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PETER BOTTE

In the island of Mauritius, in the Southern Ocean, stands Pieter Both (or Peter Botte), one of the strangest shaped and most inaccessible mountains in the world. From the sea it is most calculated to impress beholders. Its quaint shape towers above the rugged mountain mass which again dominates over Port-Louis; and its still quaint name dates from so far back as 1616, when Pieter Both d'Amersfort, a Dutch admiral, or General of the Sea, as he is described in the records, happening to be shipwrecked on the island, was perpetuated by name in the mountain which cast its shadow across his drowned body.

The travellers' tales which are heard beyond the seas of the ascents of a mountain, insignificant in size, but by reputation ranking with monarchs of Alpine celebrity, have contributed to lend a grandeur and a mystery to Pieter Both in the imaginations of those who approach him for the first time. Though various ascents have been made from time to time (one of which was described in this *Journal* as far back as 1834), that made in June 1876 by a party of eleven seems to have been of special interest, as the following narrative, from the pen of one of the party, will shew. His story runs as follows:

An Indian, Deebee by name, a carriole driver by calling, by repeated ascents has made himself so much at home on the mountain as to be able to arrange a system of ropes and rough rope-ladders by which any one with a good head and fairly strong muscles can reach the top with comparative ease. Deebee is a short square-built East Indian, with a pock-marked face, whose dress on the last time I saw him was a soldier's old tunic, and a lady's 'cloud,' also old, about his head and chin. This worthy, after the preliminaries are settled with the leader of the expedition, purchases a coil of two and a half inch Manilla rope, arms himself with a wonderfully battered horse-pistol and a broken cutlass, takes into his confidence sundry others of his countrymen, and starts up the mountain the day previous to that on which the ascent is to be attempted. Upon the 'Shoulder,' which I shall presently notice, he has built a small hut, where he and his band sleep; to me, who saw it empty, it seemed just capable of holding half one man, with the contingency that his other half would dangle over a precipice some hundreds of feet high. In the morning the ropes are fixed; the 'Ladder Rock' being ascended by means of a pole; the pistol is used to fire a line over the head, by which the rope is gradually hauled up; the cutlass is for cutting the rounds of the rope-ladders from the bushes; so that if all goes well, when the party gather on the 'Shoulder' they will see above them the whole apparatus, strangely suggestive of the Old Bailey on hanging mornings, with Deebee and his crew clinging thereto – a black Jack Ketch to perfection.

Pieter Both itself is one of a score of peaks situated in the rim of a gigantic crater, which can be traced at the present day from itself on the north to the Black River Mountains on the south, a distance of more than twenty miles. A mountain called 'The Pouce,' so called from the resemblance of its peak to a man's thumb, lies immediately above Port-Louis, and forms a well-known feature in the views of that town. After the Pouce, which is thirty-six feet only lower than Pieter Both, the crater-wall becomes a wall indeed. Its northern face falls down in sheer precipice to Pamplemousses, two thousand feet below its crest; the reverse, no less steep, facing the valley of Moka, green with sugar-canes, and fifteen hundred feet below. This wall is broken into several peaks, of which the last

is Pieter Both, having an elevation above sea-level of two thousand six hundred and ninety-eight feet, according to a recent survey made by the colonial surveyor.

At La Laura, a sugar-mill about ten miles from Port-Louis, the final arrangements are made for carrying up the provisions and other impedimenta, including on this occasion a photographic apparatus; and that satisfactorily arranged, comes a trudge of a mile along a gently ascending cane-road.

As the path nears the woods we find their margin impervious with the matted undergrowth; the bright green of the wild raspberry, with its hairy fruit, and long straggling branches armed with fearful thorns; the scarlet and orange blossoms of the *Lantana*; while the snowy white and pink blossoms of the many other species of underwood crowd in beneath the shade of the taller trees in a many coloured parterre.

