

THE CROSSING OF THE HISPAR PASS.

By W. M. CONWAY.*

ASKOLE, BALTISTAN, KASHMIR.
July 29th, 1892.

TRAVELLERS in the northern regions of the kingdom of Kashmir, who paid attention to the higher mountain districts, reported traditions of the former existence of various ancient passes across the great ridges. These passes are always stated to have been freely used in days more or less remote, but to have been abandoned and become forgotten in recent years, either through insecurity of the roads from raiders, or, in most cases, owing to a reputed change in the condition of the glaciers and an increased accumulation of snow at high elevations. Anyone acquainted with the history of mountaineering will at once perceive a strong analogy between these reports and the statements made to travellers in Switzerland when the real exploration of the Alps began. It was, for instance, reported at Zermatt, in the fifties, that there was in former days a pass over what is known as the Weissthör ridge, which the natives used to cross when they went on pilgrimage to sacred places within what is now the Italian frontier. This old Weissthör pass was stated to have become impassable owing to an accumulation of snow at the top, and it was therefore abandoned. Other old passes shared the same fate, but all were sooner or later rediscovered by the modern generation of mountaineers. The passes across the Hindu Kush and Karakoram ranges will all, no doubt, sooner or later, reveal themselves to properly trained European climbers, and I am happy to be able now to describe the successful passage of two of them.

Native tradition preserved the memory of at least four traversable routes across the main chain of mountains between Rakipushi (near Gilgit) in the west and the Karakoram Pass in the east. There was first the Nushik La, which led from Hispar to Arundu and so to Skardu; second, the Hispar Pass, or Rdzong (meaning "fortress"), from Hispar to Askole; third, the Mustagh Pass from Yarkand to Askole; fourth, the Saltoro Pass from Khapalu to Yarkand. Unsuccessful attempts to cross the first and second of these have been made by Englishmen at different times. Captain Younghusband rediscovered and successfully crossed one of the two Mustagh Passes in 1887, the other of which had been visited, as well as the Nushik La (though not crossed), by that admirable traveller and surveyor Colonel Godwin Austen in 1861. The approaches to the Saltoro Pass have been investi-

* This letter was posted at Skardu on August 9th, 1892, but was not delivered in London till the last days of December.

gated by Lieutenant Molony, R.A., but the pass itself has not been visited.

The party which I have the honour to lead, consisting of the Hon. C. G. Bruce (5th Goorkhas), Mr. A. D. McCormick, Mr. J. H. Roudebush, Mr. Eckenstein, and the Alpine guide M. Zurbriggen, having passed through Gilgit and up the Hunza-Nagyr valley, left Nagyr on June 27th to cross the Nushik La and the Rdzong or Hispar Pass. Two miles above Nagyr we came to the foot of the Hopar Glacier and ascended beside it for about 5 miles to a wonderful basin of cultivated fields and rich meadows, in which the five villages of Hopar are situated, enclosed on one side by the glacier and on the other by snowy mountains. Here we found a grand system of glaciers, unmarked on any map, ramifying from the south in all directions, and flowing down from a number of peaks of 20,000 to 24,000 feet in height. I remained eight days in this district for the purpose of making a thorough exploration and map of the glaciers, but as there was great dearth of provisions, I was obliged to send on Messrs Bruce and Eckenstein with two Goorkhas and coolies to cross the Nushik La at once and bring up supplies to meet us on the other side.

Whilst in the Hopar district I attempted the ascent of a peak of 21,500 feet, but after mounting the glacier towards it for 17 miles we found ourselves cut off from the final easy slopes by about 100 yards of impassable ice-fall—a chaos of loose blocks of ice that insecurely covered a series of deep and broad crevasses. Zurbriggen and two Goorkhas worked for hours to force a passage through this place, but had to give up the attempt. We were therefore forced to return and content ourselves with climbing a difficult rock peak of only 17,000 feet, from which however we enjoyed a gorgeous panorama.

