

SOME REMINISCENCES AND REFLECTIONS OF AN
OLD-STAGER.

BY WILLIAM MARTIN CONWAY.

(Read before the Alpine Club, February 6, 1917.)

IN Zermatt, on my first visit in 1872, I overheard an habitué lamenting at large the great changes that had taken place there in his time and how the place was no longer the simple mountaineering centre of his youth. He was one of those who had stayed at the curé's before there were any inns, and for whom ascents of the Gorner Grat, Ober Rothhorn, Hörnli, and Mettelhorn had provided almost the excitement of new expeditions. My own generation, when its day began to pass, took up a similar attitude of regret, and I dare say the young men forty years of age or thereabout who are still going strong may in their turn be feeling that Zermatt is not quite what it was to them when they began to climb some twenty years before. Each generation makes of the world more or less the kind of place they dream that it should be, and each when its day is done is often in a mood to regret the work of its own hands and to praise the conditions that obtained when it was young. I cannot entertain the present generation of climbers with aught save reminiscences, but to-day when the only activity worth anyone's while is fighting, and no one has any tale to tell of recent accomplishment in the mountains, except the mountain fighters whose mouths are closed, a spell of reminiscence may be forgiven by the members of the Club and appears to be frankly welcomed by the officer who has to provide papers for our evening meetings.

It was a lucky chance that decreed I should travel out from England on that very first occasion in company with Stogdon, Fred. Pollock, and Walter Leaf, in whose hands I beheld veritable ice-axes, ropes, and so forth—apparatus before only known to me in the illustrations in Whymper's 'Scrambles.' Stogdon was on his way to join Arthur Fairbanks, an acquaintance of my boyhood, with whom that very summer he made guideless ascents of the Jungfrau, Aletschhorn, and other peaks, to the scandal of the old-stagers. It was Fairbanks in fact who had introduced me to Stogdon, and it is to Fairbanks' talk about mountains and the climbing of them

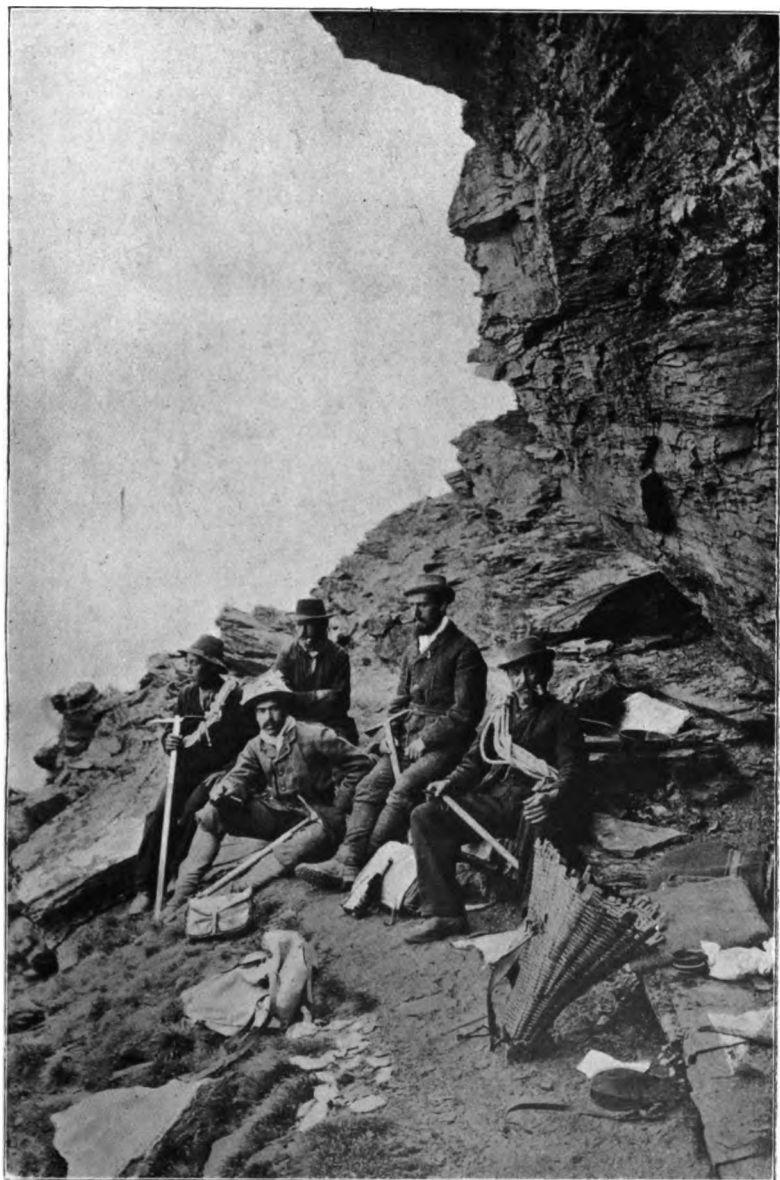
that I trace on looking backward the ultimate germ of that interest in them which has led me so long and far in the wanderings of life. His recent regretted decease after a career of much usefulness is by me specially regretted to-night. Zermatt revealed itself to my ignorant and very youthful vision just when Dent had made the first ascent of the Zinal Rothhorn from the E. and when Passingham was creating a sensation by what in those days seemed the great feat of climbing the Zermatt giants in rapid succession and each in a single day from the hotel. Even then there still lingered on an element of the eighteenth-century terror of mountains, and the spirits of the damned quite efficiently haunted the Matterhorn and other specially uncanny spots. Those who have experienced both states of mind will realise how great a difference it makes whether you possess a matter-of-fact belief that of course you can reach a certain spot or whether you are infused with a semi-instinctive suspicion that you probably cannot. The latter condition was still common among the guides.

