
Leslie Stephen: the Mountaineer as Married Man

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(Plate 71)

Following his marriage to Harriet Marian (Minnie) Thackeray in 1867, Leslie Stephen wrote 'The Regrets of a Mountaineer', an article published anonymously in the *Cornhill Magazine* in the same year. Even though Stephen does not state explicitly in this essay that he has turned from the hazards of climbing as a result of marriage, some of his readers recognised the background to the essay. In fact, C E Mathews, a fellow member of the Alpine Club, ridiculed the writer for his 'preposterous assumption'. A married man himself, Mathews declared that Stephen had 'misconceived the necessities of matrimony'.¹

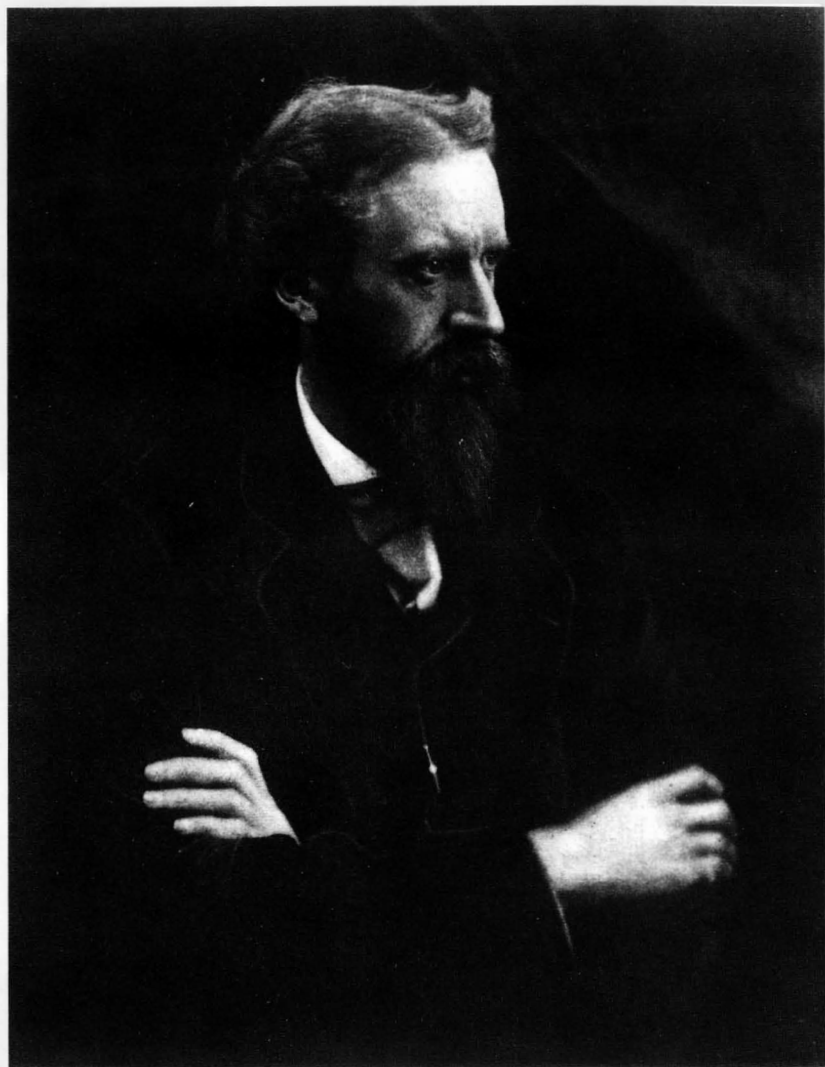
This bracing ridicule from Mathews was probably quite just. As Virginia Woolf observed, her father was much given to self-dramatisation and self-pity. The placing of his essay 'The Regrets of a Mountaineer' at the close of each edition of *The Playground of Europe* is indeed an illustration of this tendency. Moreover, Stephen did not abandon mountaineering altogether. In 1871 he made a first ascent of Mont Mallet ('that child of my old age'), and in 1873 he crossed from Chamonix to Courmayeur by way of a new pass, which he named the Col des Hirondelles. He also made a further ascent of Mont Blanc in 1873 in order to experience sunset at the summit. He even contemplated an essay entitled 'The Relapse of a Mountaineer'.

But while some ascents and scrambles are well known from Stephen's publications, there were many other excursions during his married years, and it is often possible to follow his movements quite closely by reference to unpublished family letters.

During the eight years of Stephen's first marriage (1867-75), he missed an annual excursion to Switzerland only during the summer of 1868 when he visited the United States. The first visit was on honeymoon, and one is mainly indebted here to Minnie Stephen's letters to her mother and to Caroline Emilia Stephen, her husband's sister. Admittedly, Minnie Stephen is sometimes rather vague about routes. In writing of their progress from Grindelwald to Martigny, she remarks on four passes but admits to being unable to distinguish between them. Fortunately, Stephen's advice to Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior the previous year about travel in Switzerland makes it possible to reconstruct their probable route. In writing of this particular region, he had outlined the following itinerary:

Grindelwald to Lauterbrunnen by Wengern Alp.