We now crossed to the right or north bank of the Hopar Glacier, and then, passing over a ridge about 16,000 feet high, we descended into the Hispar Valley on the other side. We might have mounted the Hispar Valley directly from Nagyr, but it is an absolutely desert trough of rocks, sand, and stones. The *détour* by Hopar is really the quicker route. From the point where we struck the bank of the Hispar stream to Hispar was a distance of about 16 miles; and this was the most horrible piece of walking we had any of us ever experienced. The sun blazed overhead; the thermometer stood at 90° Fahr. in the shade; the bare rocks on either hand concentrated the heat upon us; and the going for most of the way was either wading in sand or striding from one pointed and broken rock to another. The flies made life burdensome, and there was nothing but the muddiest water to drink. As we approached Hispar we had to cross the foot of a steep side valley, whose stream drained some hidden snowy area high above. Just as we reached the brink of the gully we heard a sound like thunder, and saw, advancing downwards at a great rate, a huge black volume of mingled

mud, water, and rocks, which filled the whole gully, and was making for the river below. The rocks that formed the vanguard of this hideous thing were many of them as large as 10-foot cubes, and they were rolled round and round by the mud as though they had been pebbles. In half-an-hour this mud-avalanche was completely passed, and we were essaying to cross the stream, when a second and larger one hove in sight above, and we had to hurry back to escape it. Three times did the mountains disgorge these black monstrosities upon us before we were able to seize a favourable moment to cross the gully that barred our advance.

We spent two days at Hispar, and on one of them I ascended a hill south of the village to try and gain a view towards the great



FOOT OF THE HISPAR GLACIER.

pass. After mounting about 3000 feet I turned a corner by a great stone-man, and was astonished by the view that opened before me. The whole upper stretch of the Hispar Valley was displayed, stretching for some 40 miles, without bend or fold or jutting headland, to the pass at the top, and entirely filled with one vast, even, gently-inclined glacier. The lowest 20 miles of ice were entirely covered with a mantle of moraine. An avenue of mighty peaks walled the glacier in on either hand, and a sombre roof of cloud, at a height of about 22,000 feet, lay motionless over all. The glacier began about a mile above the green fields of Hispar, and beyond that point there was not a visible trace of the presence or activity of man. It was a sight to stimulate any explorer, and I immediately descended with my Goorkha companion,

and made all arrangements to start for the pass on the following morning (July 11th).

What with the badness of the stony way, the unwillingness of the coolies, and the many necessary halts for surveying and collecting, our first three marches up the glacier were short. The same distance was accomplished by our lightlier burdened and hungrier predecessors, Messrs. Bruce and Eckenstein, in two days. We thus reached an Alp and camping ground, called Haigutum, on the left bank of the glacier, and something less than half-way up it towards the pass at the glacier's head. Haigutum is an important point on the route, for here a short side glacier (the Haigutum Gamu or glacier) joins the main stream from the south. At the head of the Haigutum glacier is the Nushik La; at the head of the main glacier is the Hispan Pass. It was my intention on the following day to have ascended to the top of the Nushik La, but, as clouds enveloped the glacier and snow fell with much persistence, the expedition would have been valueless. Let me, therefore, briefly describe the adventures of my companions in the passage of this pass.

Messrs. Bruce and Eckenstein, with their followers, after having been stopped at Haigutum for two days by a snowstorm that lasted forty hours, started on July 4th to cross the Nushik La. Their party consisted of fifteen men and a dog; amongst the men was one Shersi of Hispan, who said he had crossed the pass in his youth. I now quote from Mr. Eckenstein's diary:—

“ We started at 4.15 A.M. in beautifully clear weather. The way went first along the top of the old moraine (on the end of which Haigutum is situated) and then down to the Haigutum glacier, which is reached in ten minutes. This is crossed diagonally in half an hour to the foot of the slope opposite (i.e. the north-west slope of the mountain east of the pass), which is struck at a point considerably to the left of and below the pass, the part below the pass being steep and raked by avalanches. From here to the top of the pass took four hours and a half. The whole way up is on steep snow-slopes, cut up by many *schrunds*, and it is impossible to go without traversing some places where there is danger from falling ice. The slope is of a considerable average steepness, the bit which was steepest (about 150 feet high) being at an angle of $52\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$. Bruce, the two Goorkhas and old Shersi went roped together in front, and I brought up the rear. The dog acted like a true mountaineer. When the slope got too steep for him to run about on, he gave up frolicking around, and followed soberly and properly in the steps. At the beginning the snow was somewhat soft, and for a short time unpleasantly so. Our progress was regular and uneventful for rather more than half-way up. The place we then got to presented two alternatives; either to go over a *schrund* *viâ* a very shady snow-bridge, which would have been followed by a fair snow-slope; or to avoid the

