

ALPINE CLIMBING—PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE. By
C. T. DENT. Read before the Alpine Club, June, 1878.

NOT very long ago, there appeared in a well-known weekly periodical* an article on the subject of the future of Alpine climbing, and therefore also of the Alpine Club. Another article, which doubtless most of those present have read, appeared almost at the same time in a popular magazine,† on the ‘Dangers of Mountaineering.’ We have, in this Club, been accustomed to attacks of this nature from time to time: attacks which have by no means impaired our vitality, but rather, like attacks of distemper, have increased our value. It would be easy enough to refute them from our point of view, or to pass them over as the vapourings of envious mortals not initiated into the mysterious pleasures of our craft. But I would not do so. Articles like these may lead or reflect public opinion, and our position with the public is not a matter to be treated lightly. Our Club, founded as it was in 1857, has increased in numbers and importance in an exceptional manner. That the numbers still increase might be taken as proof enough of its vitality as a club. But this alone will not refute the argument that the work of the Alpine Club is fast approaching its end. It were well worth while, I think, to enquire dispassionately into the truth of such an assertion.

I may seem, in what follows, to be wandering again over ground already well trodden, to be but recapitulating what has been said, and far better than I can say it, a thousand times before. But let it be noticed that I lay no claim to originality in what I write. The conditions are different from what they were. It seemed to me desirable to sound the feeling of the Club on the points hereinafter raised, the more especially that I fear a classification into Past and Present is only too true. Look back for a moment to the commencement of our Club. Think over its rise since that time. Few could have even dreamed of the wide popularity mountaineering was destined to acquire, or the influence that the establishment of the Club was to have on it. The original members, like the fish in the aquarium, can hardly have known what they were in for. But into the past history of our Club it is not for me to enter. Familiar and interesting it doubtless has long been to all of us; but now doubly so, since it has been sketched for us by the loving hand of William Longman. It is the subject of Alpine climbing that I wish to consider now.

* ‘Saturday Review.’

† ‘Temple Bar.’

Twenty years ago there were numberless heights untrodden, passes uncrossed, regions unexplored. Then, moreover, there were comparatively but few to cross the passes or climb the mountains. But those few did mighty deeds. Peak after peak fell before them, while slowly but surely they opened up new regions and brought unexpected beauties to light. Climbing, as an art, was even then in its infancy. Gradually it became more developed, and with the increase of power thus acquired came increase of confidence. But from the fact that the training in the mountaineering art was gradual, it was necessarily thorough. It is this that many of us would do well to bear in mind in these latter days. Then, of course, the charm of novelty, so dear to us, was seldom absent. But, in quest of novelty, search had to be made even then in remote regions. As a result exploration was not limited, and the climber in those days would learn more of the geography and varied beauties of the Alps in a single season than he does in the present day in five or six. As the Alpine Club grew and waxed stronger in numbers, so did the manner in which we took our pastime sensibly alter. A strong conservatism sprang up. Certain districts came to be more and more frequented. Certain peaks became popular, either because they were conveniently placed, or because there was a touch of romance connected with them, or, best reason of all, because they were difficult. And thus places like Zermatt and the *Æggischhorn* became the great centres of mountaineering, and have remained so since. The social nature of our Club brought this about. That this is so strong is matter for sincere congratulation. As long as it is so the Club must flourish. But this strong social feeling is not without its drawbacks, and I cannot but think it is a drawback if it tend to check what Mr. Hinchliff has termed cosmopolitanism in mountaineering. Mind, I am taking a broad general view of Alpine climbing in the present day. It is sometimes cast in our teeth that we have nearly exhausted the Alps. But we have, even in Switzerland itself, many large, important, and interesting regions, e.g. the *Silvretta* group, the *Rheinwald* group, or the outskirts of the *Bernina* group, almost unknown except perhaps to one or two of our members, while districts like Zermatt are absolutely done to death.

