

REMINISCENCES OF FRANÇOIS JOSEPH DÉVOUASSOUD.

AT the moment of François Dévouassoud's death I was on the point of starting for South Africa with the British Association and consequently was unable to give the time and care I should have wished to the obituary note printed in this JOURNAL. In particular I had no good portrait at hand. So, now that I find that this slack time in mountain travel is being utilised by our Editor to collect memorials of the past, I am tempted to offer the readers of the ALPINE JOURNAL a few notes on François Dévouassoud's *livret de voyageurs* as an accompaniment to a photographic likeness of him, taken when he was about fifty, and a view of the monument close to the church-door at Chamonix erected by some of his English friends. For a more general and adequate sketch of my old guide's career I must refer to the chapter in Cunningham and Abney's 'Pioneers of the Alps' (1887), in which I attempted to give some idea both of his exploits and of a character which won the respect and affection of all who knew him. To me and my family he became more and more, as the years went on, a close and beloved friend, whose sympathy could be counted on in all the chances and changes of life. In these François would always endeavour, where possible, to take a cheerful view. I can still hear him say, after lamenting that, at seventy, our joint climbs and travels must be over: 'Mais, Monsieur, nous ferons encore quelques Grands Cols ensemble—n'est-ce pas?—de l'autre côté.' The following lines may be taken as an attempted reply to some such expression of impatience on François' part at the shackles of advancing age, which tied him to the cottage he had inherited from his forefathers and had never cared to alter. Les Barats, the hamlet of which it forms part, lies—I must add—on the shady side of the Chamonix valley, close to the path to Mont Blanc, and for some weeks in mid-winter is cut off from all sunshine.

TO F. J. D.

Knight-errant of the glacier-cleaving blade,
 Whose cottage lies hard on the narrow way
 Trodden in summer by the World at play—
 The World that hurries home to drive its trade;
 Then left to silence in the double shade
 Of winter and Mont Blanc, where no warm ray
 Breaks the white darkness of the shortest day,
 And Spring's first blooms in Summer's lap are laid:



Votre tout dévoué et fidèle
serviteur

Désobry

Let the frosts bite ; they cannot chill the glow
Lit by the memories of other years,
Embers through which shines the far Syrian snow,
Or Caucasus its conquered peaks uprears ;
Smokewreaths that frame old friends—young faces too—
For old and young find guide and friend in you.¹

Dévouassoud's 'book,' I must confess, is disappointing, inasmuch as it supplies a most imperfect record of his exploits. The reason is that after his journey to the Caucasus in 1868 he put it aside and invited no more entries from his employers. It covers therefore only the first twenty years of an active career of fifty.

The first entry is dated June 25, 1849, when François was only seventeen ! It is signed by two Bavarians. In June 1850 Mr. C. Pritchard makes the first English entry. In that year François had several English employers, none of whom, however, ventured above the snow-level. In the years next following, he, as a rule, conducted travellers on the well-known Chamonix excursions, or round Mont Blanc and over the St. Theodul to Zermatt. He told me once he was weary of the St. Theodul and tried in vain to get his employers to be more adventurous. The only writer who shows any appreciation of his character at this period is Miss Amy Helen Brice. She writes in 1852 :

'J'ai été très satisfaite du guide François Dévouassoud ; j'ai fait plusieurs courses avec lui et l'ai toujours trouvé du plus obligeant et prudent et très gai et amusant. C'est un excellent conteur d'aventures.'

A week or two afterwards the familiar name of A. P. Whateley appears for the first time, followed by W. M. Wollaston, a relation of our late Secretary, and G. V. Yool and E. L. Ames, both early members of the Club. With the two last François crossed the Col du Géant.

In 1858 François was kept busy crossing the Col du Géant and visiting Zermatt. In 1859 W. R. Bruce and John Ormsby write : 'Gentlemen making difficult expeditions could not have a better guide or a more pleasant companion.' The second ascent of Mont Blanc recorded in the book is with 'Charles Montague Style (Alpine Club).' It was made by the Aiguille du Goûter with descent to Chamonix.

