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## NEW GUINEA : ATTEMPTED ASCENT OF MOUNT OWEN STANLEY.

BY H. O. FORBES.

[We have been favoured by Mrs. Anna Forbes with the following letter from her husband, describing his late gallant and determined, but unfortunately unsuccessful, attempt to reach and ascend the great mountain which has hitherto baffled all explorers.

Besides the personal interest which naturally attaches to such an enterprise, we have, incidentally, in the letter, exceptionally graphic details as to the nature of the country traversed, and of the peculiar difficulties which beset the explorer in those parts.

Since the letter was in type Mr. Forbes has arrived in England, and arrangements are now being made for his addressing the Society in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, and Aberdeen.]

YOU will be eager to know the fate of the expedition. Do not be disappointed to learn that it is a failure; be glad that I am alive, for we have had a narrow escape. I got to the very foot of the last slope of Mount Owen Stanley, but the superstitions of the natives made it impossible to ascend. We were only three at the base of the mountain; to have left one in charge of our baggage would have been placing foolhardy confidence in natives who looked not altogether friendly, and to have ascended alone would have been madness. But to begin at the beginning. You know that some years ago a few diggers had reached a considerable distance into the interior with horses. Among these diggers was Gleeson (one of my party), and Mr. Douglas sent him in advance to cut any overgrown places in the route. This he did in August and returned. His report was that their furthest camp was 72 miles in a due north-east direction from Port Moresby. Now the top of Owen Stanley lies 43 miles from Port Moresby in a due north-east direction. Discounting his distances, I took it for granted that his *direction* was right, and estimated that this camp must be about 10 miles from Owen Stanley.

After fourteen days' ride over very rough country we reached the camp. Imagine my chagrin to find it close to where Chalmers and I made friends with the Ebe people, as the crow flies, about 24 miles from Port, and similarly 24 from the top of Owen Stanley. I was terribly disappointed. We made a camp there, however, shot with dynamite some 2 cwt. of fish out of the river, smoked and cured them. No natives were seen (or existed) between Port and this camp, and it was two days after our arrival before we saw a native. They were friendly at once, and came about the camp freely. We warily broached the subject of an escort to the great mountain, showed the trade we would give to any one going with us, but asked nobody. After ten days, we induced some eleven men to agree to go with us, and as this number was very small, we had to take the lowest allowance of food, clothes, and camp apparatus. I had conned the road we were to follow from a high mountain near the camp—(I should say that I had made a survey of the country all the

way, and had plotted it on a sheet carefully prepared before starting). Gleeson and Belford accompanied me. Jack and Cæsar, the two South-Sea Islanders, I left in charge of the camp and the horses. We started on 20th October, and our road lay at once from the river bank up some 2000 feet, through the Ebe village, situated right on the summit ; down to the river again ; across it ; and up a mountain on the other side, equally high, to another village, our first stopping-place from the main camp. Here our carriers bolted, and left us to our fate among strangers, whom we found, however, very friendly.

Next morning, after much difficulty, we procured a new batch, and proceeded on our way to the "Great Water," of which last year I had heard so much. As I suspected, it proved to be the Brown River, crossed by Europeans in its upper reaches for the first time by us. Here after a ten hours' march they refused to go further, although they had promised to take us to a village where we could get as much food as we wished. We at last got them to cross over, but they now took us into a thicket, and led us about for one and a half hours. We then had to indicate that we might be called upon to use force. On this they brought us out of the maze—but not to a village. We were doubtful of their intentions. We did not understand their language, and they could comprehend only a few words of Koiari. They had all squatted on the ground, and gave us to understand that they could not, or would not, go further. We did not quite know what to do ; we thought they said that the village was a long way off, but we doubted whether they were speaking the truth. We were afraid to camp where we were, without any idea of the situation of the villages, lest our friends should clear off in the night. We decided to compel them to make a fresh push for the village, which we believed must be near, for there were good gardens close by. So, ostentatiously having the Winchester rifle passed to me, I carefully loaded and cocked it, but made no demonstration with it. Then in a commanding voice I ordered our carriers forward. They comprehended the pantomime, and were evidently much scared ; they quietly took up their burdens, and marched forward by a good path, which had been near, but which they had not showed us. Thence up a steep mountain—up, and up, we proceeded. The sun had now set, and I called a halt, for further progress was impossible in the dark. All the baggage was deposited on the ground, and the circle of carriers found themselves hemmed in by our three selves, each with a loaded rifle. I gave them to understand that whoever tried to escape would have to be shot, though I knew that such an extreme measure would not be necessary, and they all promised at once to do as they were bid. I ordered all arms aside, chucked each under the chin (their sign of friendship and good faith), and confidence was restored. Our tent was pitched, a fire was made, and supper cooked. We gave them a little of our cured fish, a great delicacy to them.