Side by side with many other curious varieties of trees will be noted the fluted stem and broad spreading top of the mighty Sambalacoque, now fast disappearing under the axe. On either side of the road which winds along this forest line are the tall sugar-canes, like walls high above our heads, the silver-gray blossoms waving in the softly blowing trade-wind; the rain-drops hanging from their leaves, falling in showers, and giving a none too welcome hint of slippery work a little higher up. Between Pieter Both and the mountain ridge that joins him with the Pouce is a steep gorge, wide at the base, narrowing gradually till it ends abruptly in a gap some fifteen yards across, and about four hundred feet below the summit. You can climb up to this gap, but it requires to be cautiously approached, for on looking over its edge, sharp and knife-like, you will find yourself looking down a precipice of naked rock some two thousand feet deep. The lookout is grand beyond description, and you will make out Port-Louis harbour, looking about the size of the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens, and Pamplemousses Church a dot immediately below you.

The path ends with the canes; and that which we follow after leaving them we make for ourselves. But upwards is the right way; you can't go wrong, for the ravine is like a funnel cut in half, and the easiest slope lies in its centre, to which we all gravitate by a sort of 'natural selection.' The forest is dense under foot and overhead; perhaps it is as well that it is, for without clinging on to the branches and tree-stems, and swinging bodily by them up bad places, the lower part would be as difficult as the upper. The forest primeval, silent and gloomy, shuts out the light, and the air feels hot and stifling. Dead trunks lie rotting on all sides, mere touchwood many of them, resenting our footsteps by a cloud of dust; giving homes to a variety of lovely ferns, including the hartstongue, which grows in tufts on the dead-wood wherever its roots can penetrate. Everywhere strange forms meet the eye, as if Nature in a frolic had run wild to form them. From the branches depend long trails of 'lianes,' ropes that twist and twine and squeeze the life out of the trees they fasten on. Orchids are here also, fleshy leaved, with no apparent roots; and black shapeless masses perched in the higher tree forks, the nests of the destructive white ant. Mosses clothe the ground with an emerald tapestry, beautiful to the eye, but treacherous and squelching full of water under foot. Everywhere is a rank garden of luxuriant dripping vegetation, which, speaking as to comfort, we could have done without.

After a stiff climb, the funnel narrows visibly, and we get into the central watercourse, where there is free space to breathe and less vegetation. The path is rough, macadamised by gigantic boulders, moss-grown and slippery, standing at incalculable angles, very tedious to clamber over, amongst which a sharp lookout has to be kept to preserve our poor dear shins. Gradually the trees, hitherto a green arcade overhead, thin away, and the watercourse emerges into a steep grassy slope, growing steeper at every step. Above, facing us, is the gap spoken of already; on the left is the mountain ridge; on the right rises old Pieter Both, cold, gray, and menacing – and a long way up. The ravine has narrowed to some fifteen yards; here and there is a scrubby bush. The water-course is now the only way possible to climb by, and in two places there are in it rocks twelve feet high standing straight up, which have to be clambered over somehow.

Above, on the right, is the 'Shoulder,' a narrow projection about twenty yards long, and two or three wide, on which breakfast is to be eaten and preparations made for the final climb. To reach this 'Shoulder' appears a sufficient task from where we are; beyond it rises a smooth perpendicular cone, without flaw or crack, mid air, apparently impossible. Yet as we bend back our heads and say so, out of one side far up, springs a small figure; and the word 'impossible' is wiped out of our dictionaries when we behold that a 'black man and a brother' has essayed the task. Up to the 'Shoulder' it is all hands and feet; beyond that there is nothing for it but rope. Viewed from a distance, the 'Shoulder' forms the knees of the sitting figure which the mountain is said to resemble. From many points the resemblance to the statue of Her Majesty at the London Royal Exchange is ludicrously exact.

When the top of the grass slope is reached, there is a narrow band of turf, dotted with half-a-dozen scrub bushes of a foot or little more high. This band leads off horizontally to the right, and is the only possible way to the 'Shoulder.' A very bad way indeed it is. From below it looks nothing but a strip of green ribbon stretched across the middle of a rocky face, black and green and slimy as ever earth, air, and water put together have concocted to puzzle mountaineers. In truth it is little better than it looks. There are toe-holes to stick your boots into as you walk with your face to the wall; and here and there a shrub to let you feel something between your fingers, besides a bunch of dead damp grass to save you from eternity. The whole passage is oozing with sludge and water, very slippery, and the grass looks utterly rotten and unreliable.