Lauterbrunnen to Kandersteg either by Tschingel Glacier (about



71. Leslie Stephen (1832–1904).
From a photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron. (p226)

12 hours walk) or by Mürren and over Dundergrat Pass (about 14 hours, very beautiful but hard walking). Kandersteg to Leukerbad across Gemmi Pass.

On these excursions, Minny Stephen had sometimes travelled by mule, while her husband walked.

From Martigny, they subsequently set out for Zermatt – ‘over some more little passes that Leslie has invented’, his wife remarked. By a combination of rail and carriage, they first travelled to Sierre and then by mule and foot they approached Zermatt by way of St Luc and Zinal. For Minny Stephen, Zermatt was undoubtedly the high point of the honeymoon. After a week there, during which they enjoyed ‘scrambling picnics’ every day, she declared it ‘the jolliest place in all Switzerland’. The only shadow that fell across the delight was that of the Matterhorn itself. In the moonlight, Minny Stephen thought it looked ‘like a great hooky sort of gleaming ghost. I always think that it will come & poke its great hook nose into the windows.’

In 1870, Stephen travelled alone to Switzerland, and his almost daily letters to his wife are intended to reassure her about his safety. His first excursion was from Grindelwald to Eggishorn by way of the Fiescherhörner and the Monch-Joch. ‘I have been 3 or 4 times through the Fish-horns [sic],’ he assured her, ‘and the route is as safe as Piccadilly.’ However, the route proved to be more arduous than Stephen anticipated. On their first day they had to cross a crevassed glacier and they took almost 12 hours to arrive at the new hut near the Fiescherhörner. The next day’s progress to Eggishorn also presented some difficulties. ‘The moraine hurt my feet and the rope wearied my waist,’ Stephen reported, ‘and my mouth got parched and my knees weak & at last I could hardly crawl up the ridge which we had to cross.’ At this point Stephen seems to have regretted the whole excursion. ‘Oh my darling,’ he exclaims, ‘it is so wretched to go back to being a bachelor!’ But after meeting some fellow members of the Alpine Club (Hinchcliff, Hardy, Walroth, Mathews, Reilly), Stephen’s mood improved immensely. He reported on a ‘lovely walk’ from Visp to Saas and a crossing over the Alphubel-Joch (‘which I first discovered’) to Zermatt. ‘In a day or two more,’ he declared, ‘I could polish off any mountain or anybody here.’ He even thought of climbing the Bietschhorn, a mountain which numbered among his ‘firsts’ in 1859. It was, he remarked, ‘a nice safe mountain with a splendid view.’ But poor weather prevented this attempt.

It was on his next solo visit to Switzerland, in 1872, that Stephen again climbed the Bietschhorn. But he seems to have experienced a ‘let down’ on this occasion. ‘I am pretty well decided that this shall be my last big mountain,’ he ruefully admitted. ‘I really don’t care about it enough.’ When others set out from Chamonix for the Aiguille Verte, he decided it was ‘too much trouble’.

The following year he seems to have been influenced by his wife when others set out to climb the Aiguille de Blaitière – ‘a horrid looking knife of a rock,’ according to Minny Stephen. ‘As Leslie saw that I did not like the look of it he stayed behind,’ she wrote. ‘I think I should have let him go if I had known that the gentlemen whose walking powers I doubted would be turned back in half an hour.’ It was, however, during this same visit that Stephen crossed the Col des

Hirondelles – ‘the last great pass in the Alps which had not been done,’ according to his wife.

The exploration of this pass was Stephen’s last significant achievement in the Alps. The following year he was again in Switzerland alone, and his visit took on a distinctly elegiac tone when he went to Courmayeur where James Marshall, a former climbing companion, had just been killed. In 1875, he had no premonition of the imminent death of his wife when they travelled again to Switzerland, but this visit – and, indeed, Switzerland itself – was to be coloured with sentiment following her death the following winter. Many years later, Stephen was to write: ‘I always . . . associate my Minny with the Alps in which she and I and our child passed so many happy hours . . . I always seem to see her as she sat with her infant in such perfect confidence under the great mountains.’ Grindelwald, in particular, where they had spent much of the final summer, was always to be for him a virtual shrine.

In 1877, during the period when he was a widower, Stephen made his first winter expedition to the Alps – ‘partly for the sake of a holiday,’ he was to remark, ‘partly because the Oberland is to me a sacred place.’ The visit was an unqualified success. ‘Had I the pen of Ruskin,’ Stephen wrote to C E Norton, his American friend, ‘I could not describe to you a tithe of the tender, melancholy inspiring glories of the Alps in January. They surpass all I had fancied. I could grow rhapsodical . . .’ These literary misgivings did not prevent Stephen from writing ‘The Alps in Winter’, in which he reflects on his dreamlike, visionary experiences during this visit. His future visits were all to take place in the winter.

