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"ON THE KINCHIN LAY."

PROSPECT AND RETROSPECT.

Why do I sit, a melancholy owl, in the desolate halls of Darjeeling, and mope for my birthright, the sunlight, which I have bartered, as George Archibald Bishop so powerfully remarks, for a beastlier mess of pottage then ever Esau guzzled? Why do I watch the Scotch mist pouring through the windows till everything is wet through? Why not get away from the tin kettle pianos which are constantly being thumped by appalling young ladies from the plains, from the cries of innumerable children, from the ladder-like passages which connect any one house with any other house, transforming a shopping tour into an Alpine ascent, and from the very inadequate substitutes for human food which, figuring in the menu under French names, recall with an agony too profound for speech the delights of Paillard's and of Leon's? Why not? Because I am a fool. Because fifteen years of mountain travel have not taught me to come in when it rains. Because the miseries which I suffered on the Baltoro Glacier in 1902 have not been sufficiently impressed on my memory to restrain me from seeking their parallel on the slopes of Kanchenjunga (commonly spelt Kinchinjunga), the third highest mountain on this planet.

I have come on here thus early to make the necessary preparations for out attempt. My old comrade, Doctor Jules Jacot-Guillarmod, who was with me on the 1902 expedition, will join me at the end of July, with one or two other Swiss amateurs. Little or nothing has been published in England or elsewhere on the subject of that journey; and I can do more to explain the nature of the assault which these Himalayan giants require by a few words of retrospect than any other way.

Six Europeans, them, three of them with considerable reputation in the Alps and elsewhere as guideless climbers—I may observe that only the most expert men on the easiest mountains should deliberately handicap themselves by taking "guides," those always incompetent and too often cowardly and

drunken peasants whom, if they have learnt by rule of thumb the way up a few easy Swiss peaks, our Alpine quacks love to extol as the highest type of man—six Europeans, I repeat, left Srinagar in Kashmir early in May, 1902, with 150 coolies for Askoley, the biggest village of the Bralduh Valley in Baltistan on our way to Chogo Ri (K2 of the Indian Survey) 28,250 feet, the second highest measured mountain in the world. This is a four weeks' journey, for though the distance is less and 300 miles the country is so difficult that mileage ceases to be a reliable test of distance. One is badly bruised if on a ten-mile march one knocks one's head against the sky three times. On the Baltoro Glacier itself a march of three or four miles was the utmost compatible with physical wisdom.

At Askoley our caravan was swelled to some three hundred coolies. In a country which affords no supplies a man "eats up his load" in about a month, and our main camp at 19,000 feet was 13 marched beyond Askoley.

It was a wonderful journey. The perfect loveliness of the Vale of Kashmir changes suddenly at the Zoji La, in the course of a single day's march, to the arid wastes of Baltistan. In this country, wherever there is a stream lost amid the great grey rubble heaps which pass for mountains, the natives have levelled and irrigated so that a tiny terraced village here and there, with its tall trees and apricots, suddenly gleams emerald athwart the awful desert of stones, God's rubbish heap, the waste material left over from the stately masterpiece, Creation. Nothing else in the experience of my many years, can match this contrast; the heat, the ugliness, the surly waters of the Indus, the hard neutral blue of the sky, the neutral shapeless despair of the hills, and then, like a flash of a green lizard across one's path, all the coolness and beauty and colour of delicious trees and flowers. Beyond, the unexpected plain of Skardu with its girdling wall of barren crags, where we halt awhile to re-pack, and in whose rich and somber sunsets when we saw "the lead gleam to a surly amethyst" and "Night put forth a paw like a black panther and efface the East", we took a certain holy pleasure, as with primeval awe we watched the whirling columns of visible wind, laden with the impalpable dust of the great hills, sweep through the cirque, thousands of feet high—small wonder that folk yet believe dread stories of the Jinn! Above the wooded loveliness of Shigar, with its roaring river and the glory of far snows beaconing from the north; then the plunge into the gloomy gorge of the Bralduh, with its marvellous freaks of nature, rivers of thick black mud and hot springs

whose overflow leaves a shining silver stain of crystal on the brown rock. Last, the solemn march to No Man's Land, whose portal is the frowning forehead of the glacier, shut in by fantastic steeples of incredible steepness. In its jaws it grips the icy torrent; it is no longer a glacier snout but a face, the face of Dis in Dante's *Inferno*.

