slabs are the greatest obstacle a climber will meet. He would be a bold man who would say that he had found an uncairned peak of any magnitude there, but there are climbs to suit every style and every grade of skill. Much still remains to be done; no one has yet climbed all the 3000 footers in 24 hours [2]; no cinema star has landed on the Troldfjordvand in a hydroplane, and I do not think any winter ascents have been made by enthusiasts on ski in those months during which the sun never rises above the horizon. Even the nomenclature is picturesque and is not dependent for its terms upon the numerical system or the anatomy of chickens. No guides, no huts, no roads, no mountain railways—in short it is a district as yet completely unspoiled, unique in situation and unsurpassed in all the elements of beauty.

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The North Ridge of the Dent Blanche.

By D. E. PILLEY [1] and I. A. RICHARDS.

'ALL things considered,' as Théophile Ribot remarked, 'there is room to wonder whether there is not in every *grande passion* as much misery as joy.' And there are mountains which haunt individual climbers like a passion, or an obsession, so that it is sometimes difficult to decide whether to envy these devotees or to commiserate them. They seem

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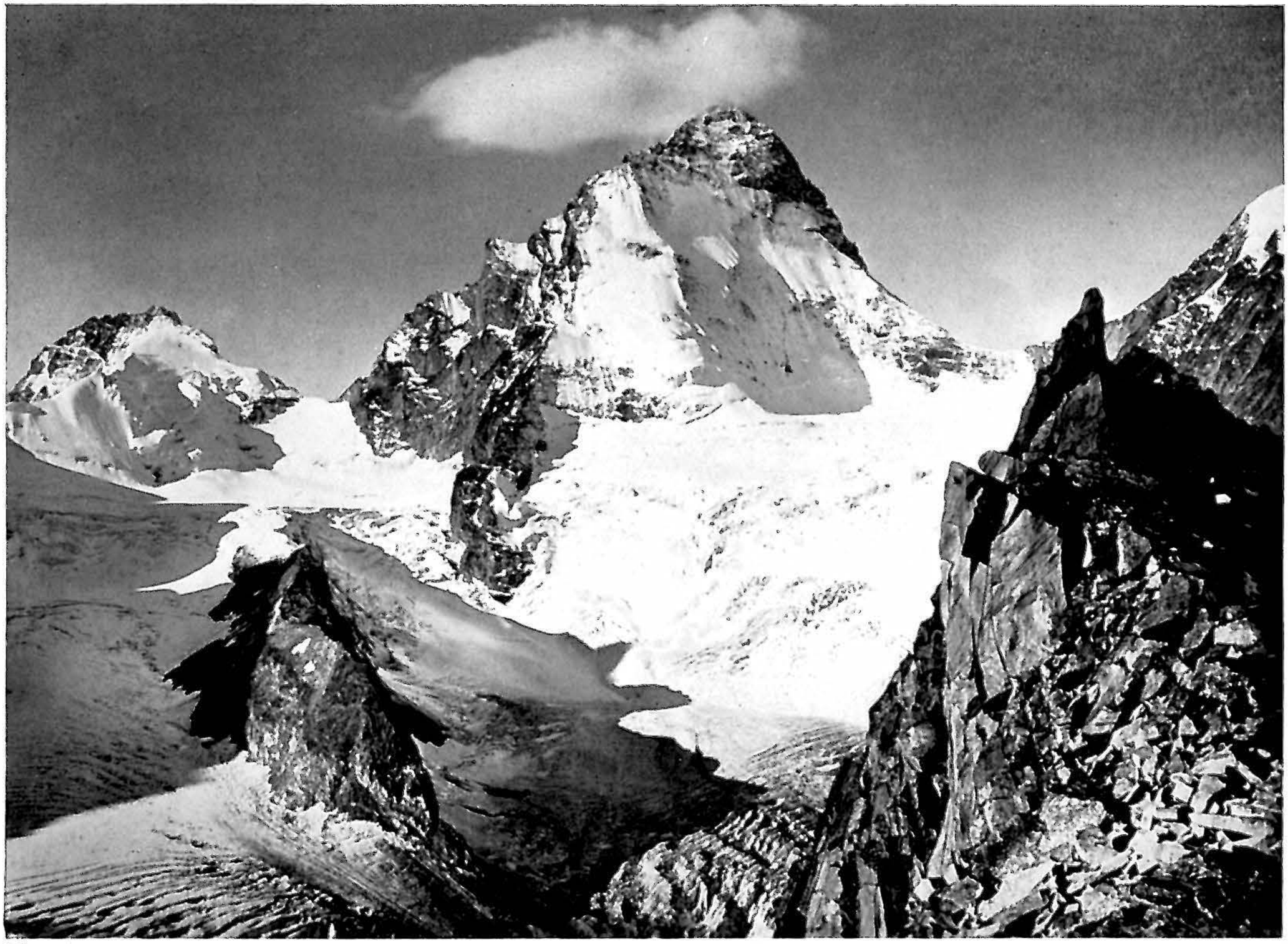
[2] *A.J.* **41,** 50.

