

Holidays among the Alps.

I have been four times among those much visited mountains - the Alps. I have been among them in early spring, in midsummer, in early autumn and in winter. At the end of March when I was in Switzerland the meadows were covered with soft melting snow and the roads were almost knee-deep in slush and mud. I found the scenery unpleasantly grim that I have no wish to remember the short time I spent there in such weather. In June the meadows on the mountainsides were painted with flowers and the great Artist who painted them certainly did not neglect high finish. Flowers like sunflowers showed high above the grass, below these the blooms that we know well in our English pastures, were thickly strewn, and yet, when I parted them, I found that there was a wealth of different little flowers growing low down near the ground.

Helen and I were together in Lucerne during June. Although I am not much of a walker, yet with her, I climbed both the Rigi and the Pilatus and she persuaded me to take a walking tour with her to the Wengen Alp to visit some friends there. We arranged to stop at Meiringen on the way. We carried packs on our backs. Not long after we started our path led us for about two and a half miles over a causeway through a marsh which lay in a hot

steamy valley. The sight of the, to me, rare flowers growing in the marsh prevented me at first from feeling the effect of the swampy air but I succumbed to it at last. I felt terribly ill before I had quite got through the valley. There was a little station at the end of it; we stopped there and I lay on the station bench to recover. When we heard that a train was due to come up I begged that we should get into it and go in that way to Meiringen. It came up and we got into it. Doubtless it was an ignominious end to our first day but not an unusual end for hikers in those days. They are more vigorous now.

We stayed at an hotel at Meiringen and started very early one morning to walk to Lauterbrunnen. We saw, blocking up the end of the valley, the shining mass of the Jungfrau. The sight was like a vision, for the Jungfrau shone with an exceptionally brilliant radiance, and there was a clear duck-egg blue sky behind it. The vision however lasted little more than a few minutes. A cloud with an edge as straight as the lower edge of a stage safety curtain descended and cut off the top of the mountain and soon hid the whole of it from view. The end of the wooded valley through which we were walking was soon also hidden and so quickly did the cloud advance towards us that before we could put on our cloaks we were in it and wet through with pelting rain. The lightning played and the thunder roared - not as if above us but close by our side. We saw a fir tree struck near us. Even in that downpour a flash of fire ran all down the poor

tree. There was then a little smoke and that was all for the tree remained standing.

As I trudged on the narrow path generally behind my long-legged sister, I could see the lining of her shoes projecting limply further and further out and I could feel my own shoes coming to pieces owing to the rocky bottom of that torrent of a pathway we had to walk on.

When we reached Lauterbrunnen Hotel the thunderstorm was over but not the streaming rain. In spite of it we went to look at the celebrated waterfall but, as it had brought down an avalanche of mud, it was no longer a beautiful sight. We had to go to bed at once on reaching the hotel for our clothes to be dried. We ordered them to be brought to us early next morning but they were as wet then as when we had taken them off. That did not matter very much as we started our climb while the rain was still pouring down. It was like climbing the fairy tale mountain of glass. We slipped back a step for every two we took. The air grew cooler and the rain changed to snow. When the snow lay fairly thickly over the ground the going was easier and at last we stood at the door of the hotel of the Wengen Alp.

In late August when I went to Switzerland I stayed in a chalet called the Jodelhütte which stood in a thick forest high above Bex in the Rhone valley. The mountains were clothed above and below the Jodelhütte by fir trees. It was very easy to lose one's way when taking a walk for there were so many false and

tempting paths made by the logs sent down the valley side in winter. Clearings were rare. But one day I came to one which I shall never forget. In the distance were light leaf-losing trees which stood out pale against the dark background of forest. The clearing was meadow land. The grass was thin and rather yellow and almost hidden under a wealth of Colchicums. So thickly they spread that I wondered if there could be room for any June flowers. Every crocus-like bloom that could be open held itself wide open for there was misty sunshine over the field. The effect of the pink-mauve waves of sloping ground was fairylike.

My winter time visit among the Alps was when my three sisters and I joined a party to spend Christmas in a french village near Mont Blanc. The party was arranged by Dr Fry, then Headmaster of Berkhamsted School.