Let me turn, if need be, to the artists for confirmation. I think they will admit that they find comparatively little inducement to leave the well-worn fashionable districts, and paint scenery often far preferable from an artistic point of view. We are somewhat exacting in the conditions we impose

upon our artist friends. We demand absolutely faithful mementos, and at the same time works of art. Thus we limit their field. Let them paint, for instance, Monte Rosa or Mont Blanc from the well-known points of view, and ready purchasers may be found. But now take the same mountains from the south side—incomparably the grandest and most picturesque in both cases—and the works run a good chance of hanging neglected in the studio.

Again, while engaged in framing the programme for the Alpine season, it is customary now to hear complaints that it is difficult or even well nigh impossible to find new things 'to do.' Variety, however, of some sort must be discovered; and accordingly the old mountains are trotted out again and again, like the stag at a cockney hunt, and desperate efforts are made to find new sides and lines of ascent. This form of novelty, I agree with the writer in the 'Saturday Review,' must soon come to an end, if it has not done so already in some cases. But while we are thus exhausting in every detail these few spots, we seem to forget what numerous, what varied expeditions of a similar nature are still left to be accomplished. The absolute novelties may be few, but in many districts we could at least find expeditions of first-rate importance which have been done but seldom, and which are capable of much development. What I mean is, that, taken as a body, now-a-days we do not search out or know adequately as a whole the particular chain to which our mountaineering attention is almost exclusively directed. Of course this is not primarily a club of explorers. There are probably few of our members who have either the military genius or the elasticity of conscience which seem essential for such work in modern times. But, I maintain, we are not sufficiently cosmopolitan in the Alps themselves. We strive to find a fiftieth line of ascent up one of our old friends, and neglect many peaks or passes which, though not absolutely new, thanks to the past, are but little known to present climbers. Take, as an example, the Lepontine Alps, as described by Mr. Gardiner in a paper read before the Club last April, and printed in the present number. Here we have a good mountaineering district, lying close to much-frequented haunts, and yet almost unvisited. There may be more pleasure found in such districts, accessible at most times and in most states of the weather, than in waiting idly, as we so often have to do, for suitable days for climbing the more difficult but at the same time more hackneyed peaks. Perhaps a growing predilection for comfort and luxury in the Alps, as elsewhere, predisposes to this state of things. The

importance of the bill of provisions, and the prominent part it plays in all accounts of mountain expeditions, tend to prove that this may have some influence on our gregarious habits abroad.

The pages of the ALPINE JOURNAL, abounding, as they do, in the most varied matters of mountaineering interest, may seem to belie the assertion that the sphere of climbing is but limited. But this is more apparent than real; the broad question is not affected by the fact that every detail is hunted out and recorded for us. If the pages of the Journal fail to tempt our members to climb in other regions than the Alps proper, I can hope for little success in the same line. Still, I would fain draw attention for a moment to a question mooted in the last two numbers. These contain notes of ascents which are of the highest interest, opening up, as they do, the question of the limit, in an upward direction, of mountaineering. The question of the effect of the rarefied air in extremely high regions on mountaineers has really only lately attracted attention—a totally different thing, of course, from its effect on those who make balloon ascents. Remarks on this point, I trust, will not be thought too technical, for they bear, I hope, on the mountaineering of the future.

In these days we seem less subject to discomfort in the high Alps than in former times. De Saussure, in the account of his famous ascent of Mont Blanc in 1787, speaks a good deal of the difficulty of respiration. At his bivouac on the plateau, at an elevation of 13,300 feet, the effects of the rarefied air were much commented on. And these remarks are the more valuable inasmuch as De Saussure was an observer and a man of science, while his account, a thing rare in these days, is characterised by extreme modesty of description. The frequency of the respirations, he observes, which ensued on any exertion caused great fatigue. Now-a-days, however, mountaineers may be seen daily ascending, often untrained, at a very much faster pace than De Saussure seems to have gone; and yet the effects are scarcely felt.

Turn to the account given by Baron Man von Thielmann of his ascent of Cotopaxi, 19,735 feet above the sea. He experienced no annoyance from mountain sickness. And the still greater height has been reached (A. J. No. 59) by M. Wiener, of probably 21,224 feet. Of the effects noticed at this height I have no information.