I first met Passingham in the breakfast-room at the old Monte Rosa hotel at 2 o'clock one horribly cloudy and intermittently wet morning. He wisely went back to bed but I up the Breithorn, indifferent to weather and all else provided only the ascent could be made, for that was my one chance of 'doing a snow-mountain,' and it seemed as though my life depended on it. In a sense perhaps it did; at all events that day decided a good deal of my future. Contact with Passingham unfortunately caused me to imagine that the proper way to climb a mountain was to do it in a day, and it was some years before the fact became apparent to me that the longer you can make a good thing last the better. On the other hand, from the very first, my main interest was not in the climbing but in the scenery and the natural phenomena which Tyndall's lectures at the Royal Institution had endowed for many with a glamour of romance. Curiosity as to what is round the corner or over the other side of any obstacle is innate in most young folk. To me the Alps were a great pageant and I wished to miss no part of it. Hence clear weather and long halts were great desiderata, and I have probably spent a longer time on the tops of my mountains in proportion to their number than most of my contemporaries. Except in the 'Alps from End to End' journey and some first ascents which had in them a competitive element, I have seldom climbed in bad weather. The desire to make long halts while completing

our ascents in a single day led Scriven and me to climb at a great pace. We did the Matterhorn from Zermatt and back in time for five o'clock tea, and spent nearly three hours on the top, beside other long halts.

We also climbed the Rothhorn from Zermatt and got back to lunch, and so forth. In two or three consecutive seasons we made most of what are now the usual ascents, including one fondly imagined by us to be a new expedition. We afterwards learnt that it had been done before but not recorded, and that discovery was the origin of the 'Climbers' Guides.'