In 1861 Mr. Whateley writes : 'F. J. D. has accompanied me this year in the ascents of Monte Rosa and Mont Vélán, over

¹ *Unto the Hills.* Arnold, London. 1914.

the Col d'Hérens, Adler, Alphubel and Lysjoch or Silberpass'; he adds: 'I am glad to be able to recommend him as a pleasant companion and a really first-rate guide equally at home upon glaciers and rocks.'

In 1862 he made a tour with two Frenchmen whom he used to speak of as 'his Counts,' MM. de St. Joseph and de Beorges, in which they failed in an attempt on the Dent Blanche from the Zinal side, but effected the first passage of the difficult Biesjoch from the Turtmann Thal to St. Niklaus. Shortly afterwards he was with the late C. E. Mathews. Next year with the Comte de St. Joseph he attempted to force a pass at the head of the Glacier de Léchaud. 'They reached the top of the second couloir on the left of the Glacier de Pierre Joseph, but thought the descent on the Italian side impossible.' At the end of the year comes a brief statement in a schoolboy hand (my own) that I found him 'an able, intelligent and attentive guide' in the ascent of Mont Blanc.

After a brief note by J. Birkbeck, Jr., follow several pages in my handwriting. The earlier ones record my 'Thonon to Trent' journey and are signed by Mr. J. D. Walker, K.C., Sir Melvill Beachcroft, and myself. Since the only printed record of this tour has long been scarce, I may be excused for giving the entry in full here.

'François Joseph Dévouassoud has been our guide for some weeks on a tour extending from Champéry to Botzen, during which we have traversed much unfrequented country and made many glacier expeditions.

'We cannot too strongly express our perfect confidence in him as a careful yet enterprising guide, combining courage with prudence, and we heartily recommend him as a capital companion especially useful in exploring a new country. The following is a sketch of our course from Chamonix:

'Cols du Sonadon, de la Reuse d'Arolla, de la Valpelline, Monte Rosa, Alphubel Joch, Portiengrat, Val Maggia, Olivone, Rheinwaldhorn, Madriser Pass, Passo di Ferro (new), Sissone Pass (new). From Pontresina we made the tour of the Bernina, ascending Piz Sella and Piz Palü, thence to Bormio by Val Viola. Between Bormio and Botzen we ascended the Zebro² and Presanella (new) and explored the Brenta Alta.

'DOUGLAS W. FRESHFIELD,	} University College, Oxford.
'J. D. WALKER,	
'MELVILL BEACHCROFT,	

'Botzen, August 23, 1864.'

² This should read the Königsspitze, of which Mr. Tuckett had made the first ascent a few days before.

Next comes a summary of Tuckett's prodigious campaign in Tyrol and East Switzerland in 1865, signed by F. F. Tuckett, G. H. Fox, J. D. Backhouse, and Douglas W. Freshfield.

Later in the same year François was with a party from Trinity College, Cambridge, W. D. Rawlins (now Vice-Provost of Eton), Gerard F. Cobb, and R. B. Townsend. Their chief expeditions were Mont Blanc, the Col du Géant, Monte Rosa, the Lysjoch, the Weiss Thor, and the first crossing of the Bruneggorn from Randa to Turtmann. They write :

'François has invariably displayed courage, prudence and skill both on ice and rock ; we have found him attentive and pleasant as a companion, whilst his knowledge of English, German, Italian and the local patois makes him most useful as interpreter. To part from him gives us sincere regret, whilst we have real pleasure in expressing our full belief in his high personal and professional qualifications.'

H. B. George follows, and emphasises François' 'skill in finding his way in the worst weather, as we especially experienced on the Weiss Thor when a local guide of some reputation was entirely at fault.' In 1866 he was again with me and Mr. C. Comyns Tucker. In 1867 he was with the Messrs. Winterbotham. And so his book ends with an entry on a sheet of notepaper written by me at Poti in 1868 after my first visit to the Caucasus, and countersigned by A. W. Moore and C. C. Tucker.

'Poti, Caucasus.

'François Dévouassoud has been with my friend Mr. Tucker and myself for eight months, during which we have visited Egypt, Syria, Constantinople, Georgia, Armenia, part of Persia and the Caucasus.

