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SUZANNE STRAWTHER  
**‘I Was Accompanied by My Wife’**

The ‘Discovery’ of Mrs J Curtis Leman



One of Edward Whymper’s lantern slides of the Matterhorn, taken in 1893,  
16 years after Margaret Curtis Lemon’s ascent in 1877.

**W**ritten in the *Führerbuch* of the Zermatt guide Franz Biener is a short sentence written by Alpine Club member J Curtis Leman.

*Franz ‘Weisshorn’ Biener accompanied me as guide on the 28th August up the Weisshorn and on the 31st when I was accompanied by my wife up the Matterhorn. [Signed and dated] Zermatt Sept. 1st 1877.*

These few words both intrigued and excited me when I first read them; 1877 was only six years after Lucy Walker's first female ascent of the Matterhorn. Who was this 'wife'? My curiosity was further piqued when I crossreferenced other sources and found a second entry about the climb in the *Führerbuch* of Aloys Pollinger, the St Niklaus guide, also written by J Curtis Leman.

*A Pollinger accompanied me as second guide up the Matterhorn on the 30th, 31st August when I was accompanied by my wife to whom he was more particularly allocated in the ascent. I was entirely satisfied with his care and attention and can recommend him as a careful and attentive guide.*

I felt affronted on the wife's behalf. She had not signed her name to the entry as often happened with climbing parties, certainly as Mrs E P Jackson always did. She would sign: 'Mrs M Jackson CAF'. And Edward Patten Jackson wrote in Aloys Pollinger's *Führerbuch* on 15 September 1878, '... he has accompanied us ...' and 'We have found him an Excellent Guide ...'

*Führerbücher* are quite small notebooks, to fit into a jacket pocket, and it became customary in the 1840s and 1850s for Alpine guides to carry them and for their clients, who had engaged them for a particular climb or climbs, to write a few words in them about the climb and the conduct of the guide. Their status altered when the various guides' corporations were set up; they became proof of a guide's right to work, bearing the annual stamp of the authorities under which the Alpine guides were organised. Detailed physical descriptions were included so there was no chance of impersonation. Also included was a detailed list of tariffs charged for each climb. (Clients were also responsible for the expenses of a guide: transport, food, lodgings and any porters used.)

Climbing with a guide was the norm until the early post-Second World War years. Practically it made sense, with few written descriptions of routes. The Rev Arthur Gilbert Girdlestone's book *The High Alps Without Guides* (1870) was badly received by his contemporaries; he was seen as foolhardy. Ball's Alpine guidebooks, published in the 1860s and 1870s and written by John Ball, the Club's first president, did little more than point you in the right direction. So engaging an experienced Alpine guide who knew the route made good sense. Though the system was not foolproof: the Misses Pigeon, Anna and Ellen, two sisters from Clapham, complained in their book *Peaks and Passes* (1885) how they were 'out for 17¾ hrs and no summit!', when their guide failed to find it.

So who was 'the wife'? And who was her husband? Never having heard of either of them, it was lucky I was in the AC Library when I discovered the Curtis Lemans so I could start immediately on the trail to find out more. One reference led to another, and I was able to follow a paper trail that revealed further details about their Alpine climbing and more particularly Mrs J Curtis Leman's achievements.

The entry for him in Mumm's *Alpine Club Register* gives the date of his election to the Club as March 1876 and he died a member in 1897. In 1862 he



Lucy Walker, photographed for the Ladies' Alpine Club during her presidency, which began in 1913. Walker made the first female ascent of the Matterhorn in 1871. Margaret Curtis Lemon's ascent was therefore an early female repeat. No extant photograph of her could be found.

had married Margaret, born Jane Margaret Hart in 1834, daughter of Lt Gen Henry George Hart, the originator of *Hart's Army List*, in Calcutta, now Kolkata, in Bengal. The eldest of nine children, her mother was Frances Alicia Okes of Wynberg, South Africa. Three of Margaret's brothers served with distinction in the army. Gen Sir Reginald Clare Hart won the Victoria Cross in the Second Anglo-Afghan War, when aged 30 and a lieutenant, the date of his bravery being 31 January 1879. He received his decoration from Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle, and his son later recalled that the pins from which the medal was suspended were pushed not just into his father's tunic but into his flesh.



Mrs Curtis Lemon's guide, Franz Biner.

James Curtis Leman, a London solicitor, was born in London 1833, the eldest of nine children of James Leman, president of the Incorporated Law Society in 1863-4. Curtis and Margaret married at St Mark's, Surbiton on 14 August 1862. They had seven children. The first in 1863 was stillborn but they went on to have Caroline Margaret, born 1864, Alicia Isabel in 1865, George Curtis in 1867, Downton Curtis in 1868, Reginald Curtis in 1871 and finally Ethel Maud in 1874: seven children in 11 years.

It is interesting to link the ages of the various children with Margaret's Alpine seasons and speculate on the practicalities involved. The 1881 census for their home address at 2, Ravenna Road, Putney Hill, London, lists in addition to family members, three servants: a cook, a housemaid and Caroline B Kage, a 17-year-old nurse born in Switzerland. So presumably nurses were engaged to look after the children whilst Margaret went off climbing: radical in itself for the time.