His second wife, the former Julia Duckworth, did not, however, share his delight in the Alps. Following their marriage in 1878, Leslie Stephen usually travelled there alone, perplexed by his wife’s aversion to the region since he thought that she had a temperamental affinity with it. ‘Why do you remind me of the Alps?’ he asked in a letter to her the year before their marriage. ‘Because, dearest, the Alps make me feel better & yet have a touch of melancholy & sternness about them. They are inaccessible or nearly so. Very often but to see them, even a corner of them in the distance, gives me a peculiar thrill which I cannot describe. And in all that there is something of you.’

During his winter excursions, Stephen found pleasure in following routes he had earlier taken during the summer. In 1879, for example, he crossed from Grindelwald to Meiringen by way of Scheidegg. On the ascent he was able to use the tracks made by sledges which had brought down hay from the high alps. ‘Then came a change,’ he noted. ‘There were no tracks on the other side, and we had to pound through deep snow.’ Along the way, there was ‘almost perpetual grumbling’ of avalanches. From Meiringen, he was subsequently to walk to Sarnen by way of the Brünig Pass – again, a familiar route. As a result of these excursions, he concluded that the difficulty of travel in Switzerland in winter was much exaggerated – in fact, ‘a complete bugbear’.

In January 1887 he delighted in a week’s stay at Zermatt. He walked there from Visp – reporting on arrival to his wife: ‘I am *quite well* & I walked 25 miles in the snow today without an effort.’ At the Hotel Zermatterhof (owned by Seiler), he dined on soup, salmon, beef, fowl and an omelette, having worked up

an appetite by excursions on the Gornergrat and the 'lower slopes of the Mettelhorn'. 'It is the real genuine Alps,' he concluded 'which nobody sees in the summer.'

Inigorated by this sojourn, Stephen then travelled to Leukerbad in order to take the Gemmi Pass to Kandersteg. At Leukerbad he found all the big inns shut, and at the inn at Kandersteg he was the first visitor in three months. Kandersteg was one of his 'holy places' – sanctified by his visits there with his first wife.

However, it was not only nostalgia which drew Stephen back to Switzerland. He also made some new excursions. In order to visit John Addington Symonds, he journeyed to Davos in 1881. The most challenging pedestrian section of this excursion was that from Andermatt over the Oberalp Pass. Following this crossing in some heavy, slushy snow, Stephen wrote: 'If we had not been able to cross the Oberalp, the whole thing would have been a failure, but this justifies us . . .' Some ascents were also possible during the winter. In 1879, while at Grindelwald, Stephen noticed Coolidge climbing the Schwarzhorn, and he made use of his tracks for an ascent the following day – an ascent which he repeated in 1881.

Increasingly, though, a shadow falls on Stephen's winter visits to the Alps. During his earlier visits, it was possible to feel some sense of distinction and individuality about the enterprise. By 1888, he was sitting down to dinner at Grindelwald with 20 other visitors. A few years later, in 1891, he lamented the arrival of the railway at Grindelwald. 'It is hardly worth coming now . . . with all these cocknies rampaging about,' he grumbled. Even more disturbing was the way he was now being viewed by others. He seems not to have been delighted by his celebrity as a pioneer alpinist. When approached by a stranger who recalled seeing him at Zermatt 25 years previously, he remarked of such individuals: 'They seem to consider me as in the class of retired prize fighters who set up public houses, & they imagine the curiosity to be flattering.' With his tendency to self-pity, he remarked further: 'I am a sort of anachronism here. One ought to be young & able to climb; or old & lazy with a darling wife to loaf about with. I am a sort of hybrid, neither old nor young & my wife is away. Well I shall be with her very soon.'

The only pleasure in the Alps he could contemplate at such moments was that of introducing his children to the region. But his journey in 1893 with Vanessa and his stepson Gerald Duckworth was not entirely successful. At Davos he was dismayed by their sauntering around the shops, and experienced days of 'absolute suppression'.

Stephen's last visit to the Alps was in 1894. Throughout his winter excursions he had always travelled with the painter Gabriel Loppé and his wife, and he now visited them at their home in Chamonix. He had not visited the region for 20 years and found it less changed than other regions. 'I never loved this like the Oberland,' he remarked, 'but it takes me further back.' On modest walks in the vicinity in the company of Loppé (who was, according to Stephen, 'thoroughly contented & good humoured'), Stephen seems also to have finally experienced some quiet contentment.

In 1903, during his final illness, Leslie Stephen presented the Alpine Club with two old ice-axes and an alpenstock. Sir Martin Conway, the President,

wrote him a letter of sympathy and thanks on behalf of the Club. Stephen replied on 12 December 1903: '... those quaint old poles,' he wrote, 'reminded me of some of the pleasantest days of my life.'²

REFERENCES

- 1 *AJ*4, 66, 1868.
- 2 *AJ*22, 488, 1905.

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