

HENRIETTE D'ANGEVILLE

— Steps to the Summit —

A Chinese proverb runs like this: *when you have ten steps to take, nine steps are half way*, and it is that saying that proved its worth to me on my ascent of Mont Blanc . . .

We began our climb in the following order: Mugnier led, Coutett was second, I was third, Simond the porter fourth, and then the five other guides, mountain-sick as I have related. But here were no sticks to act as handrails; the geographical nature of the place obliged us to rely on courage alone.

I had not scaled twenty steps of our ice staircase when I was forced to call a halt, being in a most extraordinary condition: my heart was beating so strongly that I feared my chest would burst, the muscles of my arms and legs seemed to have lost their resilience and to be plunged into a heavy lethargy, my head was swimming and a leaden sleepiness weighed on my eyes . . . I could not withstand it.

'I must sleep a moment,' I said to Coutett, 'my head is full of vapours.'

'Just another few steps.'

'I cannot.'

I barely had time to turn around and slip into

a seated position on one of the steps, where I at once fell asleep. After two minutes, the head guide awoke me. I started to climb once more, but the next moment I was afflicted by the same condition, the same overpowering need to sleep. I forced myself to make another twenty steps, but then sleep once more overtook me and I sank down where I stood, this time so clumsily that I almost tumbled to the bottom.

‘A rope, a rope!’ cried Coutett. One was passed to him, he fastened me firmly, gave the end to Mugnier, who was leading, roused me, and we set it off again, secure in the knowledge that I could not fall, so provoking an accident which might prove fatal not just to me but all who were following me up this staircase.

Yet again I was assailed by sleep, yet again I was awoken, yet again I struggled on. The same affliction struck after a few moments and this time, it was impossible to accomplish the twenty paces I had set myself; it needed all my courage to manage even fifteen or sixteen, for the palpitations became so violent that they were near to suffocating me. When we stopped on this occasion, I heard Coutett bemoaning my ever-increasing need for sleep which threatened worrying delays. ‘It’s no good . . . we’re in trouble,’ he said. ‘Look at her asleep again. This is the last lady I take up Mont Blanc . . .’

There was a moment when I did believe victory

would elude me. I needed two minutes rest at each halt. Once, we tried cutting this time, but to no avail, since I had not been three steps before I collapsed in a state of such prostration that it was feared I might be too weak to stand.

‘If I die before reaching the summit, promise me that you will carry my body to the top and leave it there’, I said, my eyes already half closed.

‘Have no fear, you will reach it dead or alive.’

Consoled by this promise, I fell into a deep sleep.

‘Should we carry her?’, asked Mugnier *‘I am ready to do so, I am still strong enough. Mademoiselle, do you want to be carried?’*

His words released me from my torpor, which melted away, leaving the field free for my will. ‘I will not be carried’, I replied. ‘I intend to make it to the whole ascent on my own two feet; truly there would not be much merit in going up Mont Blanc on someone else’s back.’

Without more ado I picked myself up and continued to climb. The fear of such a humiliation gave me renewed strength and I outdid myself; but soon after I had to admit defeat and revert to my regular sleep – every ten paces. Finally, slumber alternating with progress, I at last reached the top of the ice wall . . .

The guides had to exert great skill to manipulate the sticks round corners without mishap, for the least instability made me stagger. The same was true

of the rope. I was well content to know that I was supported, but it was fatal to try to pull me up, as the only result of any attempts to hasten my progress was that I fell on my face in the snow. I had to go gently.

In this way I gradually drew near my goal. I had fallen into one of my relentless sleeps, when I heard Coutett's voice – '*Courage. There is the summit! This time we shall reach it!*' I looked up and indeed, I could see the summit about thirty or thirty five paces away from me, in electrifying proximity . . .

This time they allowed me five minutes' rest; when I awoke I untied the rope, now useless and even rejected the stick, so that it was alone and unaided that I took the three steps that lay between me and victory. At twenty five past one, I finally set foot on the summit of Mont Blanc and drove the ferule of my stick into its flank, as a soldier plants his standard on a captured citadel.

From *My Ascent of Mont Blanc*, 1838 (translated
by Jennifer Barnes, 1991)