

## TWO CAUCASIAN FIRST ASCENTS

BY D. W. FRESHFIELD

[In 1868 a British climbing party, consisting of C. C. Tucker, D. W. Freshfield, and A. W. Moore, with François Dévouassoud of Chamonix, visited the Caucasus, and made the first ascents of Kasbek (16,546 ft.) and Elbruz, east peak (18,347 ft.).

Freshfield read a paper to the Club on the ascent of Elbruz, but it was never printed in the *ALPINE JOURNAL*. A very brief summary of the two ascents may be found in *A.J.* 4. 160 and 164.

Through the kindness of Miss K. M. Freshfield the MS. journals of her father have been lent to the Alpine Club and we are grateful to her for permission to publish D. W. Freshfield's accounts of these two important first ascents.—D.F.O.D.]

## KASBEK

**K**ASBEK is done. We walked over him yesterday, up the south face and down the north.

On Tuesday morning [June 30, 1868] we set out about 9 A.M. We had four porters to carry up our tents, etc. Taking a path on the opposite side of the glen to that by which we had been the day before, we reached the tail of the glacier which sweeps round the south face of Kasbek, and climbing the steep slopes on its left bank found at 11,000 ft. a most suitable spot for a bivouac. It was a mossy plot in a hollow between the moraine and a rocky ridge. Here we pitched our tent and passed a very fair night.

The weather after sundry fluctuations settled fine, and we set out at 2.45 A.M. under a cloudless sky. We went up the glacier to the point where the tributary coming from between the peaks of Kasbek joined it. Up this we turned—steep, slightly crevassed snow slopes like Mt. Blanc—in this way we had got to a height of 14,800 ft. in 4 hours. Just before the bergschrund ice shewed under the snow and for the next four hours we were occupied in fighting that old enemy the ice-wall. The Caucasian article is as bad as the Swiss—perhaps worse. Our difficulties were increased by a violent wind which blew the snow and ice into our faces.

We were not sorry at last to reach the gap between the two peaks. The climb to the eastern and highest was not at all difficult, some 250–300 ft., a bank of snow, some rocks, and then the final calotte. The top of Kasbek is a snow ridge steep on one side but sloping gently, at first, on the other. It was midday and we did not feel at all the rarity of the air (16,560 ft.) but the wind was too cold to linger long. We had determined not to return by the way we had come, so on reaching the gap we turned down the steep snowbank to the north. A few steps, and a little care, followed by a long easy snow slope brought us to an immense névé plateau lying at a height of 14,000 ft. It feeds three glaciers, two descending into lateral glens of the Dariel, the third

into a distinct valley running due north. We struck the ridge dividing the two first glaciers, meaning to descend by the most southerly. This, however, looked bad, so we re-crossed the ridge close to a most remarkable tower of rock. Hence the view of this face of Kasbek, a mass of enormous séracs from top to bottom, was superb.

We found an easy line down into the more northern glen, principally by snow slopes. Past the foot of the glacier we were encircled in fog. The torrent was covered by avalanche snow over which we made rapid progress, till the stream tumbled into a gorge and we were left to the mercies of a wretched little path. At length, about 7.45 P.M. we reached the junction of the two glens. Cows were visible, and finding their owners hospitable and milk abundant, we determined to sup and spend the night. The only shelter was a hollow under a cliff, surrounded by a low wall; the night was by no means cold. We found no difficulty in communicating in pantomime with the herdsmen, who were very decent fellows.

We have been very lucky in making an example of Kasbek so quickly. Being visible from Tiflis, close to the great road pass, and from its magnificent appearance, it has acquired an enormous reputation out here, and our success will wake up the Tiflisers, who looked upon us with a mixture of amusement and pity as the Englishmen who were going to try and get up Kasbek. The mountain has been tried by sundry Russian officers, but without proper gear they would have had no chance of success.

I have said nothing yet of the view. Up to a height of 15,000 ft. it was magnificent; clouds then came over, and from the top we saw only a cloud sea, and island-like snow masses breaking through. There seem comparatively few glaciers in this part of the chain; further west they may abound. Elbrouz was hidden by the west peak of Kasbek until too late, but the view in this direction was very fine, though scarcely so beautiful as that towards the Caspian, where group after group of snowy peaks stretched away into the far distance.

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[Freshfield copied into his journal, evidently from a letter, an account of the ascent by C. C. Tucker, and this is reproduced below.]