This track, which is about one hundred yards in length, lands you a little below the 'Shoulder;' then a dozen yards' stiff steep climb and you stand upon it – perhaps sit at first – for a yard farther on across it is space, sheer awful space, which to look down till you have got your breath is neither wise nor pleasant. You soon get used to the feeling; but it is a little startling just at first to find that this promised landing-place where breakfast is to be served ends in nothing, just three feet beyond the baskets that contain the provender. When you have got your breath, the first thing to look at is the great bare cone immediately above and the dangling rope up which your road must lie. Your eye takes it all in at a glance, and that first glance is not promising. But breakfast puts a better construction on the onward journey; and by the time we have made acquaintance with the Oxford sausages and Australian sheep's tongues, we begin to scramble about quite merrily, and doff boots, coats, and hats for the task with as jaunty a grace as did my Lord Russell on Tower Hill.

The summit of Pieter Both is a cone of sugar-loaf form, compressed at the sides, that nearest the 'Shoulder' having a slight bulge, without which the ascent would be certainly impracticable. From the 'Shoulder,' which is covered with short grass and wind-scarred scrub, a ridge some three yards wide runs up to the foot of the 'Ladder Rock.' This ridge, which narrows as it goes up, is composed of rock-fractures firmly cemented together, and is to all appearance a great buttress supporting the cone. Up this you climb, hands and knees, without requiring a rope. The buttress comes to an abrupt end at the foot of a huge cube of rock, flat-sided and perpendicular, which stands bolt upright, and bars all further climbing without mechanical aid.

This is the 'Ladder Rock,' and is between fifty and sixty feet in absolute perpendicular height, its breadth being less than twenty feet. Running down its centre is a crack, without which the difficulty of climbing it would have been greatly aggravated, if not insurmountable. Against the face of the 'Ladder Rock' hangs a rope, the end disappearing over the upper edge where it has been made fast; the climb up it being made easier by a rough rope-ladder, which takes you up some dozen feet, to where the crack is sufficiently wide to admit your toes; that reached, grasping the rope with every one of your ten fingers, and squeezing as many of your toes into the crevice as you can, you must trust to your muscles and swing yourself up. The top of this rock reached, you are glad to sit or lie down upon a second ridge like the lower one, but much steeper and narrower; so narrow that in climbing up it, still with the rope tightly grasped, you sit astride it, your legs dangling over the sides, where it is better not to let your eyes follow unless the head that owns them is of the steadiest. This ridge has been christened 'The Saddle,' and is made up of broken rock cemented together with lava. Here

and there are tufts of grass, with bosses of the silver-leaved 'everlastings,' wind-torn and ragged, and other plants. The 'everlastings' shew brightly against the cold gray rocks, and tempt many of the party to pluck them to adorn their hats when they get them; which just now is somewhat doubtful, as the slightest slip may be fatal. This dreadful 'Saddle' is said to have once vanquished two aspirants; one of them, conscious that he had 'lost his head,' lay flat along the ridge, allowing the man who came to his rescue to climb over his body, a ticklish bit of mid-aërial gymnastics, which happily came off successfully.

The 'Saddle' rises at a steep angle, say the steep roof of a house, and ends at another 'facer;' a huge rounded rock perhaps ten feet high standing straight up across the way, the way now having narrowed to a blunt-knife edge. This is the 'Saddle Rock,' and is the nastiest-looking and most dangerous place in the ascent. The 'Saddle Rock' must either be swarmed up or circumvented by stretching round its left side; for both experiments a rope is needed, and both are a trifle delicate. This time the rope went round; and the thread which disappeared past the smooth slippery face, out over the ghastly precipice, that fell down sheer into Pamplemousses, was not inviting. To get round you have to sidle up to the base of the rock, holding the tightly stretched rope level with your head, and push on your feet inch by inch till your toes rest on the outermost knob of rock. You must be quite sure that their hold is good before you slip your hands round the corner, letting your head and shoulders follow until you can make out a little branch as thick as your umbrella, and four inches long, which sticks out of a cranny, and is within reach of a long straddle. The awkward part of this is that in looking for the branch you are obliged to look *down*. It is the first look-down absolutely necessary, and it is one not easily forgotten. To the writer it had a strange fascination. The actual peril of the position; the necessity of coolness in head and eye; the uncertainty how far this could be relied upon, was so startling, so vivid when the actual time came, as to force a feeling of absolute security upon the mind! Never did he feel more certain of his own powers than when hanging like a spread-eagle against the face of that rock twenty-six hundred feet above the plains.

