The Rothhorn from Zermatt. By C. T. Dent.

BEGINNING an article with an apology is like beginning dinner with a bad oyster—it gives an unpleasant flavour to all that follows; but though one is certainly needed for an account of a mountain ascent, which was not entirely original, but only taken from a new side,* I must refuse it for the reason mentioned above. Our party had reached Zermatt on August 30, 1872, having come from Chamonix by the high-level route.† Wishing to take advantage of the fine weather, I was casting about for something really good to do, and had determined that that something should be a rock-climb. For it is on the rock mountains of Switzerland that the acmé of enjoyment is to be found. I by no means wish to disparage snow-walking; but if a comparison be instituted between them, I take it that it is infinitely in favour of the rock. Of course, it may be argued that there are few mountains where you do not get both combined; but looking only at the chief difficulties a mountain presents, I would roughly classify them, according as these consist in rock or snow obstacles. For, as a matter of fact, it is in this way that mountaineers do classify the peaks. A man may encounter serious difficulties in the way of bergschrunds, steep couloirs, soft snow, &c.; but if he meet with rocks which compel him to put forth greater energies and perseverance than the snow required, he will set his climb down as a difficult rock one; simply, of course, because the idea of difficulty which is most vividly impressed on his mind is in connection with that portion of his climb; and *vice versâ*. This by the way, however. An undeniable drawback to snow climbing is its monotony; the long series of steps that have to be cut at times, or the dreary wading for hours through soft powdery snow, do not always sink themselves in the pleasure of overcoming the difficulties of a crevasse, reaching the summit of a peak, or the excitement of a good glissade. It is the diversity of obstacles that meet one in rock-climbing,

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* The Rothhorn was ascended for the first time from Zinal by Mr. L. Stephen, who has described the expedition in the *Alpine Journal*, vol. ii. p. 67.

† To those who take the Col du Mont Rouge as one of their passes, I would recommend the ascent of the Ruinette from the Col, or rather by the northern face of the mountain. It is a stiff rock-climb. I descended by the same face on to the Glacier de Gétroz, the ascent taking in all just five hours to accomplish.

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the uncertainty as to what may turn up next, the doubt as to the possibility of finding the friendly crack and the apposite ledge on some huge tower of rock one has to storm, that constitute some of its main charms. Every step is different; every muscle is called into play as one is now flattened against the rough slabs, now abnormally stretched from one hold to another, or gathered into a heap like the conventional pictures of the ibex—and every step can be recalled afterwards with pleasure and amusement as the mountain is climbed over again in imagination.

But there is more than this. It is on the rocks alone that an amateur can and must exercise his own powers, and not be wholly dependent on his guides. On snow the amateur is but an impediment, an extra burden, as has often been said, to the guides: they have to hack out huge steps for his benefit; he is entirely dependent on them for steering clear of avalanches, rotten snow-bridges and the like, while the share he usually takes in a snow ascent is either counselling retreat, insisting on progress, indicating the route he selects, which is never by any chance the right one, or the highly intellectual and arithmetical exercise of counting the number of steps hewn out to ensure his locomotion in the proper direction.

Place your amateur on rocks, on the other hand; here the probability is that a slip will entail no unpleasant consequences to anyone but the slipper. The power of sustaining a sudden strain is so enormously increased when the hands have a firm grip of the rock, that the amateur can, if he please, sprawl and scramble unaided over difficult places, with satisfaction to himself, and in the majority of places no risk to anyone else; that is, as soon as he has fully persuaded the guides (no easy task, I admit,) that the process of pulling vehemently at the rope, which probably encircles his waist in a slip knot, when he is 'ganz fest,' is alike detrimental to his digestion and his equilibrium. Then will he find himself an unit in the party; a burden still, and hindrance to some guides, but nothing to what he was on the snow.

It is, too, to my mind at least, a huge satisfaction to look back on a difficult rockridge or cliff, and feel that it has been climbed with no other assistance than that which Nature provided herself; to feel, as it were, that one has successfully translated oneself over a stiff rock passage set by the female examiner (such things may yet be) Nature, without surreptitious aid from one's neighbour, in the shape of steps. Then, again, snow mountains are so cruelly inconsistent. One year every step costs much labour and toil, and the next, perhaps,

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the peak will allow itself to be conquered in one tenth of the time.

Far be it from me to argue that there is no pleasure to be derived from snow-climbing; it is of climbing *per se* that I have spoken. After all, every one has his own opinions; but this I would say, that he who has not tasted the pleasures of a really difficult and successful rock-climb—especially if it be a new one—knows not what the Alps can do towards enabling him to catch that 'mental Will-o'-the-Wisp,' Content.

