

THE STAIRWAY OF THE GODS

ABOVE the narrow valley of Champéry the Dent du Midi makes a dreadful caricature of the Trinity. The three great figures loom up against the sky, huddling together in evil conclave, leaning backwards in attitudes of insolence and pride. When the light is behind them their stony faces brood darkly in the shadow, a living monument to the mystery of evil; when the sun beats on them they stare over into Savoy, blank, cruel, unanswering; mouthless and eyeless, yet they grin and mock as if eternally amused at the helplessness of the human intellect faced with the unanswered question of evil. Their snow-streaked robes fall in gigantic folds about the granite cliffs where they sit enthroned; there is a suggestion of vast elbows and shoulders, of dreadful muscles and sinews, of huge limbs reposing, of fearful power waiting and held in reserve. Yet somewhere amidst that mighty solidity there is a hint of heaviness, of blankness, of—stupidity. They are a trio of darkness; and though the light is on them, it is never in them, and though the clouds gather about them, as if to hide their great Council from human eyes, the frightened watcher has a suspicion, deep down, that their staring pride is valueless to the heavens and their mighty cogitations are empty and unwise.

Immediately beside the third great figure is a fourth point, the Haute Cime, higher than all three, standing up like the back of a throne; the cliff falls down from it in a great sweeping curve and gathers again into the solid bastion of golden granite called the Dent de Chaux. From there the cliff-line leaps downward again till it meets the opposite descending line of sheer rocks coming down from the Tête de Bonaveau, and framed in the giant V of their meeting are

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the iron rocks of Mont Ruan, with his tilted platforms of frozen snow.

Coming up the valley, the traveller is overawed by the Dent du Midi : its savagery and triumph hold the skies. It is only when he has been in Champéry a few hours that he becomes aware of how all the lines of the lesser mountains sweep upwards and downwards to focus at one place, like great fingers pointing, at the V-shaped angle of the Pas d'Encel. It is the motif of the landscape ; the one narrow point of escape between the great guardian cliffs ; a step up, a way round, a way over : a possible pathway for the conquest of the mountain of evil.

Faced with the problem of evil the intellect has to shut its eyes, because thought is rendered useless ; and the emotions and instincts, deeper than thought, have to guide the ascent : love which goes of its own nature upwards, and faith which sees in the dark. In the same way the first step for the ascent of the Haute Cime is in the opposite direction and in the dark. The path goes up the valley westwards, leaving the great threatening group of peaks behind, and plunges into the thick pinewoods, shadowy enough by daylight, but at night-time a thickly-woven curtain of impenetrable darkness.

We started at nine in the evening, crossed the loud torrent, and reached the woods. Here Defago, the guide, lit his lantern, and by its faint yellow light the two of us toiled up the stony pathway, the light splashing uncertainly on the twisted roots crossing the path, just catching the thick trunks which crowded around and above and below us ; the air was filled with the perfume of the pines, and the grass and flowers on either side were heavy and shining with dew. As the woods cleared a little, we saw the sky alive with a thousand stars, and the trees standing up sombre and enormous against the Milky Way, black, and tall as

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towers. They stood among the high rocks above us, so steep that we craned our necks to see them; and below they descended in dark troops, down, down, to where the torrent called and echoed in the night. They seemed intent on some tremendous business of their own, charged with a purpose, aware of something we could not see. They ignored us completely, to my secret relief, because my intense longing to get to the top of the mountain had bred a fear of being challenged, interfered with, stopped. But the trees, the great Sentinels of the Stair, let us go by without a threat. They were not looking at us. No wind stirred them, and no whispers crept among their dark branches. In dead silence they were keeping their vigil, massed under the stars, their spears all set in order against powers and threats which were of their world and not of ours.

‘C’est sombre,’ said Defago, ‘Très sombre.’

With our little flickering light we went on across the open mountainside, pausing for a moment to look at Champéry, a string of spilt stars lying in the valley; and Leysin, a distant constellation on the heights across the shadowy Rhone Valley. The path led to the châlet of Bonaveau, where the journey is broken for a few hours’ sleep. Defago knocked at the door, and in the silence that followed there came the ringing of a bell, and something walked up beside me in the dark. A door opened and let out a flood of light, and I saw standing beside me a dog almost as big as a lion, with a curly tail and a bell round his neck. ‘Viens, Lulu,’ said the woman in the châlet; and Lulu led us in and made us very welcome.

