MOUNTAIN MISADVENTURES.

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The "Alpine Journal", like the telegrams from Madrid, is a chronicle of successes hardly broken by the mention of defeat ; it tells of difficulties surmounted, of peaks ascended, and passes made ; yet hardly a word of the miserable failures that fall to the lot of every climber. But we who are behind the scenes know that mountaineering has its *revers de la médaille* — that there are fifty things which may entirely make the pleasure and success of a trip. Chiefest of these is bad weather ; for it either entails monotonous inaction in some dismal inn, or involves actual risk if you choose to brave it amidst the snowfields and glaciers of the Alps.

The object of my present paper is to show how great that risk may be, and from the experience gained in a persistent run of unlucky expeditions to deduce a moral, which, unlike the storybooks, I will state, and try to justify afterwards — it is, Never start on any expedition without a good reserve of provisions in case of emergency.

On July 26th of last year I left Grenoble with Jean Martin for three days' scramble before joining forces with Mr. Middlemore and Jaun at La Grave for an attack on the Meije. Our start was made in pouring rain, along one of those roads laid down in dismal perspectives of

> The bigger trees, the lesser trees,
> So on ad infinitum,

which recall with gloomy distinctness one's first drawing lessons. Happily monotony is soothing, and in spite of a springless vehicle with animals to match, which we had hired for the modest sum of sixty francs to take us to Bourg d'Oisans, I slept without a check, through our drive of 6 hrs. While waiting for some food at Bourg, I had a conversation with a most intelligent Gaul, who declined to admit that France had been conquered and overrun by Germans. Not a bit of it : each man in the Teuton hosts was a Frenchman like himself, sons and grandsons every one of them of Napoleon's invading soldiers. After a very good luncheon, we shouldered our knapsacks, and, leaving the main road which goes by La Grave to Briançon, bore to the right up the valley of the Vénéon.

That night we slept at a shepherd's hut, 3 hrs. above Venosc, whence we intended to attack the Pic de la Muzelle on the morrow. Our hosts were two Provençal shepherds, in charge of large flocks which they bring each spring from Provence for the sake of the rich pasturage of the Dauphiné Alps, The elder of the two was a tall man with a bearing of much dignity somewhat marred by a good deal of dirt ; his woe-begone face clearly showed that the world had gone wrong with him, and the only word he seemed to know was "*misère,"* pronounced in a most melancholy tone. This word, repeated at intervals of every one or two minutes, on the most inappropriate as well as the most appropriate occasions—when, for instance, he had taken a long pull at our wine-flask, or when, again, he burnt his mouth with a lump of hot potato out of our soup—became a little monotonous towards the end of the evening.

His companion was quite of another stamp—short, fat, and talkative, with a laugh for ever on his face, he acted as a perfect antidote to the other, and these two odd creatures, as dissimilar as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, living sometimes for weeks together without seeing another human face, seemed to have nothing in common but their dirt and their hospitality. It was indeed with the greatest difficulty that we induced them to take a few francs in return for the bread, milk, and shelter they had given us, and when we parted in the morning it was on my side at least with real regret.

[...]

Almost everybody who has written about Dauphine has mentioned its fleas, but so far as I know, no one has yet chronicled its flies—that night made me alive to the fact that they can be quite as intolerable a nuisance. Our *chambre à. deux* literally swarmed with them, and as soon as day dawned all hope of sleep was at an end; every exposed bit of flesh was alive with them—they crawled over one's hands, they tickled one's nose, and were generally as offensively curious as only flies can be. In vain I hid under the sheets—the heat and the fleas soon drove me out again, and at last in sheer despair I dressed. There lay Martin "sweetly dreaming," evidently insect-proof !

That day, one of intolerable heat, we strolled on to La Bérarde, and having engaged Rodier fils to accompany us to the Brèche next day (being under the impression that it was difficult to find), we retired to roost in the hay-loft, where, for the first time since leaving England, I got a good night's rest.