'During the earlier part of the journey he acted as our travelling servant, in which capacity he proved very useful, and pleased us much by the readiness with which he adapted himself to new circumstances.

'At Tiflis we were joined by Mr. Moore and started on the 26th June for the mountains. On July 1st we ascended Kasbek (16,546 feet). We made our way from Kasbek Posthouse to Urusbieh at the base of Elbruz in 25 days, crossing the main chain four times, twice by new and difficult glacier passes. On July 31st we ascended Elbruz (18,526 feet) without meeting with any mountaineering difficulties. We afterwards traversed two of the principal northern valleys (those of the Cherek and Uruk) and returned by Vladikavkaz and the Dariel to Tiflis.

'It is unnecessary for us to repeat our opinion of François' qualities

as a guide, but we have much pleasure in recording the cheerfulness and good temper with which he underwent the exposure and frequent hardships, which are inevitable in travelling through an uncivilised country.

‘ DOUGLAS W. FRESHFIELD.

‘ C. C. TUCKER.

‘ A. W. MOORE.

‘ *September 6, 1868.*’

In 1868, after our journey in the Caucasus, François looked on any further entries as an anticlimax. It is a pity, for much of the most interesting part of his career is left out. We find no record of his many journeys with Mr. J. H. Wainwright. His long journey in Spain with a French gentleman, M. Astruc, his expeditions with the Sidwicks, with Mr. J. H. Fox and the Rev. F. T. Wethered, with the Miss Pigeons, with Sir Clifford Allbutt, Mr. Coolidge, Mr. T. H. Carson and many others, his later climbs with me in many parts of the Alps, our visits to the Pyrenees, Apennines, Algeria and Corsica, his return to the Caucasus in 1887 are all absent. The point his ‘book’ brings out best is, I think, that from his early days every traveller of intelligence recognises two chief characteristics: François’ excellence as a companion as well as a guide, and the prudence which he combined with a very high degree of technical skill in his craft. Many of the writers insist also on his great strength, which was never better put to use than when in 1869 he saved the lives of an eminent member of the Club and Peter Rübi by holding both up after a bad slip when descending the Swiss side of the Col d’Argentière.

DOUGLAS W. FRESHFIELD.

In response to the request of the Editor the following tributes to François Dévouassoud’s memory have been sent to him by Sir Clifford Allbutt, Mr. T. H. Carson, and Mr. J. H. Wainwright.

It gives me much pleasure to add a few notes to your reminiscences of François Dévouassoud. But I regret to say that I can speak only, or almost only, of a personal friendship of many years and of some intimacy, scarcely at all of his brilliant qualities as a guide. My old climbing companion T. S. Kennedy and I generally took Almer and Ulrich with us, and when for occasional excursions I engaged other guides

they were from Grindelwald or the Valais ; or, for the Engadinè, Hans and Christian Grass. Moreover, Dévouassoud had his own constant employers. However, I had many a walk with François, and visited him twice or thrice at his home, so that my wife and I got to know him well. There was an attraction in his kindly, chivalrous and intelligent manners and character which made him very welcome to women. For instance, I well recall one occasion when my wife and I—she on a mule—went for some excursion or other from Chamonix with François. The track by which we returned was rough and steep, and torn by storm waters. The mule was a good one, and safe enough, no doubt ; but for the person on him the descent was rather agitating. François soon sent the mule boy to the rear, and himself took the animal in hand. In his powerful grip he seemed almost to lift the mule and his rider, and, thrusting his mighty legs to the ground, picked the way for his load, and reduced the slips and jolts to quite a bearable degree. Of what a mountain mule's back leg slides can be few travellers are unaware. Meanwhile in a soothing voice he kept up a conversation of cheerful and comforting words : ' A little patience, Madame,' ' Just a little more, and we shall arrive,' and so on ; continually chatting, moreover, on various subjects, to draw attention off the discomforts of the path. Thus he turned a long and tiresome descent into quite an agreeable interlude. Many first-rate guides, fine-hearted, trustworthy, devoted fellows, have kept nevertheless a good deal of the peasant about them : François, like ' Old Melchior,' was a gentleman born—large minded, chivalrous, and courteous.

