to ascend the Schreckhorn, made by him under most unfavourable circumstances; one of his guides, amongst other misfortunes, being floored by a falling stone, and he and his guides together nearly swept away by an avalanche. His courage, however, did not meet with the reward it fully deserved, as bad weather made it impossible for him to attempt more than the Little Schreckhorn, the summit of which he succeeded in reaching. A more successful attack had

* A Countess Dora d'Istria has published an account of an ascent of the Mönch, previous to this. Though I should be sorry to be uncivil to a lady, I must confess that the account bears strong internal evidence of describing an ascent to a point which was not the top. Inquiries on the spot have confirmed the truth of this conjecture.

THE SCHRECKHORN FROM THE GRINDELWALD GLACIER.

been made by MM. Desor and Escher von der Linth, in 1842. Starting from the Strahleck, they had climbed, with considerable difficulty, to a ridge leading apparently to the summit of the Schreckhorn. After following this for some distance, they were brought to a stand-still by a sudden depression some ten or twelve feet in depth, which was succeeded by a very sharp arête of snow. Whilst they were hesitating what to do, one of the guides, in spite of a warning shriek from his companions, and without waiting for a rope, suddenly sprang down so as to alight astride of the ridge. They followed him more cautiously, and, animated to the task by a full view of the summit, forced their way slowly along a very narrow and dangerous arête. They reached the top at last triumphantly, and, looking round at the view, discovered, to their no small disgust, that to the north of them was another summit. They had indeed proved, by a trigonometrical observation, that that on which they stood was the highest; but, in spite of trigonometry, the northern peak persisted in looking down on them. As it was cut off from them by a long and impracticable arête some three hundred yards (in my opinion more) in length, they could do nothing but return, and obtain another trigonometrical observation. This time the northern peak came out twenty-seven metres (about eighty-eight feet) the higher. It was, moreover, to all appearance, the harder piece of work. As Ulrich Lauener (who, I must admit, is rather given to croaking) once said to me, it was like the Matterhorn, big above and little below, and he would have nothing to do with it. I resolved, however, to try to conquer this last stronghold of the Oberland mountains.

Accordingly, on the night of the 13th August, 1861, I found myself the occupant of a small hole under a big rock near the northern foot of the Strahleck. Owing to

bad diplomacy, I was encumbered with three guides,—Peter and Christian Michel, and Christian Kaufmann,—all of them good men, but one, if not two, too many. As the grey morning light gradually stole into our burrow, I woke up with a sense of lively impatience—not diminished, perhaps, by the fact that one side of me seemed to be permanently impressed with every knob in a singularly cross-grained bit of rock, and the other with every bone in Kaufmann's body. Swallowing a bit of bread, I declared myself ready. An early start is of course always desirable before a hard day's work, but it rises to be almost agreeable after a hard night's rest. This did not seem to be old Peter Michel's opinion. He is the very model of a short, thick, broad mountaineer, with the constitution of a piece of seasoned oak; a placid, not to say stolid, temper; and an illimitable appetite. He sat opposite me for some half-hour, calmly munching bread and cheese, and meat and butter, at four in the morning, on a frozen bit of turf, under a big stone, as if it were the most reasonable thing a man could do under the circumstances, and as though such things as the Schreckhorn and impatient tourists had no existence. A fortnight before, as I was told, he had calmly sat out all night, half-way up the Eiger, with a stream of freezing water trickling over him, accompanied by an unlucky German, whose feet received frost-bites on that occasion, from which they were still in danger, while old Michel had not a chilblain. At last, however, about half-past four, we got deliberately under weigh. Our first two or three hours' work was easy enough. The two summits of the Schreckhorn form as it were the horns of a vast crescent of precipice, which runs round a secondary glacier, on the eastern bank of the Grindelwald glacier. This glacier is skirted on the south by the ordinary Strahleck route, and is marked on the accompanying map. The cliffs above