An expedition of the magnitude and difficulty we desired was suggested at once by my guide, and that was, to climb the Rothhorn from the Zermatt side. Mr. G. A. Passingham, of Cambridge, was at the time staying at the Monte Rosa hotel, with his two guides, and it was soon arranged that we should combine our forces. However, when I got down to Zermatt, on September 2, after a pleasant ascent of Monte Rosa, I found that he had but just returned from a one day ascent of the Matterhorn, and we accordingly put it off till September 5. The next day we chiefly spent in surveying the mountain with a telescope, by whose aid I succeeded in discovering a perfectly impracticable route to the summit, to my own entire satisfaction; the guides, meanwhile, were sent up to reconnoitre. This they did thoroughly, and reported that with fine weather it would be difficult, but possible. Much pleased, we made the necessary arrangements, and turned in early at the Monte Rosa, as we had determined to do the whole excursion in one day, considering that a short rest in the comparatively luxurious beds provided by M. Seiler, was infinitely preferable to a more prolonged one, with probably undesirable company, in a châlet. As we assembled in the little dingy guides' room, at 2 A.M. on the morning of September 5, to superintend the packing of our provisions, it struck both Passingham and myself that if the success of our expedition was to be dependent on the excellence of our guides, it was a foregone conclusion. Franz Andermatten, tough, compact, and weatherbeaten; Alexander Burgener, the embodiment of strength, endurance, and pluck; Ferdinand Imseng, of activity and perseverance—formed a trio that for an expedition like the one we were about to undertake, it would be hard to match. Our porter, too,—who was truly an exception to that much maligned class, whose appetites, dirt, and incapacity, have been so frequently dragged forth and sported with—worked well, and proved of great service; and, moreover, carried a very considerable load over difficult places with great unconcern. At 3 A.M. we started with a lantern, and toiled up the narrow valley running

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north from Zermatt, which eventually leads up to the foot of the mountain we were making for. Having journeyed for about half an hour, it was discovered that the telescope had been left behind. Franz instantly started off to get it, and we stumbled along the dark, winding little path. Arrived at the opening out of the valley, we called our first halt. Here we waited an hour for our guide; but as no answer was returned to our frequent shouts, we agreed to give him up, and proceeded. Presently, however, a distant yell attracted our attention, and looking up, we made out the scarlet countenance appertaining to our guide smiling benignly on us from the top of the moraine on our left. Stimulated by this apparition, we pushed on with great vigour, clambered up the moraine, whose extreme want of cohesion necessitated a treadmill style of progression, and having reached the top, passed along it to the snow. Here we bore first to the right, and then working round, made straight for the sharp-topped buttress which juts out at a right angle from the mountain itself. At a patch of rocks at the commencement of the arête, we disencumbered ourselves of superfluous baggage, and buttoned ourselves up as tight as was convenient, after the manner of mountaineers generally when a stiff climb faces them. My companion arrayed himself in a strange woollen garment and head-dress to match; but I, knowing full well that the exceedingly powerful telescope, with possibly a critical eye applied to it, was doubtless directed on us from the Riffel, merely exchanged my ancient hat for a species of woollen extinguisher.

It is a grand moment that just when the real difficulty of the expedition opens out; as you grasp the axe firmly, settle into the rope, and brace up the muscles for the effort of the hour. On a fine day, when your peak towers clear and bright above you, when you feel that at last you are on the point of deciding whether you shall achieve, or fail in achieving a long-wished for success, or what I may perhaps be allowed to call a cutting-out expedition: it is that moment which is probably the most pleasurable of the whole expedition; the excitement on getting near the top rather fades away than increases, and you clamber as calmly often on to the actual summit of a peak as on to the knifeboard of an omnibus.

Dividing into two parties of three each, we passed rapidly along the snow arête which abuts against the east face of the mountain. The cliffs of the Rothhorn, which seem almost to be overhanging, are from this point magnificent, and on our right, too, the precipice was a sheer one. Without much difficulty we clambered up the face of the mountain, taking a zig-

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zag course to the large couloir, which is distinctly visible from the other side of the valley, and which terminates above in a deep jagged notch in the arête not far from the summit. The climbing here became more difficult, and it was found necessary to cross the gully several times, in doing which we were exposed to some risk from the falling stones which are here tolerably frequent. For the greater part of the time we kept to the left or south side. We reached the notch, and now looked right down upon the commencement of the Glacier de Durand, whose snow-fields are singularly wild-looking and much crevassed. Turning to the right, we ascended a short distance along the arête, and then a halt was called. My companion and I took refuge from a biting wind beneath some rocks, while the guides proceeded to arrange a length of 100 feet of rope on the rocks above us, to assist us on our return. This process sorely tried our patience, and we were right glad when the signal was given to move on again. It was now necessary to leave the arête, descend for a little, and then pass on to the west face of the mountain, and by this face to ascend and gradually work round to the arête again. This was the most difficult part of the whole ascent, but we worked ourselves slowly along, the rope being quite unnecessary. Reaching the ridge again, our progress was somewhat faster, and we felt now that the peak was as good as won. A huge inverted pyramid of rock that tried rather successfully to look like the top gave us a little difficulty in surmounting it; but this was the last obstacle, and at 1.30 P.M. we stood on the summit, enjoying a most magnificent view in every direction.