It was extraordinary how little at that time was known at Zermatt by travellers and still less by the guides about the routes which had and had not been traversed. Coolidge and Davidson were rare exceptions. I remember one evening when a goodly assembly of old climbers was gathered in the smoking-room of the Monte Rosa the question was raised, Which was the Arbenjoch? and not a soul knew. Probably plenty of people blundered over the Fee Pass and thought it was the Alphubel before I crossed it and gave it a name, and the same was no doubt true of the Windjoch. Moreover, the very names of many peaks were uncertain. There was in those days hardly a single Zermatt guide who could have taken a climber to the Balmenhorn of Monte Rosa. If three parties had separately started without collusion for the Old Weissthor I suspect that they might have crossed the frontier ridge at three different points. Such names as Fletschhorn, Nadelhorn, Barrhorn did not accurately define particular peaks, while the Col de Zinal covered various passes all the way round from the Rothhorn to the Dent Blanche. In 1877 I realised this condition of affairs and amused myself accordingly in the following winter at Cambridge in the attempt to clear my own ideas on these and other like subjects. It was a singular greenhorn who approached that study seated on the steps of a gallery in Cockerill's Building in the University Library near an obscure bottom shelf which held the bound volumes of the ALPINE JOURNAL. I was then unaware that any Alpine literature existed except 'Peaks, Passes and Glaciers,' Whymper's 'Scrambles,' the ALPINE JOURNAL, and a few other publications by well-known English pioneers, such as Wills, Hinchliff, and Kennedy. I worked steadily through them all, with some sheets of an early edition of Dufour's map, and wrote down an abstract in haphazard order of all climbs in the Zermatt district therein recorded. The discovery of Studer's '*Ueber Eis und Schnee*' was a revelation, which presently led to a



GROUP AT THE FESTI BIVOUAC IN 1878.
(SIR MARTIN CONWAY, DR. G. SCRIVEN, FRANZ ANDERMATTEN.)

very slowly expanding knowledge of what foreign climbers had done, but that I think was the work of rather later days.

At all events in 1878 my manuscript abstract in a rather cumbersome volume accompanied us to Switzerland, and if I had not been desperately impecunious, I could have spent a whole long summer capturing one new route after another, for at that time not a quarter of the ascents since made had been attempted, and I was practically the only active climber on the spot who knew with any completeness what had been done and what had not. Scriven and I that year were joined by Penhall, with whom I had been in consultation throughout the winter at Cambridge, and we had made plans which included the ascents of the Rothhorn straight up the middle of the west face, that of the Dom from the Domjoch, and that of the Matterhorn by the Z'Mutt arête, beside other climbs which were intended to solve a number of topographical difficulties arising out of the insufficiency of existing maps and the incomprehensibility of climbers' accounts of their achievements. No one who has not tried will realise how large a proportion, not of the earliest only, but of most nineteenth-century descriptions of climbs, are incomprehensible till one has been over the route oneself, or at least been able to examine it from some suitable point of view. Moreover, climbers have mistaken their peak and described as the ascent of point A an expedition which led them up point B. Thus in the 'Pennine Guide' I published a very clear description of the route up the Untergabelhorn (a peak I have never climbed), written down from the lips of a man who had just ascended it, led by one of the best St. Niklaus guides, now dead. I will not sully his fine reputation by mentioning his name. They had not been up the Untergabelhorn at all, but a lower and separate peak. It pains me to think of the number of deserving persons who used to be led astray by that description and who sadly wrote to me to record their misfortune!

I have unfortunately never been able to keep an Alpine secret to myself. The mountains then were far too interesting to me to be merely thought about. The result was that amateurs and guides alike soon shared all my information, and many new routes were made by men and guides who would not have been attracted by their novelty but for my manuscript abstracts. The guides used to come and ask me the names of their own peaks, and I think I am at this late date betraying no confidence in mentioning that I was invited to correct the

nomenclature of the Zermatt sheet of the Siegfried map, and did so some time in the 'eighties, as far as I can now remember.