The first time I met François was in the Diablerets, perhaps some forty years ago. Kennedy and I had a week to spare before Almer and Ulrich could join us, so we decided to breathe ourselves by some clambers about the lower Rhône—the Dent de Jaman, Dent du Midi, Pierre à voir, Grand Muveran, Wildhorn, Dent de Morcles, &c. Happily Dévouassoud was disengaged and agreed to meet us at Bex, whence we made the chalets of Les Plans our *gîte*. I see him now vividly, as I saw him first, waiting by the wicket of the railway station, then a small and rustic shed. At first his big loosely knit frame, his throat swathed in the invariable red handkerchief, did not suggest the great mountaineer. But we soon learnt to know him better. Many a rough scramble we had from Les Plans, and of one of them I will let out a little secret hitherto buried in silence. To this one of our days in the hills,

a day or part of a day on the Dent de Morcles, François did not relish even an allusion. We reached the Dent a little late in the morning, having scrambled thither over some neighbouring uplands. We ate our lunch on the little glacier at the foot of the mountain, and, foolishly despising our opponent, waited again a short time. It was too beautiful a day to fuss over. At last, however, we started for the summit, and reached the foot of the pike, when Kennedy and I, leaving François to puzzle out the chimneys, sat down on the rocks to enjoy the exquisite view. He was a very long time away, and as meanwhile light mists were gathering about the tops, and the day wearing on, we sprang up to seek him. We met him coming back to us looking disconcerted; he reported that there were a couple of jagged couloirs which, being a bit misty, he confessed that he had not found a ready way to negotiate. We joined for a few minutes in the hunt for the trail, but, mist and time warning us, we sped off for home, *ἀπρακτοί*! The best of the joke against F. D. was that before starting we had advised him to consult some local porter about any tricks of the route, a suggestion he then received with a scornful sniff. We didn't mind the defeat in the least, but François was very quiet all the evening. He must have dreaded our telling this story to Loppé. I scarcely need say that earlier in the day he would have fought his way up somehow or other.

From that day to this I have never bothered my head about the Dent de Morcles; but now, as I write, I have looked it up in the Club edition of 'Ball.' I see there is a trick place between 'Nant Rouge' and 'Nant Sec,' as there is in Moss Ghyll, which in the mist for once in his life baffled Dévouassoud.

His language was a good deal milder however than that which, under far more exasperating circumstances it is true, issued from Almer's mouth when, on what we supposed to be the first ascent of the Blaitière already in hand, Christian, hauling himself painfully and slowly up the last rock, put his face over the summit to find that—he had taken us up the wrong spikelet! And it was three in the afternoon! The achievement fell to others, but Loppé told us that we had had the stiffer climb, and the worse luck.

But when face to face with a big job the gentle-mannered Dévouassoud had a heart of flint. One day when, towards the end of the season, I was in Chamonix, I met François,

and after some chat suggested a walk. 'Good, and whither?' 'Well,' I said, 'there is no finer walk than the Géant, to the Col and back.' So that was quickly settled. As I parted from him he added, 'By the way, don't say whither we are going.' I was a little surprised, but of course said I would be mum. As in the morning we were walking up to the Montanvert, I said, 'François, why was I not to say last night whither we were going?' 'Because,' he quietly replied, 'we may never get to the Col.' 'No!' I said. 'Why not?' 'You have to learn what the Géant is like at the end of a fine hot summer!' And I did learn; and I learned something more—the splendid icecraft and indomitable spirit of my admirable guide. Time after time in a tight place we looked at each other, almost in despair. But no; at each such moment François exclaimed 'Mais nous ne sommes pas des enfants,' a phrase which at every crisis he repeated like a war cry, and seizing his axe and almost hurling himself upon the ice, he again hacked for himself a way to some point of vantage to which he could haul me up, and thence read a little more of the riddle of the great glacier. It was a beautiful sight to see his bold, swift and skilful ice work, his grip upon the slopes, and for so big a man, and no longer young, his catlike activity. I do not feel sure that any other guide would have landed me in the same time on the Col; but to François the Géant was home. Still he said he had never known it so difficult, and late in the season the days were getting short.