it are for the most part bare of snow, and scored by deep trenches or gullies, the paths of avalanches, and of the still more terrible showers of stones, which, in the later part of the day, may be seen every five minutes discharged down the flank of the mountain. I was very sanguine that we should reach the arête connecting the two peaks. I felt doubtful, however, whether we could pass along it to the summit, as it might be interrupted by some of those gaps which so nearly stopped Desor's party. Old Michel indeed had declared, on a reconnoitring expedition I had made with him the day before, that he believed, "*steif und fest*," that we could get up. But as we climbed the glacier my faith in Michel and Co. began to sink, not from any failing in their skill as guides, but from the enormous appetites which they still chose to exhibit. Every driblet of water seemed to be inseparably connected in their minds with a drop of brandy, and every flat stone suggested an open-air picnic. Perhaps my impatience rather exaggerated their delinquencies in this direction; but it was not till past seven, when we had deposited the heavy part of our baggage, and, to my delight, most of the provisions, on a ledge near the foot of the rocks, that they fairly woke up and settled to their work. From that time I had no more complaints to make. We soon got hard and steadily at work, climbing the rocks which form the southern bank of one of the deeply carved gullies of which I have spoken. It seemed clear to me that the summit of the Schreckhorn, which was invisible to us at present, was on the other side of this ravine, its northern bank being in fact formed by a huge buttress running straight down from the peak. This buttress was cut into steps, by cliffs so steep as to be perfectly impracticable; in fact, I believe that in one place it absolutely overhung. It was therefore necessary to keep to the other side; but I felt an unpleasant suspicion that

the head of the ravine might correspond with an impracticable gap in the arête.

Meanwhile we had simply a steady piece of rock-climbing. Christian Michel, a first-rate cragsman, led the way. Kaufmann followed, and, as we clung to the crannies and ledges of the rock, relieved his mind by sundry sarcasms as to the length of arm and leg which enabled me to reach points of support without putting my limbs out of joint. The rocks were steep and slippery, and occasionally covered with a coat of ice. We were frequently flattened out against the rocks, like beasts of ill repute nailed to a barn, with fingers and toes inserted into four different cracks which had been obviously arranged without the slightest regard to the convenience of the human figure. Still our progress though slow was steady, and would have been agreeable if only our minds could have been at ease with regard to that detestable ravine. We could not obtain a glimpse of the final ridge, and we might be hopelessly stopped at the last step. Meanwhile, as we looked round, we could see the glacier basins gradually sinking, and the sharp pyramid of the Finsteraarhorn shooting upwards above them. Gradually, too, the distant ranges of Alps climbed higher and higher up the southern horizon. From Mont Blanc to Monte Rosa, and away to the distant Bernina, ridge beyond ridge rose into the sky, with many a well-remembered old friend amongst them. In two or three hours' work we had risen high enough to look over the ridge connecting the two peaks, down the long reaches of the Aar glaciers. A few minutes afterwards we caught sight of a row of black dots creeping over the snows of the Strahleck. With a telescope I could just distinguish a friend whom I had met the day before at Grindelwald. A loud shout from us brought back a faint reply or echo. We were already high above the pass. Still, however,

that last arête remained pertinaciously invisible. A few more steps, if steps is a word applicable to progression by hands as well as feet, placed us at last on the great ridge of the mountain, looking down upon the Lauteraar Sattel. But the ridge rose on our right hand into a kind of knob, which allowed only a few yards of it to be visible. Taking a drop of brandy all round, we turned to the assault, feeling that a few yards more would decide the question. On our right hand, the long slopes of snow ran down towards the Lauteraar Sattel, as straight as if the long furrows on their surface had been drawn by a ruler. They were in a most ticklish state. The snow seemed to be piled up like loose sand, at the highest angle of rest, and almost without cohesion. The fall of a pebble or a handful of snow was sufficient to detach a layer, which slid smoothly down the long slopes with a long low hiss. Clinging, however, to the rocks which formed the crest of the ridge, we dug our feet as far as possible into the older snow beneath, and crept cautiously along. As soon as there was room on the arête, we took to the rocks again, and began, with breathless expectation, climbing the knob of which I have spoken. The top of the mountain could not remain much longer concealed. A few steps more, and it came full in view. The next step revealed to me not only the mountain top, but a lovely and almost level ridge which connected it with our standing-point. We had won the victory, and, with a sense of intense satisfaction, attacked the short ridge which still divided us from our object. It is melancholy to observe the shockingly bad state of repair of the higher peaks, and the present was no exception to the rule. Loose stones rattled down the mountain sides at every step, and the ridge itself might be compared to the ingenious contrivance which surmounts the walls of gaols with a nicely balanced pile of