We watched by turns all night, but no signs of any breach of faith occurred. We were very sorry to have recourse to any compulsion, for they had carried splendidly, but our safety depended on our not being deserted two difficult days' marches out from our main camp, for we

should then have had to lose everything except food for the way. To have had to leave our baggage would have been a calamity—so much loot to them; and desertion would be the game they would play on every future traveller. Very early next morning we sent forward one of the carriers with a present of salt to bring to us the nearest villagers. At six we started forward, and about nine met quite a crowd from these villages coming to meet us—all most friendly. It took us till noon, however, to reach their dwellings, and there we camped all the rest of that day, making friends with the people, taking photos, and gathering all the information we could. We laid the carriers from the Brown River under obligation to remain here until our return from the big mountain (which was now really over against us) on penalty of forfeiting all the pay they had earned.

Next day it rained until eleven o'clock, when we struck tent, made up the "swags," and, after much persuasion, got porters to proceed with us. It was only by using pressure in a jocular sort of way, slyly slipping a load on an unsuspecting man and laughing over our clever feat, and inciting all his friends to join in our mirth, that we got them to help us. When the baggage was all shouldered, quite a crowd followed, and at one village which we passed through further on, a fellow appeared who was pointed out as *the* man to guide us to the great mountain. My spirits were very high as I brought up the rear of our cavalcade, trudging along a rough ascending and descending path. A few hours brought us to the flat summit of a clear hill, and as the mist rolled off there stood Owen Stanley, with nothing between the gratification of my long and ardent desires but a ridge. On our right rose a steep and rugged mountain named Venudi, but not belonging to Owen Stanley. "There," they said, pointing to Venudi, "you see the top of what we are taking you to." "But, my friend," I said pointing to the peak of Owen Stanley, "that is where we want to go." Then came long faces and terrible grimaces. "There you cannot think of going." "What do you think will happen to you?" "Why, they will tear off your nails, pull out your joints, and eat your fingers; they will cut off your ears, they will pluck out your eyes, and then cut your head off." Their pantomime was too expressive to be misunderstood, but we laughed at their dismal tale, boasted that nothing could hurt us, or those with us, and asked them to prove the truth of our boast; but this opportunity they refused to take advantage of. I then lifted a rifle, and showed them the effect on a tree. They were greatly scared and astonished; no persuasion would, however, induce them to start with us to the top of the peak. They were quite willing to take us to Venudi, but not to Owen Stanley. One by one they began to disappear, and in a little we had very few of our carriers left. We unconcernedly pitched our camp, as it appeared of little use to force them. A message had, we found, been sent by these people to our Bereka carriers (who had stayed behind in the village to wait us) to come up, and, I suppose, explain to us the horrors of the ascent. They came; we tried to induce them to persuade the friends among whom they had brought us to take us forward. "It was an impossibility: no one ever went there and came back."

Towards evening most of the runaways had returned, and were about us when an unfortunate circumstance occurred. Belford, supposing that one of our Bereka followers was inciting the people to start with us on a false track, went up to him, and without my knowledge struck the native. I was at the moment engaged in taking an observation, and did not see what took place; on lifting my eyes I saw this fellow—he was a sort of chief—striding out of the camp in high dudgeon, and in a few seconds not a soul was left with us. A few villages were in sight on the slopes of the hill; as if by magic, they were evacuated, and all the women hid in the bush. We were now in a dangerous position, so far from our camp, and quite unable to guess whether we had made enemies of the people, or only frightened them. We passed a very unenviable night. I set a double watch, each of us having to do six hours' sentry duty; but no one disturbed us during the night, and in the morning not a sign of life was to be seen from our commanding position. If no one appeared, our only resource was to burn the whole camp equipage except what food each could carry, and make for our camp about twenty miles away, with the probability of having to fight our way through a rather populous country. About eight o'clock we perceived heads popping up here and there in the bush, disappearing the instant our eyes turned towards them. I ordered all weapons to be concealed, but still to be ready, and with some tobacco I went into the bush, made friendly signs, and called out, asking them to come to speak with me. One old man risked an approach; I touched him under the chin and embraced him, when he seemed satisfied of our friendly intentions. One by one the others hidden in the bush came in, and they at once commenced yesterday's tale of the awful things that would befall us if we tried to ascend the great mountain. We had made up our minds to return to the main camp, and were packing the equipage, but did not tell the people this, hoping that, perhaps, if they saw we were giving little heed to their weird prophecies, they might give in. When we told them we were going back to the coast they seemed very relieved, and all turned and left us except two or three old men. After long parleying we got these to shoulder the baggage (ourselves having to take a part of it also) back to the village, where we expected to find our Bereka carriers. They and the villagers, however, were at a garden some little way ahead, but we found our baggage safe—a good sign. We pressed on to the garden, where we met quite a crowd, who seemed very friendly after becoming assured of our good faith. The men, who had brought us thus far from the base of the mountain, turned to go the moment they deposited our gear, and seemed to be in a great rage about something; but I ran after them and brought them back, to pay them handsomely in red cloth, beads, and tobacco. They were overjoyed, as they evidently did not expect anything, being, I suppose, afraid we were harbouring a vindictive spirit because they had not taken us on to the mountain.