[1] Mrs. I. A. Richards.



Photo, Wehrli.]

DENT BLANCHE, N.E. FACE AND N. ARÊTE (RIGHT), WITH COL DE LA DENT BLANCHE, FROM LO BESSO.

[*To face p.* 277.

to be bound to their pet particular object as though by some spell, almost against their will. While other climbers wander care-free through the Alps, suiting their region and their programme to the season and the weather, they hang about their mountain, cursing fate and becoming mystery men to their friends who are not in the secret. So it was with Whymper and his Matterhorn, and so it has been with countless lesser climbers and their lesser goals. It is as if they were bewitched.

One of us had come under the spell of the Dent Blanche some years earlier, upon the other of us it was cast in that same season (1921), when one of our first climbs with Joseph Georges took us up the Ferpècle ridge from the Bertol Hut. This was in September. It was then that the project of 'looking at' the N. ridge first took form in words, and thenceforward we were helpless under the spell. It lurked behind our plans each season, thwarting them or favouring them and shaping our climbing lives.

Two starting-points compete for the expedition—Bricolla and the Mountet hut; Bricolla has immense advantages in situation and proximity of access. We knew, however, most of the climbs round Bricolla and were anxious for novelty should the grand venture fail to come off. So in 1923 we chose the Mountet. But when we set out for the Grand Cornier to look at our enchantress more clearly, we were pulled up short by cries of 'Au secours!' A guide had fallen into a crevasse, nearly taking his two novices with him. The rescue operations were long and painful, and put us off serious climbing for some days. Then against the repellant attraction of the N. ridge, the more direct charms of the Rothhorn, Gabelhorn, Monte Rosa and Lyskamm fought and conquered. We expected to come back in fine training. Instead, as a penalty for our inconstancy, a fit of staleness attacked us after the heat on the Col d'Hérens. Perfect weather and good conditions smiled ironically upon us—it was useless. We lay languidly upon the grassy knolls of Bricolla with no will alive in us. Only Joseph fought successfully against the malign internal influence, and it took us what little strength we retained to drag him away from the Dent Blanche to comparative easeful days in the Oberland. Looking back, we have little doubt now that our then mysterious mood was inspired luckily. We should probably not have prospered in the venture that year, for we were dominated by incorrect suppositions in our plan of attack, and there might easily have been too much *verglas* on the slabs.

Next year, on the way down from the N. ridge of the Grivola, the spell woke unexpectedly to life again. Perhaps one north ridge called to another! At any rate it swung us away from Courmayeur back over the St. Bernard and up to Les Haudères. Then pouring rain caught and held us while our tempers grew as frayed as a worn-out climbing coat. Our joint climbing was interrupted in the following year, one of us going to the Canadian Rockies, but the senior devotee somehow spent more than half his climbing holiday scowling dolefully with Joseph up into the clouds about the Bricolla Alp. They even built a stone house on the Col de la Dent Blanche in a snowstorm, probably just to show the Dent Blanche that they were in earnest, for the wind whistled so horribly through its walls that, long before it was finished, each had renounced privately all intention of sleeping in it under any circumstances. This dismal waste of time seemed to convince the whole party that enough had been sacrificed to folly. At least when we met again at Arolla after an interlude in Montana and the Himalaya, nobody suggested doing anything further about the N. ridge. The following season (1928) too, there was an almost marked absence of any mention of it in our programmes, yet we found ourselves once more in the Pennines.