But for all his feminine name, Lulu had a very masculine voice, and he used it continually during the brief night. A man came with his guide, carrying rope and ice-axes, on the way to climb the glacier of Ruan, and at midnight a party went by on their way

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to the Cime de l'Est. Lulu greeted each arrival with a storm of barking and a passionate ringing of his bell, so that sleep was impossible, and it was a relief to be called at half-past three. Outside the ch[^]alet all was still and cold. The travelling stars had shifted their places, and the blue wreath of the Pleiades hung just above the huge cliff-wall which hid the Haute Cime from sight. Between Bonaveau and the cliff lay a great gulf of empty air into which the black trees trooped down and vanished; on the right the two descending walls from the Dent du Midi in front of us and the Dent Blanches behind us, met at the Pas d'Encel, the one point in all that flying falling landscape where a human pathway could penetrate on the upward way. It is also the one point where the big torrent coming down from Ruan makes its way through, and torrent and pathway share the narrow fare-way between them. From Bonaveau it is an hour away, and we took the path slowly, winding tortuously along under the precipices whose square heads stood above us like giant presences against the stars. We crossed a small stream where an avalanche had fallen the week before, and three enormous blocks of frozen snow still sat there on the ledge, gleaming murderously through the darkness, turning the cold air colder still. The stream had made its way through and under them, and the black cavern it had made in the snow gaped at us like a huge mouth open to swallow us. A little further on, the path crossed several tons of fallen stone which lay shattered on the ledge, having crashed there from the precipice above some time earlier in the summer.

After this the path began to go dramatically and steeply upward, no longer a path at all, but a huge uneven stairway of stone, the grey steps now long, now short, now straight, now sideways, showing and disappearing in the swinging lantern-light. We were

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by now half-deafened by the howling of the torrent, whose distant thunder had gradually grown into an ear-splitting roar. We had reached the very point of the V where the torrent forces its way through and over the rock wall, to plunge straight down thirty feet into a boiling pool below. The walls of its narrow passage-way all shout their echoes together till the place becomes as much a focus of sound as it is a focus for the painter in the valley or the climber on the path. Defago lifted his lantern and we saw how the path turned back on itself, away from the torrent, and a narrow ledge went round the rock face out of sight.

'C'est le Pas d'Encel,' he said.

We climbed up it, and on to the path above the waterfall, and were immediately met by the dawn-wind running through the gap. It came cold from the ice-fields of Ruan, strong with the narrowness of the passage, wild with the joy of a day new-born. It set the grasses dancing on each side of the path, blew the lantern out, and nearly blew me over. I shivered so that Defago thought I was cold, but it was a shiver of sheer delight. The stars were already paling, and in that ecstasy of cold rushing air no effort to get the lantern lit again was successful. The wind was laughing at us, as if it knew well that the day was on its heels, and that no lantern would be needed again. We went on, downhill now, to where the torrent was bridged by a thick plank clamped into the rock with iron; from there the path went winding upwards into a stony valley at the end of which the Tour Sallières stood up black under the morning star.

The change of scene was complete. Nothing remained of the setting of the last few hours; the dark forests, the green valleys, the marching precipices were all gone, swallowed up by that one significant step through the Pas d'Encel. Here was a valley

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walled in on every side by sweeping slopes of ice and granite and shale, its rocky floor patched with grass and flowers. There was not a tree in sight, and even the starry generosity of the night sky was giving way to the crystal-blue austerity of day.

'Voilà la lumière,' said Defago meditatively, looking across the valley, and I looked too, and saw the morning light strengthening in the sky. 'C'est le jour—' I began, and stopped, because I suddenly saw what he had seen: the lantern of the two who were on their way to Ruan, who must have been following twenty minutes behind us all the way. Older and wiser than we were, their lantern had survived the giddy nonsense of the dawn wind in the gap, and now it shone like a little swinging yellow star as the two picked their way among the rocks towards the iron face of Mont Ruan, which towered up heavenward and formed the whole southern wall of the valley. Behind them, above a white streak of waterfall, was the hollow space of shale and stone between the Dents Blanches and Ruan, a space now filled with a curious grey light as if someone had taken a brushful of liquid silver and mixed it with shadow. The tiny yellow light swung and bobbed and advanced against this background, and Defago became altogether lost in admiration:

'Comme c'est joli de voir la lumière dans cette immensité. Comme c'est joli!'