Once on the glacier, one achieved that pleasurable awe which honest familiarity alone can give. All these Titan children of Chaos are old friends, but how great they are grown! The Aletsch, the largest glacier in the Alps, can be ascended to the pass at its head in a few hours; the Baltoro asks 12 says. Up and down, up and down, over rubbish heaps of treacherous rock, we plodded day after day; for the moraine, in Switzerland running heaps of 100 feet at the outside, here achieves its 1,000 with no apparent effort. On the whole, too, the cliffs are a great deal steeper than in the Alps, and it is rather saddening, when one stands higher than Mount Blanc, to look up at a precipice of 12,000 feet! Even one who gather samphire, dreadful trade! might be excused for wishing himself back at Dover.

On the 20th of June we were at 19,000 feet with our baggage, directly under the great peak of Chogo Ri. On the 4th of August we came down again, having pushed up our camp one march further and contributed much valuable speculation on the question "Will it ever stop snowing?" which we decided in the negative, and a whole epic in the unwritten literature (O my Irish ancestors!) of Objurgation. Of the 68 days which I spent on the glacier, only eight were fine; it was impossible even to start on any serious climb, easy as the mountain was, judged by the standard of technical difficulty. Pluck and perseverance are all very well; but they make no impression on deep powdery snow. A novice and a coward to boot will do as well—or as badly—as the best climber in the world with the temperament of Achilles. Sir Martin Conway himself, perhaps the finest mountaineer that the world has ever seen, would be practically helpless in such a condition of things; and yet here I am asking for more of it.

Hitherto Sikkim has received still less attention from mountain climbers than Kashmir and Baltistan. There was a fine expedition of Graham whose ascent of Kabru to within a few feet of its summit stands to this day as a world's record for height; that is, if it was Kabru which he climbed, a point still disputed with more acrimony than knowledge; and the delightful old-world tour of Mr. Douglas Freshfield, whose book has done so

much by its constant and close parallelisms between what he saw here and in the obscurer valleys of the Alps to lead men of science to a more perfect comprehension of the uniformity of Nature. Would that we had the benefit of his experience, when on Chogo Ri! For we gave ourselves infinite trouble in checking loads and coolies, so that had one of either been missing, the fact would have been discovered within a very few hours, and caused us serious annoyance in the shape of rescue parties. Mr. Freshfield's experience enabled to dispense with all this. When one of his men disappeared, he knew nothing about it till it was a week or so too late to do anything, so that both the previous precaution and the subsequent trouble were spared him. It is, however, something to be able to say, as we can, that we not only had no casualty, but no complaint, even of such trifles as frost-bite or snow-blindness, temporary hunger or cold. So that after all we may quite possibly decide to stick to our old tedious methods.

Our prospects here are, however, of the gloomiest. The long days and the warm weather coincide with the rainy season. The coolies are reported to be difficult to manage, but we heard the same legend about the Baltis, who turned out to be the best of all possible porters on the worst of all possible glaciers. Mr. Freshfield's book, exquisite as is its literary form (it is the *Ode to a Nightingale* of mountain literature) omits with wonderful ingenuity any practical detail likely to be of service to a subsequent party. Fortunately, Major (now Colonel) Waddell's *Among the Himalayas* is a perfect mine of topographical and ethnographical detail. As he has used his own eyes instead of groveling before the mediæval superstitions of ignorant Swiss peasants, his remarks on mountains are sane and valuable, a welcome change from the folly and fatuity of the fathers of mountaineering. The continuous mist and rain makes it impossible (so far) to do those preliminary reconnaissances which afford such priceless information to the mountaineer. Darjeeling has, in fact, so far as I have been able to observe, three distinct climates. The first is characterized by hard and persistent rain; the second by rain heavier and more persistent; the third by rain so heavy and persistent that I prefer to leave the necessary epithets to the imagination of my readers. Again, the mountain itself is probably much more difficult in the technical sense than Chogo Ri was; and though it is 94 feet lower, yet it stands very much higher above its glaciers than Chogo Ri did.

On the other hand, it is much nearer to civilisation; we have no weary 40 marches to the foot of the final peak, but twelve

or fifteen only; and we shall be in better condition to tackle a really big job, or to wait for a chance of doing so. On the 1902 expedition we were losing flesh or over a pound a day and the proportion of haemoglobin in our blood had diminished to a degree that seriously alarmed the doctor. We shall be able to have fresh meat, I hope, nearly every day. And goodness knows the weather can't be *worse* than it was the other time. If it is as bad, we shall again do nothing in the climbing line, but we hope to be able to establish a high camp, even in moderate weather, and, if so, a week of sunshine may see anything happen. Nothing is impossible, even after you have failed at it, beforehand, your rosiest visions swim before the eyes, and are only to be exorcised by application to the sheer hard work of making sure that everything is ready.

One thing is certain; before the end of the year we shall know what has happened. Why worry now?

ALLISTER [sic] CROWLEY.