The morning of the 29th broke wet and stormy, and Rodier strongly advised me not to start : this, however, was out of the question, as I was due at La Grave on that day to keep my appointment with Mr. Middlemore. After waiting an hour, to give the weather a chance, we started in drizzling rain at 5 A. M. Desolate as the Val des Etançons must always look, it appeared doubly gloomy that morning, with its never-ending monotony of rock and moraine unrelieved by a single patch of green. As we neared the glacier, the weather fortunately cleared, and the clouds, which till then had enveloped everything, began to mount with that marvellous rapidity only noticeable in mountain districts, leaving half revealed the mighty cliffs of the Meije towering 5,000 feet almost sheer above us. As the wind caught and carried into the air the frozen sheets of snow on his summit, the old mountain looked like some giant bill distributor throwing his advertisements about. Entirely protected from the wind, we whiled away an hour and a half, searching with our telescope for any feasible line of attack. Having satisfied ourselves that on this side the mountain presented enormous, if not insurmountable, difficulties, we shouldered our packs and made tracks for the Brèche, which we reached at 11.45. Meanwhile the weather had become worse again, and during the last part of the ascent it was snowing heavily ; the wind too, from which we had been protected on the south side of the col, was so strong that we were absolutely obliged to crawl over to the north side. Our position was by no means a pleasant one ; neither Martin nor I knew anything of the pass, and Rodier, who had told us overnight that he had crossed it more than once, seemed to know no more ; and although sure of the exact bearing of La Grave, we could not, owing to the fast falling snow, see further than three or four hundred yards in advance : added to this it was intensely cold. Having paid Rodier 20 francs (a perfect waste of money, as it is impossible to mistake the way to the Brèche from the Val des Etançons, and, as I have said, he could not give us the least clue to the descent on the La Grave side), we dismissed him, hoping devoutly that he might break his—well, his ice-axe we'll say—on the way down. By keeping away to the right of the Brèche and down a steep slope, we crossed the crevasses which lay at its base without difficulty. We then bore to the left across a plateau on which the snow lay very deep ; floundering through this sometimes waist deep we reached the upper icefall of the glacier, and after crossing several crevasses became involved in a perfect network of them. After a consultation, we determined to try to the right, but met with no better success, as again we were checked by an absolute labyrinth ; at last about five o'clock we took to some rocks which divide the glacier into two branches. Meanwhile the snow was falling thicker and thicker, and driven by the strong NW. wind which caught up and eddied about what had already fallen, it appeared to come from every quarter at once. It was impossible to see more than a few yards in advance, and the rocks which under ordinary circumstances would have been easy, were, with their coating of at least four inches of snow, much the reverse, as it was quite impossible to see where to put hand or foot. Our only trust was in our compass, which assured us that while keeping to the back-bone of this ridge we were descending in an almost direct line towards La Grave.

We had at most two hours of daylight before us, but there was still a hope that by following our present line we should get off the glacier before dark. How I regretted now the time lost in the morning ! A little before seven we were brought to a standstill ; our further direct descent was cut off by a precipice, while the rocks on either side fell almost sheer to the glaciers beneath. It was too late to think of looking for an other road, so nothing now remained but to find the best shelter we could and bivouac for the night. We reascended to a small platform we had passed a short time before, and selecting the biggest and most sheltered bit of rock on it, we piled up the few moveable stones there were about, to form the outside wall to our shelter, and having cleared away as much of the snow as we could from the inside, laid our ice-axes across the top as rafters with a sodden macintosh—ironically called a water-proof by Mr. Carter—over all for a roof. Despite this garment I was wet to the skin. Luckily we had each of us a spare flannel shirt and stockings in our knapsacks, but as the meagre dimensions of our shelter would not admit of the struggles attendant on a change, we were obliged to go through the operation outside. I tried to be