Now the fatigue caused by the rarefied air is chiefly, I believe, the fatigue of the muscles of respiration. Any exertion will increase the number of the respirations, and con-

sequently throw additional strain on those muscles. But there is no reason why these should not be accustomed and trained to increased power just like those of any other part of the body. If, therefore, a man were to devote any time to this form of training, there seems no reason why he should not be able to ascend to very much greater heights than have yet been attained. The experiment in this form, that of gradually acclimatising—that is, training—this particular group of muscles, does not appear to have been tried, although it would be interesting, as well from the mountaineering as from the physiological point of view. He would be a bold man, I think, who would venture to set a limit to the power of man in this direction, and I myself am of opinion that most, if not all, of the great mountains could be ascended under these conditions.

After all, the accessibility of the Alps is one of their chief attractions. It is possible for a man, leaving Charing Cross Station at night (members will agree that this is a sufficiently low place), within forty-eight hours to stand on the top of Mont Blanc. Our time for the most part is limited, and we are not likely to forsake, at present, such a fascinating climbing arena as the Alps, for regions which do not offer such agreeable scope for this branch of the art. Nevertheless, if these heights are ever climbed, I trust that they will be by those who, like our members, have served a true apprenticeship in the mountains. For such, perhaps, these honours are still held in reserve. If novelties are essential to keep up the mountain enthusiasm, at any rate these offer a large enough field, or is it that they do not offer the necessary spice of risk? We must look to it if this be the case. It is the jaded appetite that demands stimulants.

It must have struck everyone conversant with recent Alpine literature, that the subject of danger from falling stones is alluded to much more frequently than was formerly the case. Now, as I have said, the expeditions principally described are ascents of old mountains from 'new sides'—to use a thoroughly Alpine phrase, for which I am almost tempted to substitute 'wrong sides.' Oftentimes the original explorers or climbers avoided these particular lines of ascent or descent from the obvious risk that would be incurred from this cause, not in the least because the difficulties of the climb appeared to be beyond their powers. Then come the ardent mountaineers of the present school, who justify their exploits on two grounds: one, that in the present improved state of the climbing art the risk run is not greater than that incurred by

the original explorers following their admittedly safer route—on this I have dilated elsewhere—another, that there is no real risk from falling stones. Now I cannot, and never will, agree with this. It is curiously illogical to argue, as some do, that, because few accidents have yet happened from this cause, there is no danger. It is mere fatalism to deny the risk. Some seem to imagine that because they have been struck by small falling stones or flying fragments, and not killed, therefore stones do not acquire sufficient momentum in falling to inflict serious injury. Let them study the mathematical laws which govern the impetus of these stones; let them examine the stones themselves, and find demonstrably that their heads are softer than these stones; then put two and two together. Surely it does not require a fatal accident to convince them. No, the risk run from this cause is a real one. That few of the most recently effected new expeditions are free from it—that those still unattempted in the Alps may be expected to be still more formidable from the same cause—is a sufficiently serious matter.

Remember, the high Alps are not the exclusive property of the Club. Where we lead, others may be, and are, induced to follow. The spirit and tendency of the Club, whatever it may be, in climbing matters, infects and guides those who do not belong to the clan, and especially those who seek to qualify themselves for admission.

What then? Are we to leave alone this fascinating region of the untried, or what little is left of it? I, at least, am not prepared to advocate this, but still think there should be some line drawn between problems of fair climbing, like, say, the Aiguille du Charmoz or the Dent du Géant, and problems which depend for solution, not upon skill, but only upon immunity from the missiles of the mountain batteries.

Closely connected with the subject in hand, so closely indeed that I cannot pass it over unnoticed, is the question of the relative value and efficiency of guides of the past and present day. On the whole there are probably as good guides now as ever there were. Amongst the younger present-day set of men are to be found as stalwart, as trusty, and as cunning mountaineers as of yore. But they are harder to discover. A swarm of inferior men has arisen, especially about Chamonix, who tend to drag down the average of excellence. Still guiding has, on the whole, improved since the days of De Saussure, when it was no uncommon thing to drop a porter into a crevasse from neglect of the rope, and fatal accidents seem only to have been avoided by a special Providence which

ordained that the man to drop in was always he who carried the ladder, whereby his fall was arrested. It has improved again since the Club first sprang into existence. But while as many first-rate guides may be found now, they have not increased proportionately to the whole number. More expeditions of first-rate importance are undertaken, for the number of mountaineers desirous of undertaking them has increased, and thus the inferior men are more often employed. Here is an element of risk which should not be overlooked.