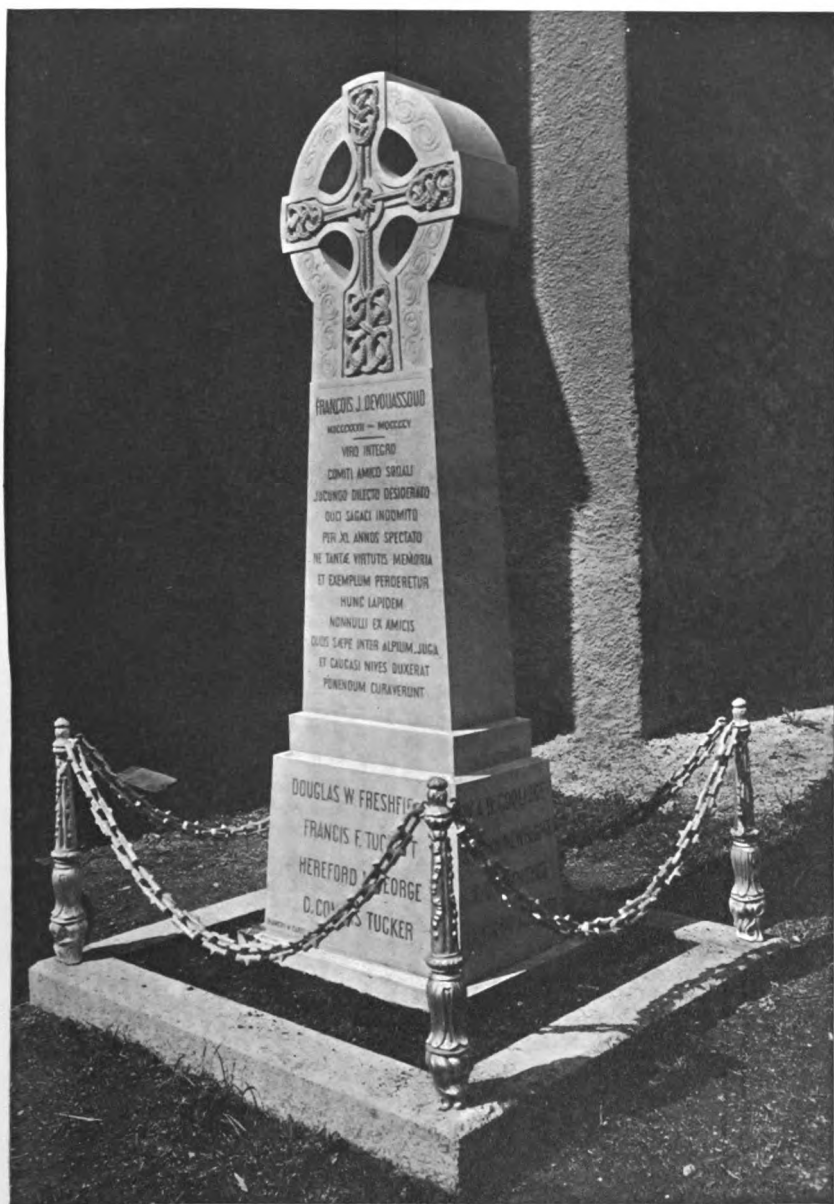
But glorious as was that autumn day—radiant as were the stupendous crags of the Jorasses almost beside us, beyond us the meadows of Courmayeur, and far away the fairy battlements of the Valaisan Alps from Combin to Rosa, 'nubigenae' enthroned in the sky—yet perhaps no day is without its tear. All the way from Chamonix François and I had most carefully nursed two peaches, one for each of us. These mellow beauties lay beside us, cooled and cushioned in the snow, for we had put off the consummation of them to the last, when the heads of two tourists from the Mont Fréty peered up from under our feet. And they, who were going no farther, lunched with us. We of course had never thought of eating more than one peach between us, and they in their turn could not dream of depriving us &c., &c.! But, as Christian mountaineers, could we have gone home without sharing them?