It is a good stretch, but does not require very long legs to do it. One toe, no more, the right one on a knob of rock; the other foot feeling for those four inches of scrub wood; both hands overhead grasping the rope; and the strangest bird's-eye view between one's legs that featherless biped could wish for. It did not do to look too long. Another pull up is in front, along a ridge like the previous two, but narrower again, which runs up to the Neck, the rope your companion all the way; and then you can at last sit down in perfect safety. This is the 'Neck,' which the aneroid gave as three hundred and forty feet above the 'Shoulder.' It forms an irregular plateau partly round the 'Head,' some six or eight feet broad, and quite flat. On it is a carpet of rough grass and 'everlastings,' protected from the wind and rain by the overhanging mass of rock, which is the 'Head,' formed of irregularly shaped rock, forty feet in height, nearly round, and which contains what there is of the brains of Pieter Both.

A notch in one side allows the rope which has been already passed over, to rest without fear of slipping; and depending from this is a short rope-ladder, hanging quite clear of everything over the rim of the Neck. Its half-dozen rounds put the rope between your fingers; and in less time than it takes to write it you are on the old fellow's brain-pan, the keen air racing past, with no more harm done than a few 'barked' knuckles, and a queer growing feeling in one's head of utter loneliness. Nothing but space all round; blue sky; white scudding clouds quite close, which turn one giddy; for it seems to be that we on our little plateau are racing past the clouds, borne noiselessly, interminably; flung on some tiny planet whirling around an endless orbit. There was another feeling to confess to, suggested by that thin white rope creeping and disappearing over the bare edge – suppose it broke, or was cut or frayed through! It was our sole connecting link with home and life and dinner. How hungry we should be if anything were to happen to that rope! how thirsty! how cold in the chill night! how wet in the company of those drifting clouds! Insensibly one fell to calculating which was the fattest for to-morrow's meal.

From our airy resting-place, the whole circumference of Mauritius, with a small exception, can be traced. From its height everything below is strangely dwarfed. Port-Louis as a town is barely visible; the harbour, which is nearly two miles in length, is a mere strip of water; moving objects are as much obliterated as if the land below was a printed map; sounds there are none, absolute silence, broken only by the whistle of the wind. In Mauritius, there is a paucity of animal life even in the valleys; it is possible to walk for miles without hearing a bird's note. On Pieter Both are no birds – even the lizards don't attempt him. Now and again a tropic bird, the *Paille en queue* of the French, sails past, screaming his news from the sea beyond. One by one our party gained the top, each one as he pulled himself over the edge lying down for breath. Our feet, innocent of shoe-leather, had lost some of their own, and more than one pair shewed signs of rough usage. But what were a few scars to the triumph of sitting perched on Pieter Both – the dear old Peter Botte of childhood's picture-book.

As the party met and got their breath, tongues were unloosed, and the serious concentrated look that had sat on most faces hitherto, melted under the influence of mutual congratulations. Eleven in all, without counting Deebee and an assistant Indian, were gathered on the 'Head;' sitting, standing, lying on that patch of black soil which Claude Penthé spoke of for the first time nearly ninety years ago. The sheet of lead for inscribing the names of the 'visitors' was there, but of a tin box which was known to have been left, not a trace remains; some passing hurricane has probably spirited it away. The descent was safely made, though it is perhaps more awkward than the going up. Some photographs were taken from the 'Shoulder,' on so narrow a shelf that it was necessary to place a man at each leg of the tripod to prevent the camera toppling over; a final glass drained to the health of the old gray rock; and about four o'clock in the afternoon, La Laura and the pleasant sugar-cane fields were reached without a single mishap.