In the old days guides were born mountaineers or born climbers—sometimes they seem to have been born acrobats. Witness the pleasant anecdote related by M. Martins of the octogenarian peasant and the phlegmatic Englishman—how the elderly man strove to exhibit his qualities as a guide—how, after divers fantastic feats, despairing of creating an impression, he hung, at last, by his feet from a slender tree that spanned a rushing torrent—how the other's phlegm was stirred, his countenance relaxed—how the aged one's abilities were recognised to the tune of one franc. Even were the present men all equally agile, this would not be enough. More than mere agility is now required; they must, or should, be truly and thoroughly guides. We have learned to appreciate the qualities of a guide as we have learned more of mountain craft.

Alpine climbing, regarded as a science, has its own individual charm. No need to carry up (I use the expression in an impersonal sense)—no need to carry up boiling-water machines, or dumpy levellers, or works on elementary trigonometry. Those who ascend mountains with no more scientific paraphernalia than a bottle with an easily removable cork, Liebig's extract, or a full tobacco pouch, can yet do well if, keeping still to their own line, they continue to develop the science of climbing. And if both guides and travellers work together in this, accidents, though they doubtless may occur, will be more and more unlikely to do so.

And what of the future? I have sought to show that we have made now-a-days more of a business, more of an art of climbing. The first enthusiasm may have passed. The more solid pleasures remain, and will remain. It is characteristic of Englishmen that they never take up anything as a pure pastime. They love to work it out in every direction, and develop whatever they have in hand to the utmost. We take our pleasure sadly. That is, we love to make the most of it. At least, in this we cultivate thoroughness. Is ours, like some

amusements, to be worked out and then laid aside? No, the Alps alone will last our time, and much more than our time; and should hereafter more cosmopolitanism creep in, the field open to climbers will be found wide enough.

Are we to leave undone that which can be done? To assert this would be to contradict myself. Emphatically I say no, but with this reservation. Let us use to the full the advantages derived from improvement in the art of climbing. One of the chiefest is, that we can recognise more fully, understand more completely, and thus minimise most successfully, the risks that are run. Expeditions without proper training, expeditions with incompetent guides, and still worse with incompetent companions, are risks run for which each one who runs them must be responsible. If climbing has been reduced to a business, then it should be looked at from a business-like point of view. We have sufficiently popularised our pastime. Let us endeavour by all means to improve it to the utmost of our power. Let this be the future of Alpine climbing, and the outlook is bright enough.

GLEANINGS FROM COGNE (II.). THE GRIVOLA AND TOUR DE ST. PIERRE. By R. PENDLEBURY.

WHEN in the company of my friends, Messrs. Cust and Taylor, and the guides Gabriel and Josef Spechtenhauser, I stood on the top of the Grivola in 1875, many a longing glance was cast down the beautiful snow ridge which forms the northern buttress of the mountain. It seemed far pleasanter to descend that way than by the wilderness of stones and screes through which the direct route to Cogne would take us. But as the pleasant pathway of the ridge would have led us, late in the day, on to a glacier of which we could only see the brow of an icefall, we gave it up and returned in the orthodox way to Cogne.

Next year, however, when my brother and I, with the same guides, were at Aosta, this ridge came into my head again. Little persuasion was needed to make the guides take kindly to my idea of ascending the northern side, as the difficulties, if there should be any, would be visible, and most likely possible to overcome: so that on Sunday, July 16, we set out for a bivouac at the foot of the peak. About half-way up the valley of Cogne, at a small hamlet where there is an inn, a short and steep side valley joins the main one. The head of this valley lies directly under the peak of the Grivola, and through it the