loose bricks,— supposing the interstices in this case to be filled with snow. We crept, however, cautiously along the parapet, glancing down the mighty cliffs beneath us, and then, at two steps more, we proudly stepped (at 11.40) on to the little level platform which forms the "aller höchste Spitze" of the Schreckhorn.

I need hardly remark that our first proceeding was to give a hearty cheer, which was faintly returned by the friends who were still watching us from the Strahleck. My next was to sit down, in the warm and perfectly calm summer air, to enjoy a pipe, and the beauties of nature, whilst my guides erected a cairn of stones round a large black flag which we had brought up to confute cavillers. Mountain tops are always more or less impressive in one way,— namely, from the giddy cliffs which surround them. But the more distant prospects from them may be divided into two classes: those from the Wetterhorn, Jungfrau, or Monte Rosa, and other similar mountains, which include on one side the lowland countries, forming a contrast to the rough mountain ranges; and those from mountains standing, not on the edge, but in the very centre of the regions of frost and desolation. The Schreckhorn (like the Finsteraarhorn) is a grand example of this latter kind. Four great glaciers seem to radiate from its base. The great Oberland peaks— the Finsteraarhorn, Jungfrau, Mönch, Eiger, and Wetterhorn — stand round in a grim circle, showing their bare faces of precipitous rock across the dreary wastes of snow. At your feet are the huge basins of snow from which the glaciers of Grindelwald draw the supplies that enable them to descend far into the regions of cultivated land, trickling down like great damp icicles, of insignificant mass compared with these mighty reservoirs. You are in the centre of a whole district of desolation, such as that to which I presume the hills of England would be reduced if it were

not for that blessed Gulf Stream. After an hour's contemplation of the view, I added a few touches to our cairn, and then turned to the descent. It is a general opinion, with which I do not agree, that the descent of slippery or difficult rock is harder than the ascent. My guides, however, seemed to be fully convinced of it; or perhaps they merely wished to prove, in opposition to my sceptical remarks, that there was some use in having three guides. Accordingly, whilst Christian Michel led the way, old Peter and Kaufmann persisted in planting themselves steadily in some safe nook, and then hauling at the rope round my waist. By a violent exertion and throwing all my weight on to the rope, I gradually got myself paid slowly out, and descended to the next ledge, feeling as if I should be impressed with a permanent groove to fix ropes to in future. The process was laborious, not to say painful, and I was sincerely glad when the idea dawned upon the good fellows that I might be trusted to use my limbs more freely.

I was once still more annoyed by an old guide on the Bietschhorn, who had solemnly informed me that his name was in The Book, *i. e.* Murray. Having done nothing all day to maintain his reputation, he seized a favourable opportunity as we were descending a narrow arête of snow, and suddenly clutching my coat-tails, on pretence of steadying me, brought me with a jerk into a sitting position. My urgent remonstrances only produced bursts of *patois*, mixed with complacent chucklings, and I was forced to resign myself to the fate of being pulled backwards, all in a heap, about every third step along the arête. The process gave the old gentleman such evident pleasure that I ceased to complain.