Dévouassoud's courage and firmness of will, perhaps at times amounting to latent obstinacy, may sometimes have

been perilous ; though I believe he never made any serious error of judgment while in charge of a traveller. Still, on one occasion in 1870, when Kennedy and I were in Chamonix, and found Dévouassoud at liberty, we fixed up the following day for the Monarch. And that evening, in no promising weather, we slept at The Mules. The early morning was surly, perhaps forbidding, but not actually menacing. So we started off, hoping for the best. But the luck was bad : a nasty wind sprang up with whiffs of sleet, and it was very chilly. We plodded on to the Grand Plateau, when, during a short rest, K. and I looked doubtfully at each other ; but François refused to meet our eyes. So we trudged on. Again Kennedy and I exchanged looks, and I did more : I hinted at return. K. smiled a little sourly and said ' Well, we came out to enjoy ourselves ! ' However, in another ten minutes we plucked up courage to face Dévouassoud. He was very angry. He scoffed at our soft hearts, and, rejoicing in his native elements, adjured us to come on. We had to withstand him to his face, and when I found that my feet were losing sensation, he rapidly altered his mind. In a twinkling I was on my back, my boots off and François chafing my feet with snow. That hour my poor toes have never forgotten ; and since, on every frost, have kept the habit of reminding me rather keenly of it. Of course return was now decided upon ; but I believe François—polar bear as he was physically—never wholly forgave us. We had shown the white feather. But he was partly reconciled when the sad news came down that on that day, but little later, a large party of guides and tourists—eleven in all—were in a *tourmente* swept into oblivion, from or near the Mur de la Côte.

The last time I was at Chamonix was when, in place of our late President, Bishop Browne, I unveiled in Couttet's garden the memorial stone to Charles Mathews. Thence I wandered up to the churchyard to visit the last resting-place of François, the old and dear friend of so many of us. And I looked wistfully down the little busy street for the well-known form, the friendly hand, of him who was no more. Yet, after a happy and successful life, was he not happy still in his rest ?—in the midst of his people, who sometimes had vexed him, large-minded man and good citizen as he was, by the little straits and meannesses of local politics, yet after all in the midst of his own people, and of those mighty hills which he had loved so well.

THOMAS CLIFFORD ALBUTT.



MONUMENT TO FRANÇOIS J. DÉVOUASSOUD
IN THE CHURCHYARD, CHAMONIX.

Among the contents of recent numbers of the *JOURNAL* some of the most interesting have been the extracts from the *Führerbücher* of Ferdinand Imseng and Ulrich Lauener. They contained not only much mountaineering information, but also personal details of which many will be glad to have a record. The series is, I learn, to be continued in this number in the shape of extracts from the 'Livret de Guide' of François Dévouassoud. As one who knew François well during many years, I wish to add a word as to the impression produced on me by a man who was in some respects one of the most remarkable characters among a generation of great guides.

I first met François at Zermatt in 1867. In that year I was a member of a party which did a good deal of high mountaineering in the Monte Rosa country and the Graian Alps; but François, who was otherwise engaged, could not come with us. In 1869, however, he was our guide both at Zermatt and Chamonix; and in several subsequent years I was fortunate in securing his services. In 1874 he was with Comyns Tucker and myself in Tyrol, when we made the first ascent of the Federer Kogel (now called the Rosengarten Spitze), an expedition which was described by Comyns Tucker in an interesting paper in the seventh volume of the *ALPINE JOURNAL* (pp. 109, 345), and was always referred to by François as one of the most difficult rock-climbs he had ever accomplished. We climbed the peak by a route which, as far as I know, has never been repeated.

Later in the same year we did some climbing in the Primiero Dolomites, where on one occasion we were benighted, and spent several hours on a shelf of rock high up in the wild Val Pravitale. One of the most vivid memories that comes back to me from that year is the sight of François tending the small fire which we had succeeded in lighting at our bivouac, while a brilliant moon lit up the huge boulders round us and the lofty cliffs which shut in the valley.