cheerful and Martin tried to be facetious as we wrung on our wet shirts while the snow beat on our bare backs, but both attempts were lamentable failures. If up to the present time my readers have not stripped in a snow-storm, let me strongly advise them never to attempt it. Having got through the performance as quickly as possible, we crawled into our shelter, but here again my ill luck followed me, for in entering I managed to tread on the tin wine-flask which Martin had thrown inside, and my weight forcing out the cork, every drop of wine escaped. After packing myself away as well as I could in the shape of a pot-hook, Martin followed and pot-hooked himself alongside me. We were obliged to assume this elementary shape, as the size of our shelter would not admit of our lying straight. All the provisions that remained were then produced. They consisted of a bit of bread about the size of a breakfast roll, one-third of a small pot of preserved meat, about two ounces of raw bacon with the hide on, and half a small flask of a filthy compound called Genèpie, a sort of liqueur ; besides this, we mustered between us barely a pipe-full of tobacco, and eight matches in a metal-box. The provisions I divided into three equal parts—one-third for that night's supper, and the remaining two-thirds for the next day. I need not enlarge on the miseries of that night. The wind blew through the chinks between the stones, bringing the snow with it, until the place seemed ail chinks ; then the macintosh with its weight of snow would come in upon us, and we had with infinite difficulty to prop it up again, only to go through the same operation an hour later ; at last, in sheer despair, we let it lie where it fell, and found to our relief it kept us warmer in that position. The snow never ceased one moment although the wind had fallen, and when morning broke there must have been nearly a foot of it around and over us. A more desolate picture than that dawn I have never seen. Snow everywhere. The rocks buried in it, and not a point peeping out to relieve the un-broken monotony. The sky full of it ; without a break to relieve its leaden sameness, and the heavy flakes falling with that persistent silence which adds so much to the desolation of such a scene.

I was all for starting ; for making some attempt either to get down, or to recross the col. Martin was dead against it— and I think now he was right. First of all we could not have seen more than a few yards ahead ; the rocks would have been considerably worse than they were the evening before, and if we had once got involved amongst the crevasses it was on the cards that we shouldn't get clear of them again : added to this, even if we could hit ouf the col, what with want of sleep and food, and the fatigue consequent on several hours' floundering in deep snow, we might not have strength to reach it. At any rate we decided not to start until it cleared sufficiently to let us see where we were going. Our meagre stock of provisions was redivided into three parts, one of which we ate for breakfast. I then produced the pipe, but to our horror we found the matches were still damp. Martin, who is a man of resource, immediately opened his shirt and put the box containing them under his arm to dry. Meanwhile the snow never ceased, and the day wore on without a sign of the weather breaking. If it had not been for the excitement of those matches, I do not know how we should have got through that day; at last, however, after about 6 hrs. of Martin's fond embrace, one consented to burn, and I succeeded in lighting the pipe. We took turns at twelve whiffs each, and no smoke, I can conscientiously say, have I ever enjoyed like that one. During this never-ending day we got a few snatches of sleep, but the cold consequent on our wet clothes was so great, our position so cramped, and the rocks on which we lay so abominably sharp, that these naps were of the shortest duration.

A little before six the snow ceased, and for a moment the sun tried to wink at us through a chink in his snow-charged blanket, before he went to bed—long enough, however, for us to see La Grave far below, with every alp almost down to the village itself covered with its white mantle.

And then, as our second night closes in, the snow recommences, and we draw closer together even than before ; for we feel that during the long hours to come we must economize to the fullest the little animal heat left in us.