To get into reasonable training, from a minus condition and within a week, was our first task. This haste seemed necessary both because the long spell of fine weather might break any day and because a rival party starting from the Mountet might, we feared, be on the mountain before long. There were other parties as to whose intentions we were more than a little suspicious, and we were anxious to have at least the first try. So with an impatient eye on our distressingly unfit condition, we toiled over the Pointe de Bricolla to the Moiry Hut, scrambled over the little pinnacles of the Pigne de la Lex, and made our way back to Bricolla by the N. and E. ridges of the Grand Cornier and the Col de la Dent Blanche. The opposing faces of the Grand Cornier and the Dent Blanche were alive with falling débris. Immediately behind us a peculiar formation of the Cornier discharged a heavy stonefall by ricochet an incredibly long way across the glacier. The newly bared rock faces seemed nearly everywhere ready to slip away and bombard the slopes below. We decided again to give up the climb if we could not keep strictly to the ridge.

We took two days' complete rest at Bricolla, Antoine, Joseph's brother, joining us, for we had decided to climb on two ropes for speed, joining up on the glacier and difficult

sections. Antoine is as sound a man on a mountain as could be wished, with an enchanting sense of humour and a calm confidence in his brother's genius. His tranquil cheerfulness through the more exciting passages of the climb was an immense support to the party. Our first evening at Bricolla was enlivened by the appearance of a party which for no reason at all we took for our rivals.

We got away at 1 A.M. on July 20,[2] 1928, with every reason to expect a perfect day. Joseph, usually gently sociable in the early hours, this morning seemed aloof and austere. We had seen something like it before when setting out for unusual expeditions. The aloofness marks the concentration of his powers ; he gains a mental poise as remarkable as his physical balance. Unlike many brilliant performers, he is never impulsive when at grips with the difficulties. His excitement takes the form of severe self-control.

Dawn found us on the Col de la Dent Blanche, a freezingly cold, clear morning. We had breakfast (5.45 to 6.15), and then split into two ropes. A long scramble over miscellaneous rocks went simply and quickly. Then came the only passage of poor rock on the climb where a little bluff has to be rounded on the E. Then the slabs begin : these trend at a high angle over to the W., sprinkled with grit and spattered even in a dry season with *verglas*. They provide little or no anchorage. We turned upwards near their W. extremities and found two awkward and holdless chimneys leading to the ledge which winds along immediately beneath the fearsome impending crags of the N. ridge. Here we found the first evidences of the descent of the Swiss party in 1926,[3] a piton in the upper chimney. At about this point they had spent the night in a far from enviable position.

The flank of the upper half of the ridge literally overhangs the slabs. It is notched by a number of clefts which from below may have tempted the imaginations of several parties. At closer quarters, however, their scale and angle are more apparent. The ridge itself comes to a sudden end ; at the extreme W. edge of the slabs a separate pinnacle affords a magnificent view-point from which to examine the terrain (10.20). Between the pinnacle and the ridge itself is the notch, equally well seen from the Bertol or Mountet.

Anything less encouraging than the arête as seen from this

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[2] *A.J.* **40,** 376–7 ; illustration facing 377.
[3] *Ibid.* **38,** 338 ; *Die Alpen*, 1927, pp. 347–55.

point would be hard to imagine. To begin with, the actual crest of the ridge overhangs perceptibly at several points. To the left a deep crack seemed to offer better chances, only to end in a much worse overhang some 100 ft. higher. Above this there was further evidence of the Swiss party's descent, a frayed rope hitched up among the crags. On the right is the smooth, exceedingly steep wall of the vast couloir furrowing the slope down to the Glacier de la Dent Blanche. At one time we had talked of crossing the couloir and returning at a higher level to the ridge. But one glance into its stone-swept depths was enough. There was, however, something like a remotely possible crack in its smooth wall, a crack which, at its critical point, passed out of sight into the unknown.