Dr. Fry's wife was always called by us Cousin Julia. She was much older than any of us so we were taught to give the title "Cousin" as a mark of respect. She was one of the daughters of father's brother Edward. He was M.P. for Bury St. Edmunds and later for Stowmarket over a period of 26 years. He lived at Nether Hall at Pakenham in Suffolk in much the same style as Uncle Benjamin at Midgham. The whole atmosphere of his house however was much freer and jollier than that of his brother's. The train of servants came in for prayers in the morning and evening as at Midgham but the day seemed to me full of interest, gaiety and activity. Julia was my godmother and, when I stayed

at Nether Hall, she gave me much instruction in religion but in a different way to Isabel who was very low church and Julia high church. Mr. Fry asked her to marry him and she wished it and, more fortunate than her cousin, was allowed to marry him. She was very happy.

I will say here that during the year following our Christmas party Dr. Fry was made Dean of Lincoln. He won fame there by his efforts to save the Cathedral seriously injured from the effects of age, heavy traffic and the work of the deathwatch beetle. An enormous sum was required to save it. Dean Fry realized that such a sum could not be gathered only in England. He was an excellent lecturer and went three times to America and by his lecturing tours and through donations that he received he made £80,000 for his beloved Cathedral.

Dr Fry was bald, had fine features and a long beard that changed later from golden brown to snowy white. He could hardly be called portly but he had a comfortable figure. He was a very small man but had such a look of importance that in five minutes after being introduced to him a stranger would think of him as tall. Cousin Julia was tall and so thin that she could be called uncomfortably thin. She had a mild and extremely refined look. She could not be said to be dominated by her husband because her complete subservience to him was so voluntary and glad.

The plan to make up a party to spend Christmas among the mountains came about in this way - Cousin Julia, when a girl,

had had a French governess and whom she was fond of. The governess had married a mountain guide who conducted climbers up Mont Blanc. He made money and built an Hotel as an investment. He built it on a high platform of land that lay between mountain peaks some way above Argentiere, itself a high village. It had an uninterrupted view along the valley of Chamonix towards Mont Blanc. Cousin Julia who had kept up a correspondence with her governess expressed a wish to visit the hotel and see her old friend again. Basil, the younger of her two sons, most likely urged on the scheme. The winter sport centres were in their infancy. I fancy Basil thought that the hotel might be developed into one. The hotel had never before been opened in winter. It was considered to be situated too high up to attract visitors at that season. But the owner said that if a party were made up that would fill it, it could be opened. Dr. Fry did make up such a party. Basil went on separately to see that everything was properly arranged. We started a few days before the 25th of December. We were all to travel together, there would be no stopping on the way and we were to spend the long winter night in the train.

It proved to be one of those night journeys so uncomfortable that ever after I have avoided them. The train was overheated and we were not allowed to open the windows. A boy of out party, to escape the hot air coming through the floor grating, climbed up and lay on the luggage carrier. This was in the compartment where poor Alice and Helen were sitting. Someone

there ventured to put a mackintosh on the floor hoping to save his feet from the heat and it was burned past mending and Helen still squirms when she thinks of the smell it made.

The party consisted largely of learned men, schoolmasters and clergymen. They were evidently very tired. Those in the compartment in which Florence and I were sitting (in spite of the heat which was less than in the other carriages, were apparently unable to keep their seats from weariness and they slipped down and slept soundly sitting on the floor. One old clergyman slept with his head on Florence's knees and I had a famous divine sleeping at my feet with his head on my knees. It was too hot to object - too hot to do anything but to remain "pu" and bear it.

The morning after our arrival at the hotel we found ourselves in a marvellous snow world. Mont Blanc faced us unveiled by clouds and the long valley which stretched to its foot was blue in the shadow and dazzling in the light. Basil, of course, having arrived first, had arranged plans for us and was our dictator. He told each member of the party what they were to do and the members obeyed orders. Some were to remain in the hotel, some to go to Chamonix to fetch luggage. Helen and I were to do this. We two were to toboggan with our despotic leader to Argentiere where the sleighs were waiting for us and from there we were to tail to Chamonix to fetch our luggage. We went at the appointed time to the hotel yard. Basil was there already. He stood near a board made into a toboggan. He seated

himself at one end, told Helen to sit behind him holding on to him and told me to sit and hold on to Helen. I had never tobogganed in my life. I was not afraid for I had confidence in Helen but I had none in Basil in spite of his alpine outfit and dictatorship. I was wearing a tweed skirt and a short tweed jacket. Basil gave a whoop and started off and we headed down the fearfully steep slope. The whoop roused a big dog who happened to be in the yard. The dog yelped with anger and flew after us and caught us up in a moment. He seized tight hold with his teeth of the lower edge of the back of my coat. He then found that he could not let go. He was so much of a break that Basil, who was quite ignorant of the reason why the toboggan was slow, gave more whoops and tried to make it go faster. I did not feel very happy on my first ride and could only hope that the dog would be too tired to bite me when we got to the bottom. As we began to slow down the dog got his teeth free. He growled, left me and ran back. Only my coat suffered.