schrund by going to the right. This was very much the more direct way, but involved going up the steep slope mentioned above, and a slip on this would certainly have been fatal, as it terminated in an ice-precipice below. The slope was ice underneath, covered by about a foot of not over-good snow. I abstained from saying anything, and asked Bruce to let the natives settle it between themselves, and their subsequent performance proved full of interest. Two of them put down their loads and took off the goat-hair rope they use for carrying. They took a double length of this, and one tied it round his waist in true orthodox style. They then borrowed one of our axes (which so far had not been used). The first man (who was tied round the waist) started ahead with the axe, cutting steps, followed by the second man, who held the two ends of the doubled rope tied round his stick, which he drove in as he went along. And so they went along till the easier slope above was reached. Then the others followed, and subsequently three went back to bring up the two loads that had been left behind. It was really a capital performance, and would have done credit to any men. Altogether their performance, and that of the other five natives as well, was one that not every Swiss guide would care to imitate under similar conditions. None of the loads were much above 30 lbs., but were all arranged to be inside this limit as far as possible. Just below the top of the pass there was a rather nasty piece of slope, with snow that was very rotten. Our natives all stopped, and each said his prayers before going on to it. The top was all corniced, and we did not go over quite the lowest point of the pass, but at a point about 50 feet higher to the east. Amar Sing and Parbir (the two Goorkhas) cut through the cornice, the passage of which required the use of the rope in the case of every member of the party. We reached the top at 9.40 a.m., and the view from there is truly splendid."

The descent to Arundu is perfectly easy and straightforward, and does not need description, for it has been admirably described by Colonel Godwin-Austen in the *Journal* of the Royal Geographical Society for 1864.

When we reached Haigtum we had still a certain amount of baggage and some servants that could be dispensed with, so we arranged to send the whole over the Nushik La to Skardu, in charge of Mr. Roudebush. Zurbriggen was to accompany the party for two marches, and then return and join me again on the Hispar glacier. The party under the command of Mr. Roudebush crossed the pass in bad weather on July 14th. They also had a local guide with them, but neither guide nor coolies showed the least mountaineering ability. At first they took the same route as Mr. Bruce, to the far side of the Haigtum glacier; but then Zurbriggen declined to follow the local guide, who, like Shersi, was for leading them under some dangerous overhanging ice, which might have fallen upon them at any moment. Zurbriggen struck out a

safe route more to the left and reached the watershed, in three hours and a quarter of actual climbing, at a point about half a mile east and 500 feet or more higher than the point where Mr. Bruce's party crossed. He had infinite trouble with the coolies, who kept on throwing down their loads and refusing to advance. Again and again he had to go down and help the men up, one by one, which he did with the greatest kindness. The coolies fully realised the value of his help, and when all the difficulties were over, they fell on the ground and kissed his feet, saying that thenceforward they would follow wherever he chose to lead. One of these men returned with Zurbriggen to my party, and his account of what had happened stimulated the courage of my coolies, who thenceforward ceased to give trouble and worked admirably and without complaint.

Zurbriggen was away from me for three days in all. During one of these days we remained stationary. On the other two we made long marches up the glacier, the surface of which was now free from stones, except for two or three big medial moraines. Our advance was by no means easy, for the glacier was often crevassed and always cut up by large sinuous streams, far too wide to be jumped, which undercut one side of their bed. We had to meander around the curves of these waters, often finding it difficult to discover a route. On the evening of July 16th we encamped at the edge of the upper snow-field, and at the angle of a great icy affluent, flowing in from the south, at whose head stood a mighty white mountain, so graceful in form, and pure in aspect, that I named it the White Lily. Shortly after camp was pitched we heard Zurbriggen's whistle coming from far over the glacier, and in due time he arrived from his laborious march.

The next day Zurbriggen rested, and we took rounds of angles with the theodolite, catalogued collections, inked in the map, and engaged in other needful occupations. On July 18th we started, meaning to make a camp at the foot of the final ascent of the pass. The coolies, led by a Goorkha, went up the right side of the glacier; M'Cormick, Zurbriggen, and I, with the other Goorkha, struck straight across the ice to the other side, in order to reach certain points necessary for the survey. As we went along we found the snow to be in admirable condition; the day was so superbly fine that we loudly bewailed our failure to arrange for pushing on at once over the pass. Just then we saw that the crevasses at the foot of a side glacier were forcing the coolies out into the middle of the ice and within shouting distance of us. In a moment I determined to change our plans, and signalled for all the men to come in our direction. We started at once up the long snow slopes towards the col, and walked at a rapid pace. Zurbriggen led skilfully through a labyrinth of great crevasses that presently intervened, and then we had to pound over some 4 miles of gently sloping snow-field to the pass. At noon we were all united on

the summit, and the longed-for view over the other side disclosed itself to us.