It may be thought worthy to record the names of this the largest party that ever made the ascent of Pieter Both. He is not likely to be visited again for some time to come, and long before this account appears, the whole eleven will be scattered far and wide – miles distant from that strange, eerie trysting-place. They are: Lieutenants MacIlwaine, Creswell, Bayly, and Midshipman Elwes of H.M.S. *Undaunted*. Major Anderson, Captain Bond, Lieutenants Phillipps, Hammans, Sillery, and Saunders of H.M. 32d Regiment; and Captain Montague, Brigade Major. A pole was rigged up, and the Union-Jack hoisted and left flying, as a remembrance of the day, and as a sign to the many watchers in town that the ascent had been successful. These told us afterwards that through a telescope our movements had been perfectly traced; the passage of the 'Saddle Rock,' where the rope stretches round the face of the mountain opposite Port-Louis, having caused the strongest sensation, as our bodies, dwarfed to the size of spiders, came out against the sky.

W. E. M.

THE LAST OF THE HADDONS

CHAPTER XXXIV. – TWO LETTERS

After arranging everything else, I sat down to write my farewell letters, commencing with one to Philip, and being very careful to allow no tears to fall upon the paper.

'Dear Philip – I ought to have told you what I am about to write, when I bade you farewell this morning; but I wanted our parting to be, as it was, a happy one. Had I had the courage to tell you, instead of writing, I know you would not have yielded to me; perhaps you would not even have listened. When you read this, your blame cannot reach me; and until you can forgive me, we shall not meet again. Dear Philip, I cannot be your wife. I must bear all the blame of not making it known to you until now, as best I may; but I cannot marry you. The conviction has only become absolutely clear to me since you so much pressed me to make no longer delay.'

'Ah Philip, may you never suspect *how* it was made clear to me!' I mentally ejaculated, breaking down for a few moments in an agony of suffering. But I sternly called myself to order, and was presently bending to my task again.

'I have chosen a different life, and only delay explaining what that life is, and why it now seems more congenial to me than being a wife' (to the man who loves another woman, was in my thoughts), 'until you have quite forgiven me. Indeed, it is the belief that that time will come, which gives me the courage to act as I am doing. But there is one way, and only one, by which you can prove that your forgiveness is sincere, and give me the comfort of believing that I have not shadowed your life. If I hear that you are able, by-and-by, to find some other woman more appreciative than I' —

I dropped the pen, and bowed my face upon my hands again in the bitterness of grief. 'More appreciative than I!' But I forced myself to my task again, and left the words as they were. If he once suspected that it was a sacrifice, would he accept it, however willingly it were offered? Loved he not honour more? Besides, this must be a letter which he could shew to Lilian; at anyrate by-and-by, and no suspicion of the truth must reach her.

'If that time comes, and I earnestly desire that it may, I shall be able perhaps to justify myself to my own conscience. I know only one whom I should consider worthy of you, one not to be easily won, but worth the labour of a lifetime to win. I dare not name her – I am almost afraid to write of her. But, dear Philip, if it could be – if she whom I love above all other women could be in time won to make up to you for the loss of me, I shall have nothing to regret. I can only repeat that nothing but the knowledge of your happiness will give me the courage to hope for your forgiveness and to meet you again. Meantime, I can only beg you to try to believe in your loving sister

Mary.'

I read the letter through with not a little dissatisfaction, though I could not see how to amend it. It had been so difficult to say sufficient to serve the purpose without giving some clue to the truth. I could not help a little bitter smile at the reflection how very different would his judgment of that letter have been if he loved me! How scornfully would such excuses have been swept away if I had been the woman he loved! How angrily he would have taunted me for being what in fact I should have been had I deliberately wronged him! Alas! I was writing to a man whose love for me was dead,

and who yet desired to act honourably towards me. He would not be inclined to be unkindly critical about my *manner*

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