At 2.45 we were off on a calm and lovely morning, and enjoyed a glorious sunrise which displayed to advantage the wilderness of most inaccessible-looking peaks around us. At 6.30 we found ourselves 14,800 ft. above the sea. Here our difficulties began. François [Dévouassoud] became tired of leading and I went to the front for 40 minutes during which we had passed from the favoring snow slope to ice covered with a treacherous 4 inches of loose snow. The work of hewing steps in this was severe, and at the first favorable halting place I resigned the business to François, who was now recovered.

Presently an incident happened which might have been serious but for the steadiness of Moore and Freshfield. A huge crack, 2 or 3 ft.

wide, of which the upper lip was about 5 ft. above the under and fringed with great icicles, barred our progress. François and F. were above, Moore below me, and we had all safely passed when the rope between me and Freshfield, which had in the difficulty of crossing got into a loop, got hitched round a big icicle below me. I in vain tried to unhitch it, and had to cut a few steps downwards towards the edge of the break. It is difficult to cut steps in bare ice below one, and it is not surprising, therefore, that in trying to unhitch the rope, I slipped out of the shallow steps and shot over the crevasse. I came down right way up, however, held on by my axe, and doubtless should have pulled myself up, when the rope tightened with a jerk between me and F. and Moore, turning me head over heels with head down the slope in an undignified and disagreeable position. They, however, held on to their footholds like men, and I soon recovered myself, none the worse for wear. The slope above grew worse and we had to cling to the insecure stair-case with knees and hands as well as feet and ice-axe. Time passes rapidly, and it was not until François had again become exhausted with cutting steps against a furiously cold wind that drove the snow like so much iron hail against our faces, that we reached the depression, or col, between the two highest peaks of Kasbek (16,000 ft.). There was no doubt now which was the highest, so after snatching a mouthful of bread—the first food we had tasted since starting—I again led up the slopes to the right, and in 45 mins. (12.5) we stood triumphant on the highest point.

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#### ELBRUZ (EAST PEAK)

We have come back here [Urustpieh] from our Elbrouz expedition. We left on Wednesday morning [July 29, 1868] in fine weather with a cold wind, which continued the whole time we were out. We found that to get at the mountain from this side it was necessary to reascend to the head of the Baksan valley, which is filled by a large glacier; just before reaching it we turned up a glen on the right, closed by an ice-fall—an outlet of the névé plateau of Elbrouz. The glen was short and was chiefly remarkable for the number of snakes we found in the grass and for the striking ridge of columnar basalt which rose above it on the west. We slept at the alp at its head, where there was a rough chalet for the men. The top of Elbrouz (or Mingy Tau as the people of the country call it) was just visible, a flattened dome.

Thursday morning we climbed the slopes on the true right of the ice-fall, which is beautifully broken into towers and pinnacles, and getting on to a spur of rock, found a convenient place for the tent among broken crags, at a height of 11,900 ft., some 500 ft. below the great névé plateau, which spreads round the base of the mountain. By levelling a bit of ground, removing stones and building up a wall, we made our quarters tolerably snug.

Meantime, as it was early in the day, some of the party paid a visit to the snow plateau and inspected the mountain, which somewhat

resembles in shape an inverted tea-cup and presents no apparent difficulty to the eye of a mountaineer. The afternoon was fine, and the view of the main chain opposite splendid, specially an Ortler-like mountain—Tungzorun—immediately opposite, and a two-headed peak—Ulschba [*sic*], a most inaccessible-looking brute.

The night was very cold, the water inside an india-rubber bag which we had filled overnight was frozen inside the tent into a solid sausage of ice ere morning. At 2.10 A.M. on Friday we were off by the light of a setting moon. It was cold enough tramping across the 'Grand Plateau,' a black cloud resting on the dome above us and lightning playing far away below over the steppes. - Presently I diversified the proceedings by entirely disappearing in a concealed crevasse. Soon after the slopes steepened and we were on the mountain. The cold grew intense and the wind almost unbearable and we trudged on without halt, until about 7 we came to the rocks which crop out in the upper part of the mountain.