On the present occasion my guides were far more reasonable, and I would never complain of a little extra caution. We were soon going along steadily enough,

though the slippery nature of the rocks, and the precautions necessary to avoid dislodging loose stones, made our progress rather slow. At length, however, with that instinct which good guides always show, and which amateurs are most deficient in, we came exactly to the point where we had left our knapsacks. I have often been so much puzzled by the extreme difference in the appearance of the same rocks when ascending or descending, that I never fail to remark the skill which practice gives the natives in hitting off a path which they have once taken. We were now standing close to the ravine I have mentioned. Suddenly I heard a low hiss close by me, and looking round saw a stream of snow shooting rapidly down the gully, like a long white serpent. It was the most insidious enemy of the mountaineer — an avalanche; not such as thunders down the cliffs of the Jungfrau, ready to break every bone in your body, but the calm malicious avalanche which would take you quietly off your legs, wrap you up in a sheet of snow, and bury you in a crevasse for a few hundred years, without making any noise about it. The stream was so narrow and well defined that I could easily have stepped across it; still it was rather annoying, inasmuch as immediately below us was a broad fringe of snow ending in a bergschrund, the whole being in what travellers used to represent as the normal condition of mountain snow — such that a stone, or even a hasty expression, rashly dropped, would probably start an avalanche. Christian Michel showed himself equal to the occasion. Choosing a deep trench in the snow — the channel of one of these avalanches — from which the upper layer of snow was cut away, he turned his face to the slope and dug his toes deeply into the firmer snow beneath. We followed, trying in every way to secure our hold of the treacherous footing. Every little bit of snow that we kicked aside started a young avalanche on its

own account. By degrees, however, we reached the edge of a very broad and repulsive-looking bergschrund. Unfixing the rope, we gave Kaufmann one end, and sent him carefully across a long and very shaky-looking bridge of snow. He got safely across, and we cautiously followed him, one by one. As the last man reached the other side, we felt that our dangers were over. It was now about five o'clock.

We agreed to descend by the Strahleck. Great delay was caused by our discovering that even on the nearly level surface there was a sheet of ice formed, which required many a weary step to be cut. It was long before we could reach the rocks and take off the rope for a race home down the slopes of snow.

As we reached our burrow we were gratified with one of the most glorious sights of the mountains. A huge cloud, which looked at least as lofty as the Eiger, rested with one extremity of its base on the Eiger and the other on the Mettenberg, shooting its white pinnacles high up into the sunshine above. Through the mighty arched gateway thus formed, we could see far over the successive ranges of inferior mountains, standing like flat shades one behind another. The lower slopes of the Mettenberg glowed with a deep blood-red, and the more distant hills passed through every shade of blue, purple, and rose-coloured hues, into the faint blue of the distant Jura, with one gleam of green sky beyond. In the midst of the hills, the lake of Thun lay, shining like gold. A few peals of thunder echoed along the glacier valley, telling us of the storm that was raging over Grindelwald.

It was half-past seven when we reached our lair. We consequently had to pass another night there; a necessity which would have been easily avoided by a little more activity in the morning. With this exception, I had every

reason to be satisfied with my guides, especially with Christian Michel, who is a first-rate man.

Perhaps I may be allowed to add a note on the geography of the Oberland. There is, I suppose, no better known pass than the Strahleck, and yet it is laid down entirely wrong in every map that I have seen. The ridge joining the Finsteraarhorn and Schreckhorn has no existence, as I can testify after careful observations from the Finsteraarhorn, Schreckhorn, and Oberaarhorn. The spur of the Schreckhorn, called Strahlhörner, runs towards the Oberaarhorn or nearly so, but does not join it. Thus the great basin of névé under the Finsteraarhorn communicates with unbroken glacier, both with the Grindelwald and Aar glaciers. The old Strahleck pass used (as I have been told by M. Anderegg) to lie across this basin.* It was changed for the route over the Strahlhörner, because the glacier became too much crevassed near the Oberaarhorn.

* See map in this edition.