A lump came up in my throat as I listened to him, and my own love for 'Cette immensité' shrank to nothing beside his guide's love for the lantern-light. It seemed to me that all his ancestors spoke through him from the forest-hung valley of Champèry, where for centuries the light of European culture had been kept alight against the changing threats of battle and government, and the unchanging threat of mountain and avalanche. Men like Defago had kept the Faith

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in the valley to this day—kept it, as much from the guide's sense of fear of unknown and unmanageable forces, as from the undying sense of beauty that underlies the great religion. As he watched that little human light swinging triumphantly across the wilderness, his very blood told him that it was lovely to see.

We munched dried fruit and biscuits, and the day strengthened in the east behind us. Then the path led us on, upwards and eastwards, not steep, leading among big grey rocks and patches of short, incredibly sweet-smelling turf. It looked as if someone had laid green carpets on the Stair. The light had brought back colour, and the peaks of the Dents Blanches behind us, untrue to their name, were flushed golden and red. The awful glacier of Ruan, with its weeping cascades, had called its frozen blue-green shadows back from the uniform grey-white glimmer of the night. In a little while a turn of the path brought us in sight of the Haute Cime. We had not seen its face for nine hours of our journey, and now we saw it with its back turned towards us, its mighty shoulders hunched and its head bowed. We seemed to be in a throne-room, very close behind the throne, where a mighty Being sat wrapped in silent thought.

A step further on, Defago showed me a little still spring of water among the stones. We had left all grass behind us now, and this was the last spring on the upward way.

'My grandfather discovered it,' he said. 'He marked the place and called it La source de Prosper.'

I drank from the spring of Prosper and wished three things. Then we went on where there was no grass or water or earth, only the black shale under our feet, until we reached the top of the col which is the eastern boundary of the valley, and there the sunrise

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met us full in the face. Switzerland lay in front of us, looking like a rough sea, its sharp high waves frozen tight amid a wilderness of blinding white foam. Defago unpacked more provisions. 'We should eat little and often,' he said wisely. But we ate a lot, and sang. Some birds joined us, sailing round on the look-out for food, and when we started again we left them a special meal spread on the shale. Before we had gone two hundred feet they had finished it all.

The path wound upwards now, zig-zagging through such airy steepnesses that life seemed to have got into one dimension only; the whole world held nothing but height and depth. For two thousand feet we toiled and scrambled while the loose shale slipped and chinked and ran, making a metallic noise as if someone was scattering largesse. I dared not look at the view, which grew in magnificence at every step—there was altogether too much sky around me and under me, and I clung frantically to the idea of the mountain, solid under my feet and hands, and watched with agonised interest the little stones, bright with sunrise, running and leaping past my face from Defago just above me. All thoughts of Stairway and Throne-room were gone now, vanished into the giddy emptinesses above and below. We were climbing the mighty Being itself, and all other thoughts fell from the mind like the little falling stones, disappearing into vast chasms of fear and air and light. The bright terror in the mind drew nearer to a focus with every scrambling, slipping step, as the fearful lines of the mountain drew in together to a point a little above us. There was more sky now, and less mountain than one would have thought possible. Then everything narrowed to a climax as Defago stopped above me among a group of wind-sharpened rocks, holding on to them with his hands, and saying: 'C'est le sommet.'

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I climbed up beside him, and the terror in my heart reached its crisis and broke, letting in a flood of wonder and joy. Around and above us was—nothing at all! The Stairway had come to an end. Beneath us, through the cracks in the overhanging rock, was a sheer drop of three thousand feet, with the snows of the glacier gleaming far below. The green valley and the dark green forests lay still further down, like something in another world. The Alps swept the horizon in a great white circle, shining in the morning light; Mont Blanc like a giant on the south; the Matterhorn, a high-backed iron throne against the snow-curtains of Monte Rosa; and a hundred and fifty miles away to the south-west, the far mountains of Isère. Immediately below us to the eastward—terrible triumph of the Stair—lay the three evil heads of the Dent du Midi: still throned in dark conclave, still busy with their ceaseless whispering, still staring out with meaningless savagery towards the blue lake and the green mountains of Savoy. But their triple black mystery lay beneath us—beneath us—and we were higher than they. Higher, and almost too high, in the thin air among the sharp metallic rocks, we were as far removed from the pleasant earth as if we were clinging to the face of the moon. I longed for the grass and woods which live where man lives; and then I saw there was a piece of wood crowning the rocks. It was a cross clamped to the rock with iron, marking the highest point of the Haute Cime. I put out my hand and touched it, and in the bright sunshine it felt warm like touching a person; and in the strong wind that swept the callous and immovable rock it shook and thrilled under my hand, frail and trembling and alive.

ELIZABETH BELLOC.