Bad weather frustrated any attempt on the Z'Mutt arête of the Matterhorn when we hoped to attack it, and we had to go home and leave it untouched, but Alexander Burgener and I had talked of it and of the Furggen arête, and attention was generally directed both to them and to several other possible climbs which I had discussed with him and others. One was the north arête of the east peak of the Breithorn, which no one attempted till several years later. In 1879 I could not go to the Alps at all, so Penhall and Mummery raced for the Z'Mutt arête of the Matterhorn, and everyone knows the story. Mummery also tried the Furggen arête, with the result that had been foreseen. My unfortunate habit of chattering about things that had and had not been done led to some contretemps. Thus I named what seemed likely to be an interesting expedition to two different climbers. Both decided to do it, and as bad luck would have it both started on the same day and I believe did it in opposite directions (I forget the details). At all events there was for a time rather a hot dispute between them as to who deserved the credit for the novelty. Another time I got into hot water over the peak which I named the Wellenkuppe. It used often to be said at Zermatt in those days that the place was badly off for interesting single-day expeditions. Sitting one afternoon outside the old Rifelhaus my eye fell on the Wellenkuppe and I noted the route now so frequently followed. It occurred to me that this was the very thing wanted, if only the peak had a name. As long as it was merely the lower summit of the Gabelhorn it could not expect to become popular. The obvious course was to climb and name it. Lord Francis Douglas was said to have ascended it, but no one knew by what route and no one cared. He was thought of merely as having in that case failed on the Gabelhorn. I afterwards found from an entry in a Zinal visitors' book that his ascent must have been made from the Zinal side, perhaps up the Triftjoch ridge. I mentioned the new expedition as attractive to a party of climbers then at Zermatt, and a day or two afterward climbed it with Scriven and Parker (now Lord Parker of Waddington). Returned to the hotel, members of the aforesaid party met us with abuse, complaining that I had told them of the expedition, that they had arranged to make it, and that I had robbed them of it! They were not satisfied till another had been placed at their disposal, and I don't think they ever quite forgave the injury. When the guides asked

where we had been I replied 'Up the Wellenkuppe.' 'Which is the Wellenkuppe?' was the next question. 'Don't you know? Why, the lower peak of the Gabelhorn, of course'; and so the name caught on, as did afterwards that of the Stecknadelhorn and several others which found their way on to the official map but no one suspects were inventions of my own. The secret of getting a name accepted is to put it about among the guides and then receive it back from them as one they are actually using; as long as no one knows where a name originated no one will object. The touchiest place on earth in which to distribute names is in the Andes, but I found all I wanted by corresponding means. The hardest work is to find a genuine existing name for a given peak. If you find one you generally find several and have to choose. Thus when my attention was first called to the Nadelgrat—the whole ridge from the Südlenzspitze (which now they call the Lenzspitze) to the Dürrenhorn—there was only one name along it that any climber or guide could cite, except old Franz Andermatten, and that was the Nadelhorn. It is extraordinary how little people care about a nameless peak. Dent had ascended the Südlenzspitze but not recorded it nor thought anything about it, though it was the last great peak to be climbed in the Zermatt district, simply because it was thought to have no name. Old Franz told me that he had heard the Nadelhorn and it called the Nord- and Süd-Lenzspitzen. He had also heard it called Südlendenspitze and Landspitze. I accordingly called it the Südlenzspitze and sent Graham up it. For the other peaks no certain names were discoverable, so I gave the name Stecknadelhorn to the one next the Nadelhorn, while the Hohberghorn and the Dürrenhorn were names vaguely wandering about in the neighbourhood, and seemed as far as I could gather to be likely to belong to the peaks now so known. I wrote a paper in the JOURNAL on this ridge, and plenty of climbing about it followed. The Weisssthor ridge gave a great deal of trouble, but I believe that proper old names were found for all its parts except the Old Weisssthor, which certainly was not where it is now placed; but Coolidge has worked out the history of that region far more completely than I ever did and his results are final. Those who have read his late papers on the history of various peaks and passes will realise how vague was the nomenclature of the Alps till maps and guide-books fixed wandering denominations to particular points.

