

VANITY FAIR
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ON THE KINCHIN LAY (Part 4)
MOUNTAINS OR METAPHYSICS (Conclusion)

By
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I should have kept silent as to Righi's misdemeanours, but as he "gave me warning" just before the catastrophe, I do not feel bound to regard him as a comrade. His no-reason for desertion was the publication of my first article! As, weeks before, he had copied this article for me in his own handwriting, his surprise and indignation at its contents are no better than a lie: and the use of the pretext implies premeditated treachery, or an unusual slowness in making up his mind. A slump is feared in the Darjeeling market for foreign noblemen.

Utterly sick at heart, I made all my preparations for retirement to those dear domestic joys that make the heart of every true born Briton go plunk-plunk-plunkety-plunk. For me

All the rains and ruins are over,
And all the seasons of snows and sins,
The days dividing lover and love—

But will my peace be sweet as that now known to these dead men? Not if I know my wife!

Now that one begins to get proportions of things the tragic side glimmers up in the Aristophanic gloom. To us it is ever to regret Pache infinitely, the courtly gentleman, the soldierly spirit, the good comrade, let me add for my part, the only one of the party who understood his duty and did it. While he was rear-guard, there was little or no trouble about supplies; and nothing is to be more deplored than the unfortunate misreading of his instructions, due to a damped letter and my vile handwriting, which brought him up to Camp IV and began the series of disasters.

It has just been suggested to me (an unnamable insect is crawling outside my tent) that some hypersensitive member of the Alpine Club, or other person pledged to attack climbing without guides may feel hurt by the strictures which I have

thought necessary to pass upon some of their methods, and turn to criticize mine. I hope so, that I may renew my confidence in that adage of my nonage "Even a worm will turn." My position will be to take no notice of any criticisms on climbing made by anyone who is not at least good enough to repeat some of the climbs I have originated. I therefore hereby challenge any man who has climbed only with guides to repeat my ascent of the outer pinnacle of the Devil's Chimney on Beachy Head from the sea, *i.e.*, without touching the top of the cliff at any point during the ascent.

I choose this climb because of its proximity to London, and lest anyone should complain of the expense, I will pay for his first-class single railway fare to Eastbourne for his dinner, bed, and breakfast at the best hotel, and for a scavenger and a bucket at the foot of the cliff.

Thus I forestall the triple-distilled venom, the piffle about the folly of climbing without guides, when the satraps of Savile Row are doubtless collecting "in their teeth, and in their throats, and what is worse, within their nasty mouths." Lower down the street are nine tailors busily trying to make a man, but at the top six hundred things do their best (one must suppose) and the result is pretty poor.

To return to pleasanter subjects (my boy has squashed the unnamable insect), I have written my report of the "accident" to the Deputy Commissioner, and am ready to return to the rains and leeches of outrageous Sikkim.

I have made the necessary suggestions as to searching for the bodies, building a great commemorative cairn, and so on—suggestions only, for no longer will I give one single order when up on the glacier, crying to heaven, are the murdered monuments of disobedience.

I have uttered no word of reproach to the Doctor, nor he any word of explanation to me. The former, since he is genuinely sorry for his error (as if that were any good) or at least for the pain in his back; the latter, probably in fear of the retort "*Vos explications sautent sur quatre cadavres*"—"Your explanations stumble over four dead men."

It must be clearly understood that the words of criticism I am compelled to print are directed solely by regard for the true theory of mountain craft, the which I will maintain with my life. No personal grievance should induce me to pen one line against a good friend, nor should I condescend to notice an enemy, but the misrepresentations which those professional liars who have exhausted all the meanness of trickery in the endeavour to

prevent the names of the people who climb without guides being known, so that their own foul names may a little longer enjoy a fictitious reputation which the British public are certain to circulate, compel me thus to speak out fearlessly and frankly the true causes of the disaster.

So I muse, as I wander down the sweet-smelling meadows, watered by delicious streams, and clad in exquisite flowers, which fringe the lower part of the Yalung Glacier. It is, indeed

"A land of clear colours and stories,
A region of shadowless hours,
Where earth has a garment of glories,
And a murmur of musical flowers."

And so from musing I slide into meditation. True it is that materialism has conquered, but only by exceeding its connotation to something very like what Berkeley meant by spirit. True that man is only a machine, or even less, a thing all cause and no purpose; the admission only requires that the idealist should take a larger unit. True, above all, that all this beauty and tragedy have no existence, but in my own mind, and it comes upon me, as upon Mansur el Hallaj long ago. "Ana 'l Haqq, we laysa fi jubbat il Allah." (I am the truth, and within my coat is nothing but God), or upon the Osirian in ages beyond history: "I am Osiris! I am Osiris! I am the Lord of life triumphant over death! There is no part of me that is not of the gods!" Let this be my epitaph upon my good friend Alexis Pache; and not that other consciousness which comes intruding, as I walk alone over the vast abyss of wanton stones, that there is no consciousness, no purpose, nothing but a giant stress of things . . . (Excuse my imitating the love-letters of the Brownings, and Mr. H. G. Wells, in trying to express the complete works of Spinoza, Puddhaghosha, and myself, by a series of dots).

But in the final analysis it matters little; one thing I beg, let no Dualist cock crow upon the dung-heaps of Darjeeling!

So far as I know, I am not a Sufi or a Taoist, but I must go to China and Persia, and find out for sure.

In the meanwhile, back to Darjeeling, which I am sorry to say has been only partially burnt down in my absence. It will be my tenaciously-gripped privilege, by the wonderful courtesy of its brilliant young manager "Count Alcesti C. Rigo de Righi," my late comrade—the only fault I have to find with him is that he seems to think that he has the same sort of control over his guests that the governor of a prison has over his—for the ab-

surdly inadequate remuneration of nine and fourpence a day to stay at Drum Druid Hotel, and feast, as I am sure Lucullus never feasted, upon the really ingenious substitutes for human food, which, figuring in the menu under French names, recall with a sweet anticipation too deep for tears the delights of Pail-lard's and of Leon's. (I gather from official criticism of my first article, in which a sentence, somewhat similar, though not so fine, appeared, that it should be held to apply only to the occasions when I dine out, because the food at Drum Druid is *actu-ally* human food and *not* an ingenious substitute. How the mind broadens by travelling!)

But though I may grip tenaciously, I shall not grip for long. The little devil that with his accursed whisper "Go on! Go on!" makes me think at times that I must be the Wandering Jew is already at my ear, and I have no whither in particular to go. Like Lord Curzon, I am out of a job.