We found horses and sleighs waiting us at Argentiere and some of our party were gathered in the "Place" waiting for Basil's orders. A toboggan was tied with a rope to the end of the sleighs. Helen sat behind me and after her a young man named, I think, Maurice. Basil said "You are to fetch some of the luggage" and started us off. The sleigh driver paid ~~not~~ no attention to us. He drove fast round corners and the toboggan swayed so that I wondered how long I should be able to

keep my seat although I had the easiest place. Why we weren't in the sleigh was a mystery to me then but of course now I know that, as we had come for winter sports, Basil considered that the sooner we started the better. Maurice sat where the swing was greatest but unluckily he knew nothing of the sport of tailing and so put out his foot to guide himself in the wrong way and ricked his knee. That was the first of many accidents that Helen had to treat. When she was not joining in an expedition she was giving patients massage. How it was that there were not many more accidents was a wonder.

There were two experienced alpine climbers in the party - Mr. Brandt and Mr. Carter. Mr. Brandy really grasped the fact that he was among people who knew nothing of winter sports. Mr. Carter could not believe it and left us to take care of ourselves without advice or help. (Hence the accidents.) Basil also could not believe in our ignorance. We made expeditions - often dangerous ones - jumped over crevasses, walked along the edges of steep slopes and sheer precipices and made climbs that in another air would have turned me sick with fright. I had only one asset as a mountain climber. I could obey quickly orders given to me being too alarmed to do otherwise. I got praise for obedience.

On Christmas morning there was brilliant sun and hard snow. The shadows on the snow were as blue as the sky. We were told that a splendid toboggan slope had been found. Helen and I at once started out. Florence was to follow. Alice had

gone for a walk. We found Dr. Fry on the top of a slope with a toboggan. "Get on it" he said. "I'll send you down". We got on it. He pushed us off. It was fine spinning down. Helen steered me well round a dangerous corner where the slope went very near the edge of a rocky precipice. A black stream gurgled at the bottom of it and I was glad to have passed that corner but sorry to reach the bottom of our track. This by the by proved later to be a public pathway. We went up again carrying out toboggan. Half way up the slope we saw to our horror that the naughty Dr. Fry was settling an evidently very nervous Florence on to a toboggan. He laughed and would hear no objection from her and pushed her off. She had never been on one before and had'nt the faintest notion how to guide it. She sped past us, her feet spread out in the wrong way and with a face expressing terror and helplessness. "The precipice" gasped Helen. "She will be over it". As Florence neared the dangerous corner a party of black-dressed church goers appeared coming round it. They had with them a big dog. Florence, unable to stop herself, ran into the dog which had bounded to meet her. She and the dog rolled in the snow together and ran into an old woman of the church-going party and rolled her over. All three in a tangle were buried in the snow bank just before the precipice corner. We ran to help them. The dog behaved well. Florence was thankful at all cost to be off the wretched toboggan but the old woman cried bitterly and said again and again "This is what comes of

going to church".

Cousin Julia was very happy in her long talks with her old governess. Dr. Fry was happy with many friends round him. Basil was happy not only while skiing and climbing but by having people about him with so much leisure. That enabled him to find listeners. He was an enthusiastic admirer of the works of the minor poets of that time and was eager to induce people to admire their verses by hearing him read them aloud. Whether the listeners were happy I dont know. I did not listen being too happy in mystruggles to paint the rainbow tints of mountains under snow to care about anything else and all were happy over our expeditions. There was unluckily no ice for skating. That was a disappointment especially to Basil. In the evening we acted charades, took parts in reading Shakespeare and played games. We had an evening in which we were each dressed up to represent the title of a book. Alice did not dress up but went in her usual dress just as she was. No one guessed the book she represented to her great surprise.

We were driven from our wonderland by such a blizzard that our landlord was anxious as to whether his hotel would stand against the gale and we were all but snowed up. too. The wind was so violent that it blew my bedroom window in and I found in the morning a drift of snow about two feet high between my bed and the window. The gale had put out all stoves of the hotel. We felt the guilding shiver in the wild gusts. A few years

after we had been there some friends of ours went to stay for Christmas holidays in the same hotel. While they were there half of the hotel, collapsed in an avalanche during an equally bad gale and blizzard. The hotel was built not only too high up but it was in a wind swept gully between mountain peaks. I would go once more to it in winter in spite of the danger, just to see again at the end of the valley the white shining mass of Mont Blanc.