Her contemporaries tended to be either unmarried, like Lucy Walker or the Misses Pigeon (until Ellen married after their last Alpine season of 1876), Meta Brevoort, aunt of W B Coolidge. The son of Mrs Aubrey Le Blond, Arthur St Vincent Burnaby, was looked after by his grandmother, while Mrs Henry Freshfield's son Douglas (AC president 1893-5) was actively involved in the planning and execution of the family's Alpine excursions from an early age (see *AJ* vol XXX, pp187-9).

Fortunately Mumm does mention Margaret's climbs alongside those of her husband and though not mentioned by name, Curtis mentions his wife, a guide and himself as witnessing a circular rainbow on 7 August 1871, whilst standing on the summit of the Brevent at about four or five in the afternoon, according to his article in the *Alpine Journal* (vol XII).

That same season of 1871 Margaret climbed the Strahlhorn, Breithorn and Monte Rosa. In 1877 she climbed the Matterhorn and Weisshorn, in 1878 Mont Blanc and in 1880 the Grivola, Col de Lauzon, Col de Valpelline, Rimpfischhorn, Rothorn and Furggloch. For 1881 there is no reference to Margaret in Curtis' list of climbs that season.

Their season in the Dauphiné in 1882 was particularly successful. The Lemans' climbs were recorded in the *Annuaire de la Société des Touristes du Dauphiné* for that year. Curtis was a member, as were a number of AC stalwarts of the day: the Pilkington brothers, Frederick Gardiner, Coolidge.

(The society's name rather belies its intent and purpose.) So: 16 August 1882, Col de la Lauze; 17 August, Col du Clôt des Cavales; 18 August, the Tête de la Maye. '*Première ascension par une dame anglaise*' is recorded for this last but was probably true of the other climbs.

It was on 28 August that she made the first female ascent of Mont Pelvoux. The party included the Curtis Lemans, the guide Pierre Gaspard *fils* and two porters. They left the Refuge de Provence at 4am and arrived at the summit at 11am, where the party was met by bad weather, snow and squally wind. '*La courageuse ascensioniste*,' i.e. Margaret, sheltered out of the wind on Pointe Durand, whilst the rest of the party made a brief visit to the second summit Pointe Puiseux, 11m higher. They returned to the hut in five hours and then down to the valley and Vallouise for midnight.

In 1883 there are only references for Curtis' climbs in Mumm. Margaret died in 1896 and her husband in 1897. Unfortunately, there is no obituary in the *Alpine Journal* for Curtis, despite still being a member on his death. He is buried in Highgate cemetery with his mother and father and two of his sisters, Caroline and Julia. Again, unfortunately, I could find no record of Margaret's grave. Curtis Leman's brother Robert Edward Leman was also an AC member (elected February 1876), Robert's father-in-law Henry Trower was an original AC member, as was Henry's school friend William Longman (AC president 1872-4) of the publishing house Longman, Green & Co. I mention these familial interconnections to give a flavour of the world in which Margaret lived.

It is frustrating that there is no record of her 'voice', of her reactions to her achievements. A platform for recording exclusively female climbs and accounts only appeared in 1907 with the founding of the Ladies' Alpine Club and in 1921 with the Pinnacle Club.

The Longman connection is interesting in so much as it was the Longmans who published Mrs Henry Warwick Cole's book *A Lady's Tour round Monte Rosa* in 1859. (Henry Warwick Cole was an AC member and a London solicitor.) They also published Mrs Henry Freshfield's *Alpine Byways* (1861) and *A Summer Tour of the Grisons and Italian Valleys of the Bernina* (1862) and similarly Amelia Blandford Edwards' *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys* (1873).

Unlike these women, finding information about Margaret's climbs and who she was had to be done through her father and husband. Mrs Jackson, mentioned earlier, née Margaret Anne Sanderson, was invited to submit an article for the 1889 *Alpine Journal* and to read a paper before the Yorkshire Ramblers' Club in November 1903. Margaret Leman presumably was never invited or encouraged to record her achievements; tantalisingly we shall never know. A recent symposium in January 2023 addressed the question of why so few women go on expeditions. We might equally ask the question of why so few women wrote and indeed write about their exploits. I am not sure what this all says, or means: I shall leave it up to you. But I am very glad that I stumbled across her.

Franz Weiss her Biner  
 accompanied me as guide  
 on the 28<sup>th</sup> and up the Weisshorn  
 and on the 31<sup>st</sup> when I was  
 accompanied by my wife up  
 the Matterhorn -  
 I have no reason to alter  
 my previous praise of  
 your back of his capabilities  
 of powers and I should  
 recommend him as a good  
 & careful guide for any  
 expedition. <sup>known difficult</sup>  
 J. Curtis Lemon  
 Zermatt  
 Sept 1. 1897.

On Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup> Franz Weiss her  
 Biner accompanied me and  
 some friends over the St. Thedis-  
 dule pass. I was so much  
 pleased with him that I  
 engaged him for the ascent  
 of Monte Rosa on the 5<sup>th</sup>. We  
 made the ascent by the rocks  
 on the Sol de Ley side. I found  
 him in every way a first  
 rate guide, and as pleasant  
 a companion as he was a  
 careful helper in the difficult  
 parts. He is to be much recom-  
 mended; and I shall certainly  
 employ him in any more  
 ascents I may have to make  
 E. H. C. Wellesley

The entry in Biner's Führerbuch detailing Mrs Curtis Lemon's ascent of the Matterhorn.