That night I learnt to shiver, not the ordinary shivers, but fits lasting a quarter of an hour, during which no amount of moral persuasion could keep your limbs under control ; and it was so catching ! If either of us began a solo, the other was sure to join in, and we shivered a duet until quite exhausted. As we had nothing to drink, I had swallowed a considerable quantity of snow to quench my thirst, and this acting on an almost empty stomach produced burning heat

within, while the cold, which was now intense, acting externally, induced fever and lightheadedness, and once or twice I caught myself rambling. Martin, too, was affected in the same way. The long hours wore on, and still there was no sign of better weather. Towards midnight things looked very serious. Martin, who had behaved like a brick, thought "it was very hard to perish like this in the flower of his age," and I, too, thought of writing a line as well as *I* was able in my pocket-book, bequeathing its contents to my finder, then of sleeping if I could and waking up with the Houris; but I had the laugh of him afterwards, because he thought aloud and I to myself. However, this mood did not last long, and after shaking hands, I do not quite know why, because we had not quarrelled, we cuddled up again, and determined, whatever the weather, to start at daybreak. In half an hour the snow ceased, the wind backed to the S., and the temperature rose as if by magic ; while the snow melting above trickled down in little streams upon us. We cleared the snow off the macintosh, and putting it over us again, slept like logs in comparative warmth. When I awoke the sun was well up, and on looking round I could hardly realize the scène. Not a cloud in the sky ! Not a breath of wind ! The rocks around us which yesterday were absolutely buried, were showing their black heads everywhere, and only a few inches of snow remained, so rapid had been the thaw ; while far away to the N. the snow-capped summits of the Pennine Alps stood out in bold relief against the cloudless sky.

I woke Martin, and at a quarter to six, after thirty-five hours' burial, we crawled out of our shelter. At first neither of us could stand, so chilled were we by long exposure, and so cramped by our enforced position ; but after a good thaw in the hot sun we managed to hobble about, and pack the knapsacks ! After eating the few scraps that remained, we started at seven o'clock up the ridge that we had descended two days before.

We were very shaky on our legs at first, but at each step the stiffness seemed to wear off, and after half an hour we quite recovered their use ; but there remained an all-pervading sense of emptiness inside that was not exhilarating. After ascending a short distance, and with my telescope carefully examining the rocks, we determined to descend to the glacier below us (the western branch), and crossing this get on to some more rocks beneath the lower ice-fall. If we could get down these our way seemed clear.

I won't trouble you with the details of the descent : suffice it to say, that without encountering any difficulty we stepped on to grass about twelve o'clock, and descending green slopes still patched here and there with snow (which would have provided sufficient Edelweiss for all the hats of the S. A. C.), we arrived safely at La Grave, after a pleasant little outing of fifty-six hours ! Mr. Middlemore, despairing of my coming, had started for England the night before, and had left Jaun to await my arrival.

After a hot bath, and some bread-crumbs soaked in warm wine, I went to bed, and the next morning I awoke as well as I am now, with the exception of stiffness in the knees, and a slight frost-bite on one hand. Martin, however, who I suspect had eaten a good deal on his arrival, was seized with severe cramp, and for some hours was very ill.

Two days' rest put us all to rights again, and gave us ample time to make arrangements for an attack on the Meije. We whiled away most of the day on the sunny slopes above the village, examining the northern face of the mountain with the telescope ; while the untruthful, but unabashed, Pic lied for our amusement during the evening. As we had determined to sleep as high up on the mountain as possible, and were very likely to be out two nights, we were obliged to engage a porter to carry spare blankets, etc. In this we met with the greatest difficulty; the history of our exposure (probably enormously exaggerated) had got about, and it was a long time before we could find any volunteers. At last, however, two men turned up, and we engaged the younger, a likely-looking young fellow of about twenty-five ; but just before we started, his wife, a leathery-looking person, in point of age his superior by many summers, carried him ignominiously away.

We were then obliged, at the last moment, to fall back upon the other, a tough but somewhat tattered gentleman of about fifty ; he had a wife, too ! but she did not love her lord with the same exuberant affection as the other had shown, and was more than content to let him go *anywhere* and *for any time* for the modest sum of ten francs.

Pic, who from the first had stoutly declined to accompany us, showed us some rocks on the western side of the Glacier de la Meije, where

we should find good shelter, and from which he said we could reach the eastern peak of the mountain in about four hours.

