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PIONEERS OF MOUNTAINEERING.

"The Early Alpine Guides" by RONALD CLARK,
Phoenix House 15/-.

Much has been written about the Alps and on their conquest during the mid-Victorian years that came to be known as the golden age of mountaineering. The exploits of famous climbers such as Whymper, Mummery, Moore, Wills, the Professors Forbes and Tyndall, and many others, mostly Englishmen, are recorded in their own writings and in the annals of the various Alpine journals. In all these, the guides are mentioned by name, but hitherto no popular account has been published of that fine body of men without whom the early ascents would not have been possible.

In "The Early Alpine Guides" by Ronald Clark, the story of these men is told. And what a wonderful story it is! Mr. Clark describes the lives and deeds of a number of these sturdy sons of the mountains, fearless, clear-eyed, sure-footed, with steady, balanced temperaments, and utterly dependable in an emergency; men who accepted as a matter of course and as part of their day's work the dangers of a profession in which one false step literally meant death and who made light of it. They seemed to be quite unconscious of their heroism; for a few francs they were ready to risk their lives and assume the responsibility of however difficult an expedition.

Their work as guides was usually a side-line: they were peasants, cheese-makers, wood-carvers and artisans who sought an additional income by hiring themselves out to the amateur climbers. They knew the Alps as a Londoner knows the Old Kent Road. Heredity, environment and experience from childhood had given them a deep understanding of the mountains and their vagaries, a keen perception of atmospheric conditions and changes and an uncanny instinct for finding their way on the snow-and ice-covered slopes. And this knowledge was not limited to their own mountains, it was made use of in expeditions to the French Dauphiné, to Norway, and as far afield as the South American Andes and the Himalayas.

Possessed of extraordinary powers of endurance and great physical strength they often performed herculean feats. Christian Almer, an Oberlander, carried a young fir-tree all the way up the Wetterhorn and planted it on the summit to mark the first successful ascent. The same Christian Almer, in 1896, at the age of seventy, celebrated his golden wedding by an ascent of the Wetterhorn, accompanied by his wife who had never before climbed a snow mountain.

Mr. Clark has classified his guides in the Oberlanders from the Grindelwald and Meiringen districts, the men from Chamonix and Zermatt, the Italians, and the Travellers. He points out the variety of their characters and their personalities and describes their social background. As far back as 1823, the Chamonix men formed a *corporation des guides*, the Oberlander followed suit later. Each guide was provided with a Führerbuch, a treasured possession which served to establish his identity and the right to exercise his profession.

The relations between these early guides and their employers were not always those of servants and masters. The dangers and hardships shared made for a companionship which diminished the social gulf and

often developed into friendship and genuine affection. Peter Bohren, an Oberlander, at a difficult moment, said "Herr, you are master in the valley, I am master here." Melchior Anderegg, also an Oberlander, became the honoured guest of his English employers and is said to have found his way, unaided, in a London fog.

The Matterhorn looms large in Mr. Clark's ascent. The local population looked on that magnificent peak with terror and believed it to be haunted by evil spirits, a mountain to be left alone. Not so J. A. Carrel, the Italian guide. For him the Matterhorn had a peculiar fascination and had become almost an obsession. His one ambition was to be the first to reach the summit for the honour and glory of his country. Time and again he attempted the ascent and nearly succeeded, but in the end was forestalled by Whymper. The tragic story of Whymper's ascent is well known; it would have been interesting to hear more of Taugwalder, one of Whymper's guides to whom Mr. Clark refers but casually. According to Whymper, the Taugwalders — father and son — lost their nerve and behaved none too well after disaster had overtaken the party on the descent. This episode is not touched upon in Mr. Clark's pages.

The book is well-written and beautifully illustrated. It contains several maps and a useful appendix, also a bibliography and an index. On page 66 there is a slight grammatical mistake, the wrong gender being used for the German word *Gletscherwolf*.

A century almost has gone by since the early guides, portrayed in Mr. Clark's book, flourished. They have become outstanding figures in Alpine history, the mastery of their craft has not been surpassed and the memory of their characters and of their skill will long remain undimmed.

J.J.F.S.



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