In the searching breeze we clung to the bitterly cold rocks of the pinnacle, gazing at these crags, black against the now sun-filled blaze of the sky. We were just inside their shadow, a golden gleam or two showed where the angle of the ridge eased off above. Our difficulties would be over on reaching that warm and welcoming glow 150 ft. above, but for the moment they seemed overwhelming. Whatever estimate subsequent parties may make of this passage, there is no doubt that as a daunting spectacle it will always hold high rank.

Joseph now began a series of explorations which seemed to us, then and now, as the high-water mark of cragsmanship. He started by exploring the wall of the great couloir round the corner to the right—an anxious moment for us since he was soon out of sight and we could tell from the inch-by-inch movement of the rope that the ground was exceedingly difficult. We could do little to safeguard him as he slowly gained height. But Antoine's calm, reflective confidence in his brother's skill, his quiet assumption that everything was normal, was a great reinforcement to our trust in Joseph's judgment. In such situations the amateur has, as we all know, a responsibility which can easily become agonizing. It was with a mixture of disappointment and relief that we began to take the rope in again, 90 ft. of it, and soon we were welcoming Joseph among us once more. He had been within a few feet of success, but those few feet had proved insuperable.

After a pause for chilled hands to regain their strength, the second possibility was reconnoitred. This was the crack on the left, the entry into which proved extremely hard and the exit unluckily impossible. With the greatest difficulty Joseph contrived to force nearly 100 ft. of the crack. Then the problem of escaping the overhangs closing this route came to

a head. At one moment he seemed almost to be emulating a lizard on a ceiling. But human beings lack the necessary organs and we were forced to watch a series of descending movements, extraordinarily reassuring as a proof of his climbing reserves. On rejoining us in our belvedere, he said that he had been within a few feet only of a series of possible holds.

There remained the very nose of the ridge itself. It seemed a hopeless chance : a few sinuous, very shallow grooves wound up among its protuberant bosses, but they were mercilessly smooth and no square-cut hold seemed apparent. There could be no rest or anchorage for the leader for at least 100 ft. And, to begin with, the base of the nose was undercut. Its actual base seemed inaccessible : once on the tip, the leader would be on the steepest possible rock with a clear 3000 ft. of space beneath his feet. Frankly, it was almost with dismay that we saw Joseph, after a thoughtful survey, turning to it.

The first problem consisted in scrambling up the initial overhang. There happened to be a cleft in the rock under the eave into which an axe-shaft could be fixed, leaving the rest protruding like a springboard over space. We made sure that it *was* fixed, but to gain its vibrating head without assisting holds was no easy matter. From this vantage point the overhang could be breasted. The next stretch, as it seemed to us later, depended upon one and rather rounded hold. However, it served hand, knee and foot in turn, while the fingers found only pressure thrusts to direct the balance. Breathlessly we watched Joseph's smooth, seemingly effortless movements. He kept up a flow of *patois* remarks to Antoine as he worked across and upwards. Soon he was only a shapeless silhouette against the dazzle of the sky above. It seemed impossible that he could cling on at all in so steep and smooth a passage, much less proceed. After a while, as the rope still ran out, his voice grew muffled with distance and we lost sight of him in the glare. Suddenly came a sharp exclamation. Antoine, calm as ever, translated *Il est là*. The tension was over, or rather changed its direction. Now it came to our turn.

For us, most of the steps had to be accomplished by the oddest series of counterpoised pressures we have ever had to control : all on a surface too steep to allow of the usual margins for balance. An occasional pinch-hold was a luxury. The friction of a rubber sole or the palm of the hand on some small awkwardly-sloping surface had to suffice. It was with a very queer sense of unreality—as though a dream had got out of

place—that we came at last to a rapturous Joseph perched on little or nothing and wound round with a network by means of which he had supplied us with a spare rope.