It now became a serious question whether we could go on ; frost bites seemed not only possible but probable and the wind did not sink. On the other hand the rocks gave some shelter and were less cold to the feet than snow. Looking back we saw two of our porters advancing rapidly in our traces. We had almost decided to turn when they came up looking fairly well off in their big sheepskins. I said, 'If a porter will go on, I will go on with him.' François was complaining of his fingers.' 'If one goes, all go,' said Moore, so we went on, and from this moment the cold became simply disagreeable and no longer affected our extremities painfully.

A long grind up easy rocks, a short ice-couloir, where we cut a few steps, the only approach to a difficulty on the mountain, and we were on top of what had for long been our skyline, to see as much more rock above us. Doubts were even now expressed of our success. We persevered and almost suddenly at last gained the crest, and turning to the west faced the wind for a final fight. The ridge was broad and easy, and with our hands in our pockets and our ice-axes under our arms, we tramped up till it culminated in a bare patch of rock with snow all round. This summit was one end of a horse-shoe ridge enclosing a snow plateau, evidently an old crater (all the rock about Elbrouz is volcanic). We walked round this ridge and visited all the summits which are three in number. Under the furthest boss of rock we found shelter and a quite endurable temperature.

Running about on the ridge we none of us felt any inconvenience from the rarity of the atmosphere. Our porters pointed out the neighbouring valleys while we tried to identify the peaks in view. To the south and east the view was cloudless. We saw the mountains of the Turkish frontier, I believe the Black Sea, and the chain of the Caucasus ; the latter looked magnificent. The Pennines from Mt. Blanc are nothing compared to the east chain seen from Elbrouz. The Caucasian peaks are sharper and the groups finer. To the north the steppe was covered with fleecy vapours. We were on the top from

10.20 till about 11 and before leaving it we built a stone man on the first peak which appeared to be a trifle the highest. We had some difficulty in reconciling the shape of the summit with its appearance as seen from a distance either from the south or north, when two peaks of equal height separated by a considerable hollow are visible. The gap between the second and third summits we visited was not more than 15 ft. deep, and we were surprised at its being so conspicuous from a distance. At the same time, we walked all round the ridge and I saw that on the west the slopes fell away abruptly towards the Karatchai, and the light clouds which were sweeping up in this direction could scarcely have concealed any summit nearly equal in height to that on which we were.

The descent was tiresome over the rocks, as they were so easy one longed to throw away the rope and 'skedaddle.' At our old halting place we stopped to feed and at 1 P.M. I broke the icicles out of my moustache which had been there since 3 A.M.

The snow was still in good order and we quickly returned to our bivouac and thence to the Alp, where we were enthusiastically hugged and kissed by the other porters and shepherds, who were naturally much pleased by the success of their compatriots, and had apparently never expected to see us again. I felt one of my ankles rather weak the last hour. Next morning it was so stiff I could hardly walk and I was glad to avail myself of a mount on a baggage horse, but in two or three hours the stiffness entirely passed off and I walked into Urustpih [*sic*] at 4 miles an hour. I suppose it was the effect of cold, particularly as our men stupidly mislaid my gaiters the night before and I had to walk without them.

The two porters who reached the top deserve great credit as they came on their own account, being engaged and paid only to the bivouac; they were almost snow-blind the next day. Of course their success has persuaded all the village of the reality of the ascent; the princes are highly delighted, and come in and remark 'Mingy Tau' at intervals.

My firm belief, in which I am supported by the opinion of all my companions, is that we were on the western of the two summits seen from below and that the easternmost point of the ridge we had struck in ascending appears from a distance as a second summit.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The first ascent of the west summit of Elbruz was made in 1874 by F. Gardiner, F. C. Grove, and H. Walker. Gardiner read a paper to the Club: 'An ascent of Elbruz,' on December 18, 1874. This was printed in *A.J.* 7. 113, and Freshfield's comments (footnote, p. 121) may be quoted: 'After hearing Mr. Gardiner's narrative I can no longer feel any doubt that Elbruz has two distinct peaks, and that the points reached in 1868 and in 1874 were not the same. Nothing short of such convincing evidence could, however, have made me believe that the clouds about at the time we were on the east summit could have completely concealed from men anxiously on the look-out for it, a peak of equal height. The depth of the intervening hollow proves to be far greater than we expected to find it, and the fact that we could see an unbroken snow-slope, falling 1,000 ft. from our feet to the west into the mists, no doubt helped to convince us that the three-headed summit on which we stood was the only top of the mountain, and that the gap in it must be the gap seen from Poti and Pätigorsk.'