Our stay there was, however, a short one; and having added a proper number of stones to the cairn, we descended rapidly to the point where it was necessary to quit the ridge. Down the first portion of the steep rock-slope we passed with the utmost caution, some of the blocks of stone being treacherously loose.

We had arrived at the most difficult part of the whole climb—the descent of the nastiest piece of rock I ever attempted to pass over; the smooth, almost unbroken face of the slope scarcely affording us any foothold, and our security almost entirely depending on the rope we had laid down in the ascent. Imseng was far below working his way round to the arête; suddenly I heard a shout from above; Franz and I both glanced up at once: a large flat slab of rock that had afforded us good hold in the ascent, but proved to have been only frozen in to a shallow basin of ice, had been dislodged by the slightest touch from above, and was coming straight at us.

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It seemed an age, though it could not have had to fall more than about ten feet, before it reached me: just above me it turned its course slightly. Franz, who was close beneath me more in its direct line of descent, attempted to stop it, but it ground his hands cruelly against the rock, and passed on swiftly straight to Imseng. A yell from us hardly awoke him to the danger; the slab slid on faster and faster; but, just as we expected to see our guide swept away, it gave a bound for the first time, and, as with a startled expression he flung himself against the rock face, it leapt up, and flying by within a few inches of his head thundered disappointed down below. A moment or two of silence followed, and then a modified cheer from Imseng announced his safety, as he looked up at us with a serious expression on his face. 'Comment ça va, Franz?' 'Terriblement cassé,' was the answer; and in truth, though his escape had been a remarkably lucky one, his hands were badly cut about and bruised. I may have unduly exaggerated the escape we had, but I simply give honestly the impression which I strongly suspect was left at the moment on all our minds. I do not think that by the lapse of time I have brought myself to consider the danger greater than it really was, when I say that had the rock not turned its course just before it reached me, and bounded from the face of the mountain over Imseng's head, one or more of the party must infallibly have been swept away: Franz and I might possibly have been held up by those above, but Imseng was unroped at the time. I am ready enough to admit that the place was an exceptional one; in fact, I never saw a stone glide for such a distance on rock without a bound, but with the circumstances still fresh in my memory, I cannot bring myself to consider falling stones such an imaginary danger as they are often made out to be.

Without the aid of the rope, at which in a short-sighted spirit I had scoffed in the morning, and which I used more than anybody else in the descent, it would certainly have been most difficult to have descended at all, and quite out of the question to have done so, remaining respectably apparelled at the end. A zig-zagging crack, which was too narrow to admit of anything but a most uncomfortable position, gave us the only hold for our feet we could rely on: my gloveless hands while clutching at the rope slowly cooled down to that unpleasant temperature at which one ceases to know for certain whether they are attached to one's arms or not, and I began to wish we had gone down the Lo Besso side of the mountain. However, Imseng, leaving a considerable and important portion of his raiment here and there on the rocks, wormed himself along,

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and finally reached the end of our rope and a position of comparative safety. We followed his example slowly, and having joined him, seated ourselves on some inappropriate rocks, and finished our food. Climbing carefully down the E. face of the mountain we reached the snow arête, and passed rapidly along it, our spirits rising exuberantly as we looked back on the conquered peak. Having achieved a series of gymnastic exercises, after the manner of cabmen, the effect of which was to convert the mottled purple of our countenances into a more pleasing shade of colour, we descended rapidly to the rocks where we had left our baggage. Here the use of tobacco was considered expedient, and my companion accordingly produced a curious looking substance, purchased in the valley, which strongly resembled odds and ends of brown paper. This however he declared to be excellent, and it certainly, having been lit after a frightful struggle, did induce a state of calm enjoyment. In fact,

> We soared above
> Dull earth in those ambrosial clouds, like Jove,
> And from our own empyrean height
> Looked down upon the world with calm delight.

Descending rapidly, we reached Zermatt at 7 P.M. precisely, in an exultant frame of mind, discontinuous suits of clothes, and a preposterous state of hunger.

The way our guides worked was first rate. No doubt a little party spirit, the notion of taking the shine out of some of the Zermatt men, who, with a dismal incredulity, worthy of the Chamonix clan, had denied the possibility of the ascent, stimulated them to greater exertions. A desire to prove that there were men of the Saas Thal as mighty as any to be found in Switzerland (of which fact I am fully persuaded) may also have assisted. But it was evident to us that they thoroughly enjoyed—as all truly good guides do—overcoming the difficulties of what both Passingham and I agreed was the most formidable ascent we had either of us ever succeeded in making.

The whole time occupied was sixteen hours; of this an hour was wasted while we were waiting for the telescope, and three-quarters of an hour were spent in arranging the rope by the aid of which we descended. I should say, then, that in actual climbing and walking we employed rather under thirteen hours. Our descent was, however, on the whole a very rapid one.

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