I have now altogether forgotten by what stages my manuscript abstract of routes, continually added to from old hotel

visitors' books, guides' testimonial books, conversations with climbers and guides, and a widening knowledge of Alpine literature, came to be thrown into an ordered form and published as the 'Zermatt Pocket-book.' I only remember that during the process I came into connexion with Coolidge, and he helped me to pass the thing through the press—the commencement of a partnership that endured for many years and in a sense still endures unbroken and indeed at no time the least unstable. We never disagreed except on the mountain-side, when he wanted to go one way for reasons of history, I another for reasons of topography—a frightful *impasse*! The 'Zermatt Pocket-book' had a curious history. My second oldest friend, Lord Ranfurly, who is here to-night, paid for the publication, and he little thought what a frightful offspring from a literary point of view that little volume was to produce. The sale never repaid the cost. The copies that remained in England were slowly sold off. Those that went to Zermatt were found by me there intact some fifteen years later when I and everyone else had forgotten their existence. The curious situation thus arose that the book, believed to be out of print, was selling second-hand in London for ten shillings and even for a guinea when anyone could have bought a copy for five francs at the then unique Zermatt shop if he had thought of asking for it. The natural conclusion was that if people would pay a second-hand bookseller a guinea for the 'Zermatt Pocket-book' they might as well pay me a like amount for a new and better edition of it, brought up to date. Hence the two volumes of the 'Pennine Guide,' which, as I explained in an insulting preface, were divided at the Theodul Pass, the most inconvenient point possible, in order that Zermatt climbers might be obliged to buy both halves. The 'Lepontine Guide' followed, written by Coolidge and me in collaboration, and thus the series of 'Climbers' Guides' was started, and volume after volume followed, in theory edited by Coolidge and me, but in practice by him, my own interests having in the meantime been transferred to other mountain ranges in distant parts of the world, and the Alpine knowledge of a man endowed with a singularly evanescent memory rapidly passing away.

I have elsewhere stated and may here repeat that at a date I cannot remember—it was when Donkin was Hon. Secretary—I wrote to the Committee and offered to present the intended series of 'Climbers' Guides' to the Club and to edit the series for it. The letter was acknowledged but never answered, and soon afterward the re-editing of Ball's guide was under-

taken and the Club committed to what I thought an out-of-date type of guide-book.

Translations and imitations of the 'Climbers' Guides' or parts of them were many. Even the 'Zermatt Pocket-book' was translated by a French soldier who took it with him into a military prison and thus beguiled the tedium of confinement. It would already involve some research to form a list of the imitative offspring of the series as a whole, but it will not, I think, be denied that the bulk of existing guide-books to snowy mountains are of the type which the 'Pennine Guide' fixed. Coolidge was always bothering me to bring out a new edition of the Pennine volumes when they in turn had been for some years exhausted, and at last I went to Grindelwald to see what could be done with the help of his wonderful library. I worked through all the publications of all the Alpine Clubs over a dozen years or more and made the necessary abstracts, and the thing looked like an accomplishment till I came to the low levels. It then appeared that the ways to the various new huts and the paths out of the valleys were all undescribed and that the only way to get accurate accounts of them was by actually walking over them. That was impossible. So I gave Coolidge all the materials and told him to get another editor to complete the book. He never succeeded. Notwithstanding several appeals, not a single member of this Club came forward to undertake this easiest part of the task, and the book remained dead. At long last Coolidge transferred all his and my rights and all my MS. notes to the Swiss Alpine Club, who have recently published a volume, to be followed by others, which, you will forgive my saying, it would have been well if this Club had produced. As things are, however, I am content that my friend Dr. Dübli (the other day elected a corresponding member of the Royal Geographical Society—a well-deserved honour) should have stepped in to make available to all climbers who can read the German language the information which I laboriously gathered together. Even at the present late date I am not without hope that the English rights which have been reserved may not remain unutilised.