Nothing could exceed the friendliness of this large gathering, and when we proceeded we had ten times the carriers we required. The march back to the Brown River was thus most pleasantly accomplished. There we camped for the night, with the promise of the accompaniment

of this crowd back to the Bereka village. False hopes all! In the morning, with the exception of the three who were returning home, we were alone. They had all cleared off, without pay, but not without the hope of pay; to them it seemed impossible that we could take all our belongings with us, and they could return to appropriate the left goods. For some hours we tried by sending messengers to the runaways, who, we perfectly understood, were hidden in the bush, to persuade them to accompany us, but without avail. It came again to be a question of our safety. We loaded our rifles and revolvers, made the whole burdens of fifteen men into six bundles, compelled the three men with us to shoulder one each, and we each took one, and started in single file, a native between each of us, urged with the information that he would be shot on the slightest sign of perfidy. We left nothing behind us, for anything we could not carry we burned, being determined that no loot should fall into the hands of our faithless friends.

I did pity the carriers; they were really too over-burdened, but stern necessity demanded stern treatment. When we got to the river we lightened our loads by throwing our surplus stores, rice, flour, bread, into the river, as well as extra trade. You should have seen the woe-begone countenances of the men as these riches were turned into the river, to be lost irrecoverably over a near cataract! At the crossing we were joined by another Bereka man, who helped with the burdens, and a long and weary day of climbing and descending brought us to the Bereka village, one stage from our camp. They were exceedingly friendly, and we passed a comfortable night for the first time since our departure thence.

After a long series of observations which closed in the survey between our main camp and Owen Stanley, we started on the last stage to the camp, where I hoped to be able to reorganise the party, so as to leave one white man in charge of the main camp, and have the two South-Sea Islanders to strengthen us on our return to Owen Stanley for another attempt at ascent. All went well for a few hours. The day was very hot, and our road a very trying one, through grassy ascents and descents of some 2000 feet devoid of shade. About eleven a bright object like a tent attracted our attention in the Ebe village, which, as I mentioned in the beginning of my letter, stands on the crest of a hill. I got out my telescope, and recognised one of our tents. I at once suspected that something was wrong, but hid my discomfiture. A rifle was fired, while I kept my telescope on the village; at once some people appeared, and two displayed themselves conspicuously, dressed in European clothes. I was too far off to recognise their features, and had a doubt whether they were natives in our clothes, or our two men, Jack and Caesar, who had moved our camp for some extraordinary reason.

In a few moments the tent was struck with lightning rapidity, and I realised that we had some disaster to face. The courage of my comrades failed, and our carriers at once suspected that something was wrong. They were seized with panic, and would proceed no further. I told them that the people on the mountain there were my men, and all was right. We had to descend fifteen hundred feet into the bed of the Goldie River,

and thus far I got them good-naturedly. We rested for about half-an-hour, and then started to ascend the mountain to the village where we had seen the tent, for our path lay through it. It was only by showing some force that we got the porters to move on. You may imagine how harassing it was—the urging of these men, on the verge of running away, by driving at the mouth of our guns, with the terrible anxiety as to what had happened at our main camp oppressing me. When we got about half-way up, the Ebe people refused to permit the Bereka carriers to come nearer to their village. This was, in reality, a declaration of war to them. We opened a parley, speaking at about a mile distant. They said: “If you go back to the river we shall join you there.” I wanted to get to the village where the tent stood, but they firmly resisted. I could have forced them, but I was not prepared to go to extremities without knowing whether our two men were captives or killed. So we wearily scrambled down to the river again.

