

(FROM A HOLIDAY CORRESPONDENT.)

RIFLEBERG, SEPT. 23.

Up, up, up, and up again; it must go hard if a man does not rise so high towards Heaven as to find a cool spot upon earth. We left Visp yesterday morning soon after 5, mounted on steeds whose slow gait is something between the long stride of the camel and the crushing tread of the elephant. We had hardly reached Stalden when the sun was high up in the valley, and we found no shelter against its fierce heat in the few straggling fir-trees hanging here and there upon the steep road. It was hot at St. Nicklaus, where we breakfasted on tough beefsteak and sour Ballioz wine. Hotter still at Branda, where we had a thimbleful of Kirchwasser dashed into a bottle of lemonade gazeuze. The heat had reached its acme when we stopped at the Hotel Monte Rosa at Zermatt, and called for a pint of Champagne Vaudois and a crust of bread. We had nevertheless come over the whole length of this never ending St. Nicholas Valley, and reached its head at Zermatt at 2 in the afternoon, accomplishing the 9½ hours' distance in seven hours, without computing the stoppage of about 1½ hour at St. Nicklaus. All this we achieved by forcing our heavy steeds into a bone-breaking jog trot from time to time, and taking to our own legs when all other means of urging on those sorry quadrupeds failed us. We drank our sparkling wine and munched our dry crust at Zermatt, and half an hour later went on our way on foot to the Rifleberg Hotel, wondering how any human being who could possibly help it could take up his quarters at Zermatt. It would be the same as if one went to St. Paul's to enjoy the panoramas of London, and stopped at some of the shops below in the churchyard. We had a stiff two hours' walk up to the Rifleberg, a tough piece of work, yet hardly worth mentioning, inasmuch as a good bridle path has been made, not only to the hotel, but further up to the Gornergrat, and no ascent where horses can go should properly be reckoned as real mountain climbing. At the Rifleberg, at last, we found a cool breeze for the first time this many a week, and even the fewest imaginable drops of refreshing rain.

I was here at this same Rifleberg Hotel 11 years ago, arriving late at night, after crossing the Weiss Thor from Macugnaga, the greatest Alpine feat ever achieved by my legs in younger days. But even after 11 years—nay, after a long lifetime; a man who has once been on the spot, and has only looked about him for five minutes, would never forget a single feature in this matchless panorama. There are far more beautiful spots in the Bernese Oberland; greater contrast between rock and glacier on the one side, and fine meadow verdure and luxuriant vegetation on the other, is to be met with at the foot of Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa, on the Piedmontese side; but nowhere in the world are you more at home among snows and above glaciers than at the Rifleberg, and no pyramidal mountain rises so close at hand and at the same time so hopelessly above you, so apparently beyond all human reach, as that murderous Matterhorn. The Matterhorn, still stained with the blood of its victims of two montis ago, is here the king to whom some scores of the highest summits in Europe bow in obeisance. Even Monte Rosa, though considerably higher, though so much more dignified and majestic a mountain mass, must be satisfied with playing second part to its great rival, Mont Cervin, in the Zermatt region. Monte Rosa is most distinctly an Italian mountain; on its southern slopes, at Gressoney, Alagna, and Macugnaga, its greatness can be fully appreciated, and from any part of the vast plain from Turin to Milan it can be seen in all its majesty, the giant of the chain, the brightest jewel in the mountain-diamond of Italy.

The sea of snow and ice surrounding the open platform of the Rifleberg, seen more comprehensively from the summit of the Gornergrat, is still inexhausted, but it looks at this present moment far less inexhaustible than it did at the period of my former visit. The long drought of this extraordinary summer has dug as deep into the frozen mass as it is in the power of any solar influence to achieve. The lower ends of the glaciers here, as at Grindelwald and Mürren, are converted into dry squalid "moraines," and the lower skirts of the Alpine mantle look as if they had been squeezed up like half-washed linen and stretched out to dry in the warping and withering sunlight.

It is, strange as it may appear, with a kind of melancholy feeling that one looks upon the ravages of this never-ending summer among the beauties of the higher Alpine region. The epithet of "everlasting" seems now less than ever applicable to the Alps. This dwindling of glaciers and waterfalls reminds you, on the contrary, that these huge masses are perpetually crumbling; every wave of those muddy roaring torrents carries with it part of their spoil; every one of those deep chasms, of those abrupt crags and cliffs, tells its tale of the slow but sure work of frost and thaw. The Alps are going, ever going, and imagination can anticipate the time when all their rough grandeur shall have gone altogether, when nothing shall remain of them save only round, smooth eminences like the older Alleghanies and Blue Ridges of North America. Melancholy as the thought may be, let not the reader distress himself on his own account or mine. Let the summer be never so long, and the sun never so hot, the Alps, I confidently believe, will last our time.