These reminiscences have taken me away from Zermatt and from the mountains. It would be tedious to keep you listening to a tale of old ascents, the lively details of which I have myself forgotten. The feats of those days, moreover, are nothing now when the craft of climbing has been developed to a degree undreamt of in the 'seventies and there are few

big topographical puzzles left. I suppose the kind of climber I may regard myself as representing is extinct. A mountain need not necessarily be regarded as a problem and the climbing of it as the solution. No doubt to accomplish the solution of a difficult problem involving the use of all a man's powers, whether physical or intellectual, is a delightful experience, and I am not desirous of minimising it. But mountains may be otherwise envisaged. They are beautiful at all times and seasons, and they are intensely interesting. It is possible to climb them for the sake of their beauty and interest, but there is something more besides, and it is hard to define. The first time I saw the snowy Alps (they were the Oberland, beheld from near Berne) there arose within me an intense desire to be on them, to climb to the top, to look down from them and over the other side. I take this to have been a form of that general desire for possession which is so energetic a motive in most of us. We in a sense possess the places we have visited. We carry them away in our memories. They become part of us. We own them. It has been said that a landlord possesses his land, but that anyone who has delighted in it owns the landscape. The statement is substantially true. But the sight of a magnificent mountain provokes in modern man, not merely the desire of possession for the sake of its beauty, but the desire of approach for the sake of its mystery. To one who has never been aloft a great snow mountain is full of mystery. It looks like a portion of another world. All its parts are mysterious. It rises we know not how. Its buttresses and hollows, the places where blue shadows lurk, the crests which the sunset dyes, they are far from being self-explained. At a distance we do not understand their relations, nor can we realise their structure. We are puzzled and intrigued by them, and the glamour of their beauty at the same time enraptures and bewilders us. Hence I think the powerful attraction that draws us aloft. I well remember the first time I met a man who had just come down from a high peak. He seemed to me then almost like one who had risen from the dead. He had been to the other world and returned. Not otherwise was I myself regarded by the natives, both in the Himalaya and the Andes, as one who had been to the abode of the gods and returned alive. Remember, please, that I am trying after all these years to write down the emotions of a boy sixteen years of age. Probably conditions have wholly changed, and what we then felt was a passing phase. The present generation may be as unable to enter into the state

of mind thus inadequately described as modern man to grasp the emotions of his prehistoric totemistic ancestors. In that case the younger members of this assembly must forgive my obscurity ; the old ones will understand.

When at last the day of days came and we could start for our first climb into the world of snow, we went forth as to a great adventure. Each step revealed the fact about some feature we had beheld only afar off or heard men tell about. But not thus quickly was the new world to be understood. At first it was hard to reconcile the aspect of things when close at hand with their appearance at a distance. That what had seemed a sheer wall was in fact a slope of broken stones, that what had seemed a faint line or crack should be a vast impassable gash extending to the very depths of a glacier, that things which had seemed near together should in fact be far asunder, that what had looked an easy slope should be a wall of ice only to be mounted by experts after hours of toil—these and a countless multitude of discoveries and disillusionments were not to become instinctively appreciable even in a long summer season of climbing.

As one climbing season followed another, and we gathered experience and learned to know the look of the same mountain from several sides, and the relation of mountain to mountain, of ridge and valley to mountain-mass, and of the great mountain-masses to one another—as we came so to know some one group of mountains that when we beheld it from afar off it no longer seemed to us a serrated wall, but a deep mass with peak showing over the shoulder of peak, in sequence of depth as well as breadth—we attained a new understanding full of interest in place of the old wonder and multiplex inquiry. For a time this increase of knowledge was its own reward and we delighted to behold the heights we had climbed, the passes we had traversed, saluting us across great distances, each now known for what it actually was in individual form and relative position to its neighbours.

This stage of satisfaction also passed, and some of us began to realise that knowledge was not all pure gain. One day perhaps when a glorious sunset was illuminating a noble peak on whose summit we had recently been sitting, we found ourselves identifying some notch in a ridge as a place we had found difficult to pass, or some sweep of snowfield as the scene of intolerable toil when the heat scorched us almost past endurance, and before we had time to delight in the splendour of the scene, lo! the colour had all gone and the pallor of

night was at hand. And then we awoke to realise that the mountains had for us lost their mystery and that by a great price we had obtained an unwelcome freedom.