I must tell you that the river runs there between rocky precipices, almost perpendicular, and several hundred feet high. We were scarcely disappointed to find that no Ebe native kept the tryst; they parleyed with our men from a high bank, and out of sight. After a very short dialogue, our men threw down the baggage and sought to escape. It was a critical moment for us; we could not force our way out of the river with even a couple of men against us, and our camp, eight to ten miles distant, could be reached only by its windings—a road terrifying even to contemplate, the stream being full of slippery boulders, with pots many fathoms deep, and frequently blocked by rapids. Our safety almost certainly depended on our carriers being kept close to us, both as guides and to strengthen the defence. Luckily, they were terribly afraid of our firearms, and we hunted them back, formed them into line, and started by the only road open to us—the bed of the river. It is impossible to describe that awful march, driving our unwilling cavalcade, and surrounded by crowds of armed natives from Ebe. These latter we kept at bay by covering them every few minutes with our rifles; between clinging to the crags by a toe-hold, crossing chasms by fragile shaky trees, struggling through rapids and deep pots, from which I was rescued from drowning twice by the men whom we were driving. Then two actually escaped, getting round a corner before they could be fired on. It was sometimes almost past endurance; we had often to scale the dismal walls that held the river, the nails of my fingers were nearly all gone, and the throbbing pain from the water and dirt was most severe. It needed all my perseverance and determination not to give in. Burdened with my rifle and ammunition, and the instrument I carried (which I was loth to lose), and the weight of my drenched clothes in the hot afternoon sun, I was almost overpowered by fatigue, but if I had given way none of us would have ever reached the coast.

Some miles before reaching the camp we came upon two of our pack-saddles. It was no surprise to me, but my companions fairly broke down. We added the recovered booty to our already loaded carriers, who were doubly burdened with the loads of the two who had escaped, and—on, on. At half-past four we were near enough to the site of the camp for a shout

to be heard. We shouted, but no reply. There was a knoll just above the camp, and, with palpitating hearts, we hurried up. We were not very surprised ; we had pictured pretty well what we should find. Everything was looted ; all my dried plants were scattered about, everything of value was gone—my sextant, sextant-stand, watch, the new station-pointer I had just bought in Sydney, every article of clothing, books, the newly-constructed map, all the photographs I had taken, chemicals, medicines, and all our food supply except two or three tins of meat which they had not succeeded in opening. The wretched carriers, who had really served us well, we paid with what little trade we had with us. They were evidently delighted that no evil was meted out to them, and at parting even gave us three yams, for which we were grateful, for these, with the tins of meat, would carry us for the next four days to a place where we had hidden some provisions, and which would bear us to the coast if our boys, supposing they had escaped, had not used it on their flight. We now made a close examination of the camp, while one man kept guard with a rifle. We searched for signs of a fight, but there were no traces of blood, and neither corpses nor graves. Before dark I sent for the horses from the face of the neighbouring hill—the natives were too afraid to approach them—one was wanting. We counted over the pieces of the saddles scattered about. Only seven saddles—the missing saddle belonged to the missing horse. Hope revived in us that the boys had escaped with one horse, and had made for Port. You may picture my distress, for I supposed that you were there waiting my return, and it was impossible to judge when the attack was made, and how long they were in advance of us. We slept that night one at a time, and rejoiced when day broke. It took some hours to make three saddles out of the wreck of the seven, and then we at once started for the coast, a month earlier than I had intended. For the first two days we had to keep constantly on the alert, and one watched each night. I stuck to my work the whole way, never relaxing the taking of observations, and through this delay our stores were finished before we reached the hidden boxes. They had not been touched, and we could discover no horse's footsteps. We feared that our boys had really not escaped ; but a recent fire near the provision camp was found with some nuts by it, which we supposed to be traces of one of the men at least. We took out enough provisions to take us to the coast, and left enough for the boys, should they have escaped and come later to seek food. We arrived at Port Moresby on Saturday night, the 5th of November, and found preparations being made for despatching an expedition to our rescue, for Jack and Cæsar—who had both come in the night before, after many dangers and difficulties, and weak from want of food—had reported our probable fate. The camp had been attacked on the Saturday and Sunday before, and we arrived on the Monday. The Saturday's attack was an attempt to loot, in which one of the natives was killed. Our boys first took him and laid him on a road, hoping his friends would take him away ; after some hours they went back to look at him, and, finding him dead, they buried him.