The landing place resembled a recess with one hold rather than anything else : for a time we were busy with the problem of how to stay there and prevent the sacks, which had come up on an independent rope, from departing. There was as yet no space in which to put them on again.

Joseph meanwhile was busy with Antoine, to whom fell the job of bringing up the last axe and thus accomplishing the bulging overhang without its aid. Electing to climb the step in boots, it has always been a mystery to us how he did it. The overhang involved a voluntary leap into the void. But in time he came up the last bulge as placidly as ever, with a broad smile and an 'Ah, les amoureux!' as he spied us clinging together to our joint and solitary hold. After this, only the steepness of the wall remained ; its holds seemed superb in comparison with the passage below. Joseph disappeared again, there was another pause while the sacks and axes went up ; and then, suddenly, on topping a wall of rough yellow rock to a ledge, we came into sunshine.

We lay and basked. The arête above promised nothing more than what is normal in a great Alpine ridge. Its rough, golden rocks stood up in bold, very practicable, masses enchanting to our eye by contrast ; their plaster of ice and snow could give no trouble. Time was our only opponent. We had a long way still to go, so for comfort and speed we roped in two parties again. From time to time rocks would slip away automatically in the recesses of the mountain below us on the right, slide down a snow patch, hop, whir and vanish into the great couloir, but we were in complete safety as we clambered along our ridge. We kept close to the crest, turning it when necessary a few feet, W., down on the right.

Exhilaration did its best to give us wings, and the rocks were really charming—like the best parts of the usual S. ridge of the mountain. Still, they were long, the day was far advanced (we had taken 3 hours 20 minutes over the crucial passage), and it was 5 P.M. before we reached the summit. We did not pause for long (5.30), neither did we linger on the way down, for the sun sank with that peculiar suddenness displayed when you are sinking also. The valleys were filling with gloom as we turned down on to the glacier (base of S. arête, 7.15). We were in no further hurry ; we had only to walk, at leisure, home to bed. A bright day in our moun-

taineering life had closed, a spell had been exorcised—a dream replaced by a reality transcending it. In all the literal force of the word we were content.

As to the future of the ridge: it would be rash indeed to prophecy, after the fate, for example, of the N. wall of Piz Badile, or the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon. The chief obstacle tending to make repetition infrequent is the probability of *verglas* on the slabs, but the Alps, like other ranges, appear to be getting dryer. The difficulty of the great step may—as in other cases—seem less to later parties, while the entire route in settled weather is free from unavoidable risks.

Ski Mountaineering.

By HENRY HOEK.

THERE are many ways of enjoying God's beautiful hills—ways on the hills themselves, ways round them and between them, ways for vehicles of all sorts over easy passes, and ways for dainty shoes along blue lakes, that reflect the snows and the clouds—ways of the mind too, in far-away grey towns and in the tranquillity of lamp-lit studies.

Whoever enjoys the hills is our kinsman. He is a lover of mountains and a seeker of beauty. But a 'mountaineer' we only call him who gets bodily in touch with the mountains, who lays hand on them or puts his foot on them, who tries to climb them and who longs for the summit.

There are many ways too, of getting to the top of a mountain. We try to do so by hand and by foot—mostly by the latter. And according to the way we are shod we make a difference. We speak of walking and scrambling and use ordinary boots, the soles of which are only more or less adorned with nails. We speak of rock climbing and use specially made footgear with soft soles. We speak of ice-work and use horrible looking crampons with needle-sharp steel points. We speak of ski-ing and use the long gliding boards, that came to us out of the North.

Which footgear is likely to afford the greatest pleasure and utmost advantage depends entirely on the condition of the mountain we want to go up—depends on the season we go out in. The orographical aspect of the mountain mostly decides the sartorial character of our outfit, especially of the lower limbs.