In 1883 François accompanied H. A. Beachcroft and myself in Piedmont during a month of wonderful weather, in which we were fortunate in making the ascent of Monte Viso and the Ciamarella under almost perfect conditions. One day we were joined by Coolidge, who had not long before been exploring with Freshfield the various routes which are claimed to have been followed by Hannibal in his passage of the Alps. Freshfield's well-known article, since expanded into a book, appeared, I think, in the number of the *ALPINE JOURNAL* which was published in August 1883 ('A.J.' xi. 267-300). I had the number

with me, but Coolidge had not yet seen it, and he was very curious to know which route had been finally accepted by Freshfield.

I cannot pretend to give a detailed account of the many expeditions in which François accompanied me; but I have delightful memories of climbs with him in the Pralognan district of Savoy and among the rough peaks which overhang the Val Maggia.

Others have spoken of the skill and coolness displayed by François in meeting mountaineering difficulties: I prefer to speak of his charm as a companion. He had travelled widely and was exceptionally well informed. But he had other qualities of a different kind. In the course of the above wanderings I have seen François under all kinds of conditions. I have seen him in fair weather and foul. I have passed the night with him under the stars or in the most uncomfortable of shepherds' huts. On no single occasion did François fail to show a tact, a courtesy, and an unselfishness which are only too rare among us. I always looked on him as one of Nature's gentlemen.

THOMAS H. CARSON.

My first meeting with François Dévouassoud was more than forty years ago, when he and his brother Henri guided my brother (the late Mr. Benjamin Wainewright) and me up Mont Blanc one October day in the early 'seventies. After that I had for many years the great advantage of his services, as guide, companion, or courier, sometimes on the higher mountains, sometimes on the lower hills and valleys in Tyrol or those surrounding the Italian lakes, or in the beautiful country between the lakes and the Alps. As guide, he was strong, capable and efficient, with a wonderful and most extensive knowledge of the mountains and passes in Switzerland, France, Tyrol and Italy. He was also a very useful courier, as he spoke French, some English, and Italian. Of German he only spoke a few words, and those pronounced with a very French accent. He knew the best places to stop at and the best way of getting to them. He was, moreover, a most pleasant companion, full of interest in many subjects—botany, geology, art. On the mountains, in the valleys, in storm or sunshine he was always the same—kindly, thoughtful, considerate—never thinking of himself, but only of the safety or comfort

of his charge. I never knew him out of temper or heard him say an unkind word about anyone. One morning going up the Disgrazia, the guides (old Hans Grass and François) had a dispute about a distant snow peak, Hans insisting that it was Mont Blanc. François, turning to me, remarked 'If it makes the poor man happy to think he sees the Mont Blanc, it is no matter; but, my dear sir, it is the Grand Paradis.' Sometimes, when things went wrong, or if I was irritable with him, he would say in his quaint English, 'My dear sir, take a patience: it is the life.' His fidelity and devotion to his old friends and patrons (especially to Mr. Douglas Freshfield, with whom he made so many journeys and notable 'first ascents') were touching. He had a great respect for D. W. F.'s walking powers, and often said to me 'Miss Freshfield he do run very fast.' He was apt to turn 'Monsieur' into 'Miss.' With such great gifts François' modesty and deference were perhaps extreme. If one asked him 'What shall we do, François?' his reply would be: 'My dear sir, you know very well; you are the master.' One evening at Cadenabbia I said to him 'Why, François, I have not seen you all day.' He answered 'Ah! my dear sir, you have the good society: you have no want for me—I am only little man'! But this deference was for off-days. Of course when on the mountains he led, without consultation, by the best routes. On the Piz Languard one day, not very long before his death, he said 'My dear sir, I am a happy man to-day, for I have your good society, the day is fine and we have a beautiful view; but I am also a sad man, as I think I may never see it again.' And so it proved. I asked him one day what he did in winter. 'My dear sir, I do smoke my pipe and do make the politique (read the papers).' I could recount many of his quaint sayings, but the foregoing may give some idea of his nature. I have missed him sadly, knowing that I shall never meet his like again. His type is rapidly disappearing, if it has not already disappeared, from the ranks of the guides, though happily there remain many splendid men and climbers in those ranks. I think that somewhere Mr. Freshfield has written that 'François was one of Nature's gentlemen'—a most apt description of that charming personality!

J. H. WAINSWRIGHT.