At Zermatt and the Rifleberg I have fallen in with the Alpine tourists properly so-called—those who, according to the classification given in one of my former letters, belong to the first category. Only the other evening, at Visp, the company was still mixed. Pleasanter talk than we had with a set of highly civilized travellers on their way across the Simplon to the Italian lakes I hardly ever remember enjoying in my former tours. There was a Q.C., an M.P., with his lady, a stately beauty, who had nothing to fear from comparison with three or four lovely grown-up daughters; there was a middle-aged gentleman, doing duty as a tutor or bearer to his own son, at home for the holidays—the father the most intimate friend of the son, the son proud of nothing so much on earth as of his bland, gentlemanly father; there were, in short, a score of persons, a handful of the sand from that ocean-shore which constitutes the English nation, and these persons, without hardly a link of common interests among them, with no other ties of acquaintance than such as began and were to end with that late *table d'hôte* dinner, spent together as agreeable an evening as if each of them had outgalled his brains to call together the choicest company at his own house. By that instinct which goes such great lengths towards the composition of a gentlemanly character each of the guests took the part naturally suited to him on his very first sitting down. We had talkers and listeners. We had those who had much to tell us about the Valais, its actual social condition, the decline of its noble families, the dwindling of the rural population, their decline both in physical and moral qualities, in health and wealth, with allusions to the annals of the past, when lordly families from the turbulent Italian republics, the Tavelli, the Biondrate, the Della Torre, took refuge in this hitherto quiet and happy valley, filling it with their hereditary feuds, and converting it into a theatre of violence and bloodshed; when the Bishops of Sion were by their riotous vassals thrown over the battlements of their castles; or when, in later times, those same ambitious and warlike prelates led the Valaisan peasantry down the plains of Italy, allied themselves to the mercenary mountaineers of the Forest Cantons, and adopting the maxim "*Point d'argent, point de Suisse*," sold themselves and their followers to the highest bidder, ready to sell the latter in turn, whenever interest, bigotry, or caprice seemed in their ignorant estimation and lax conscience to justify defection and treason.

Our dinner last evening at the Rifleberg was with an altogether different set. We had none but men here. Strange to say, the inn is not only exclusively officered but actually commanded by women. Our landlady is a sister or cousin of those brother Sailor who have the Monte Rosa Hotel at Zermatt and the "Rhône Glacier" at the Furka Pass. This lady, a young and pretty woman, is General-in-Chief; under her a score of handmaidens; no man in the house except Boots, who never shows except for his night work, and whose only office, besides blacking, is that of killing the daily sheep, an act of necessary cruelty to which no female heart could lend itself. This table of mere men, attended by only women, was, though on the whole perfectly orderly, yet somewhat noisy. Alpine climbers, if I may judge

from most specimens here assembled last night, talk about anything rather than the Alps. They look upon their mountain work as mere sport; so many miles in snow and ice; so many hours' clambering on rocks. One has "done" the Cima di Jazi yesterday; another is going to "do" the Lyskamm to-morrow. They meet, question, and congratulate each other on their exploits, much as men out shooting would count the ten or twelve brace of birds they have bagged, or foxhunters would tell of the capital run they had after hounds. There is but little æsthetic and nothing scientific in the object of nine Alpine climbers out of ten. The pleasure is in the run, not in the fox that is thrown to the hounds, or even in the pheasant or blackcock that everybody is so keen to kill. There were but few Syntax-like faces about me last evening, but few who would not laugh at the notion of coming to the Alps in quest of the picturesque. One comes to the Alps to "do" them, to breathe fresh air, to give a keen edge to appetite, to seek a vent for the exuberance of animal spirits. Some one in the company was evidently a lion, or fancied himself so. His talk was of the loudest; he bounced up from his place every now and then, throwing back his chair in the suddenness of his movements. He showed great energy and alacrity in his step to prove how little his powerful elastic frame had been affected by his 14 hours' toil on the ice. His tone was overbearing (there is no mincing the matter), his manner obstreperous. He was young, wild-looking, presumptuous. You would have said the Champagne air of the Alps had got to his head. He kept up an incessant rattle; none within reach of his shrill voice had a chance to put in a word; and as it ever happens where a man takes too much on himself, there were those around him willing to allow him even more than he assumed. There were Boswells to this Alpine Johnson, men who took every impertinence as a joke, who burst out into uproarious laughter at the fine fun of seeing their idol jump up in his place and kick down the chair behind him. That upsetting of the chair every five minutes was an incomparable joke; so was every remark about cut disguised as hare, and tough goat palmed upon the guests as chamois. The forty or fifty guests assembled round the table were not like these, thank Heaven! There were, on the contrary, men of intelligent countenance and gentlemanly demeanour. But these were awed into silence, worried and annoyed, but "shut up." There was nothing for them but to hold their tongues or fling the bottle into the face of the disturber of the public quiet, and they took the more prudent, more peaceful alternative.