It is a view unique in my experience of mountains. We saw no series of ridges, and looked down no long glacier such as we had expected to behold. Instead of these things there was displayed beneath us a vast, seemingly flat lake of snow, in area at least 300 square miles, white, silent, the very embodiment of stillness and calm. A great range of peaks ringed it around, and a mighty group of rock-needles jutted into the heavens on one side of it to a height of 24,000 feet, masses of rock surpassing the Aiguilles of Chamonix in number, in steepness, and immeasurably in size. There was no visible outlet to this lake, but there was a suggestion of the existence of one round the corner to the right, hidden by a near snowy ridge. We feared that there would prove to be a great ice-fall at this point, and the reported "accumulation of snow" might well enough have resulted in making an ice-fall, of such dimensions as this would necessarily possess, wholly impassable. We stopped for an hour and a quarter on the pass, during which time we lunched. I took a round of angles and read the instruments. The mercury stood at 15.85 inches. The air temperature was 64°. Many of us felt, though none suffered from, the diminished atmospheric pressure, but the burning heat of the sun in the morning gave us headaches, which the diminished pressure may have increased. The headache, however, was primarily one of the sun-headaches with which we have become far too familiar.

It was not without some misgiving that I gave the word to descend. We went down a gentle snow-slope, and then through a maze of big crevasses, thus reaching the edge of a bay of the great snow-lake. We traversed this and passed round its far angle to the right. There, as we turned the corner, the broad smooth highway of the Biafo glacier opened suddenly before us, stretching away far as the eye could reach, without visible crease or chasm in the direction we must go. On either hand peaks of extraordinary abruptness, to which the mountains of Europe contain no parallel, rose one behind another in interminable array. Far in the distance clouds and glacier seemed to meet in purple indistinctness. Just round this corner, for us so momentous, we found a plateau suitable for the camp; there we spent the night. Hour after hour snow fell deep upon us, and the clouds wrapped us around, but in the morning the weather lifted somewhat, and we were able to continue our way. We marched about 12 miles before camping at nightfall in the bed of an old lake.

The glacier was without crevasses for the whole distance, a most disagreeable condition of things, for there was no crack for the melted snow to flow into, and it lay about all over the surface of the ice and turned it into slush. We waded for hours through this nameless compound of water, ice, and snow, which sometimes reached to the

knee. Imagination cannot picture a greater satisfaction than we felt when we once more trod on earth that was partially dry. The next day we made another long march, and came in the evening to a reasonably comfortable level, where there was brushwood to burn and grass to lie upon. On the following morning I sent off Zurbriggen and the spare coolies to Askole, about 25 miles down. They reached the village in the evening by a long forced march. M'Cormick and I remained all day resting in camp, and spent the day following in sketching and surveying. The weather now became steadily bad, and my survey could proceed but slowly, owing to the constant clouding of the peaks and their intricacies of form. We were thus unable to reach Askole with a finished map till four more days had passed; but ultimately all our work was satisfactorily done, and on July 26th our whole party (with the exception of Mr. Roudebush, who remained at Skardu) was reunited at Askole.

The Hispar Pass is thus from the end of the Hispar Glacier to the end of the Biafo Glacier over 80 miles in length, and is the longest glacier pass in the world outside of the Arctic regions. At Nagyr everyone declared that it had not been crossed in the memory of any living person, and it was evident enough that none of the men that accompanied us had the least knowledge of the way, for they were all as surprised as we were at the unexpected nature of the view from the col. At Askole, however, I was able to learn some more precise traditions from the mouths of the Baltis. Colonel Godwin-Austen, writing in 1864, says of the Hispar Pass, "It was by this way that the Nagyr men used to come into the Braldoh and loot the villages; their last raid was some twenty-four years since (*i.e.* about 1840), when a body of from seven hundred to eight hundred crossed over, and carried off about one hundred men and women, together with all the cows, sheep, and goats, they could collect." I enquired about this story every day I was in Askole and was informed as follows:—The last time there is any memory of the pass having been crossed was in the days of the father of the very old man in whose house our baggage was stowed. He does not remember the event, but he remembers his father telling him about it. The leader of the band that crossed from Nagyr was Wazir Hollo. They came late in the year, three months later than now. The harvest in Nagyr had been bad and the Nagyr folk needed provisions. The band did not attempt to attack Askole, said the old man, but the Baltis gave them ibex skins and flour. The Nagyr people invited some of the Baltis to go back with them, but they refused, fearing the cold. The Nagyr men started to return by the way they had come, but they all perished in the snow except Wazir Hollo, who alone reached home to tell the tale. There is perhaps a fragment or two of truth in this story, but the actual facts will probably never be discovered.