I think it was that discovery that drove me from the Alps to the mountain ranges of Asia, Spitsbergen, and South America. There at any rate the wonder and the mystery returned in full measure, in spite of all Alpine knowledge and experience. Nothing in them was quite the same as in Europe. Moreover it was impossible in a single season to solve their topographical problems. Every valley we looked up led to the unknown. The great peaks were for the most part frankly inaccessible. The huge distances to which on rare occasions we looked forth transcended our powers of instinctive comprehension and so produced upon our minds an overwhelming effect. I still, for example, sometimes feel again the indescribable thrill with which I gazed for the first time up the immense trough of the Hispar Glacier, to the col at its head fifty miles off in a straight line from where I sat, the long river of ice reaching down most of the way. Here once again was an opening into the 'other world,' and the invitation to enter and obtain possession. That emotion lasted throughout our Himalayan year and throughout both our Spitsbergen seasons, notwithstanding all my topographical labours as a surveyor. But in the Andes it was otherwise. There I had to deal with a single range of peaks standing side by side in a long row and learned to know them too well. Before turning my back on them and leaving Bolivia they had become to me a weariness and like a tale ten times told. I remember one day riding along the plateau at their foot and noting some broken stones in the path. One seemed a queer colour and I had it picked up and handed to me, and then the notion came into my head that the big mountain behind was just another stone such as I held in my hand, only bigger, and that in actual fact I might as well labour to set down on paper the shape of the one as of the other. I had been for months worrying myself to find out the shapes of those big rocks away off there against the sky, and what did it matter? Why should I care which way the ridges ran and how the side valleys penetrated among them? After all it was not really to respond to such questions that the mountains had called me more than twenty-five years before. They had called me as things of beauty and of wonder, things terrible and sublime, and instead of glorying in their splendour here was I spending months in outlining the vagrant plan of them on a piece of paper.

That realisation ended my mountaineering career. The old flame burst forth again for a little while amid the novelties and sombre mysteries of the dark channels, pallid glaciers, and black forests of the Straits of Magellan and the Land of Desolation, but when I turned my back on them I knew that my climbing days were done, because the desires that had led me on and on were extinguished, the motive power withdrawn. For some years I hardly visited the Alps, or only halted for a week or so among them on the way to Italy, till a whim took me out to a centre of winter sport with mountain surroundings. I no longer had the smallest wish to go aloft, but the joy of the bright sunshine, delight in the beauty of the foregrounds of snow, the fine air and the sense of health and general well-being were like drinking good wine that maketh glad the heart of man. So I went again and yet again, and at long last one day I gazed aloft on the Jungfrau and beheld her as I had beheld her with the eyes of a boy—a vision of pure beauty, robed in mystery as of yore. I no longer cared a rap which ridge had been climbed or whether the face would ‘go,’ or what the rocks were like, or whether the scratch across the upper edge of the glacier was a passable or impassable *bergschrund*. The distracting interest of such questions had vanished along with the clear memory of all the Alpine lore of that kind I had once possessed. The overwhelming beauty of the thing seen submerged all other interests. I had learned at last what we all ultimately learn—that it is not by going to the beautiful thing that we attain possession of its beauty, but by staying where we are; that the beauty is not there but here: the beauty of the plains on the mountain-top, the beauty of the mountains down in the valley or away off in the plain, the beauty of the glacier on the ridge, the beauty of the snow-slope on the glacier or hill-side from which it is beheld. And finally, that there is beauty wherever nature reigns and that a man need not travel far to find it, but that the power to behold it must be once kindled in his heart, as it were, by a divine inspiration. Then beauty will meet him everywhere and will dwell with him and increase its dominion over him till he himself fades away into that kingdom of mystery whence all beauty emanates and where it eternally abides.