We reascended the slopes which three days before we had descended under such different circumstances, and striking the western part of the Glacier de la Meije, where it is bounded by a ridge of rocks, we made straight for the point near which we were to find shelter for the night. Our porter, who had been very cock-a-hoop on the rocks, quite changed "the burden of his lay" when the ice-work began. He slithered and slipped about in such a pitiable way that I gave him my axe and took his stick. With the energy of despair he drove the axe-head in with such force at each step that in his convulsive efforts to extricate it again he invariably lost his balance, and required perpetual hauling in front, or propping-up behind. At three o'clock we arrived at the camping-ground, and after building an admirable hut we cooked our supper, and rolling ourselves in blankets slept the sleep of the just.

By sunrise next morning we were well on our way up a ridge of rocks which seemed to lead in a direct line towards the eastern peak, but here our folly in trusting to the directions of that arch impostor Pic became manifest, as after an hour's climb we found our further advance completely cut off by a precipice. There was nothing for it but to retrace our steps, and with hearty good wishes for Mr. Pic and the rest of the family, we found ourselves at our starting-point again—time 7 A. M. At the next attempt we reached the ice slope leading to the *arête* without difficulty, and after a good deal of step cutting, and a very pretty bit of rock climbing, stepped on to the eastern summit at 10 minutes to 11. After a thorough examination of the long comb connecting the two peaks we came to the conclusion that it would take at least 8 hrs. to pass it and get back to where we then were, so we determined on returning to our bivouac, then crossing the glacier, and encamping close under the summit of the Bec de l'Homme, which would place us an hour nearer our work in the morning ; added to this the steps were already cut, and this would save us another hour at least. Martin and I descended the rocks which. form the eastern point, and passing on to the ridge leading to the true western summit, satisfied ourselves the way was clear, at any rate for some distance. By five o'clock we had reached the Bec de l'Homme, having picked up our porter on the way, and by seven were eating a comfortable meal in a substantially built shelter. For the benefit of future travellers I may state that by following the rocks forming the eastern boundary of the Glacier de la Meije, you cannot fail to find it, as it is just under the highest point of the ridge, called on the Freuch map "Bec de l'Homme."

That night was very cold, and the wind coming in violent puffs and from no particular direction boded ill for the next day's weather. It proved a true prophet. When day dawned all the west was cloud, and the white mists curling over the crest of the Meije showed us what we had to expect from the south ; while far away in the north where the sun was lighting up the topmost points of the Pennine Alps, Mont Blanc had an ominous nightcap of black cloud enveloping his summit.

We started, however, but had barely reached the ice-wall leading up to the *arête* when the snow commenced. After waiting for half an hour, to see if it really meant business, we were obliged to beat a hasty retreat, and before we arrived at our sleeping-place, our previous footsteps were perfectly obliterated, so thick and persistent had become the downfall. Instead of descending by the glacier we kept entirely to the ridge of rock forming its boundary, and this route future travellers will do well to follow, as it not only saves the labour of step-cutting, but the rocks themselves are so easy that they form a perfect high road. On our way down this ridge, we noticed several upright stumps fixed into the rocks, and on inquiry I found that a company had been formed to collect the electric fluid discharged during storms round the summit of the Bec de l'Homme, and conducting wires had been carried from the top of the mountain to a house in La Grave.

What they were to do with the fluid when they got it, I don't know, as I don't suppose they could bottle it like Bass's beer. However, the company and their house "bust up" one fine morning, when a rather stronger supply of liquid than usual was remitted to them from above, and the gentleman who had undertaken to work the concern was blown through the roof. Since then I believe they have been unable to find a worthy successor to this enterprising booby, and nothing now remains but a few blackened stumps, like folly's signposts, to commemorate this ambitious undertaking. We arrived at La Grave wet to the skin (as usual), and as the weather looked

thoroughly bad, we took a carriage to Grenoble and went on by train to Geneva. I should mention that the porter's name is Pierre Dode : he is a very willing fellow, and the more he carries the better he seems to like it—a trait so rare that we availed ourselves of it to the utmost.

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