

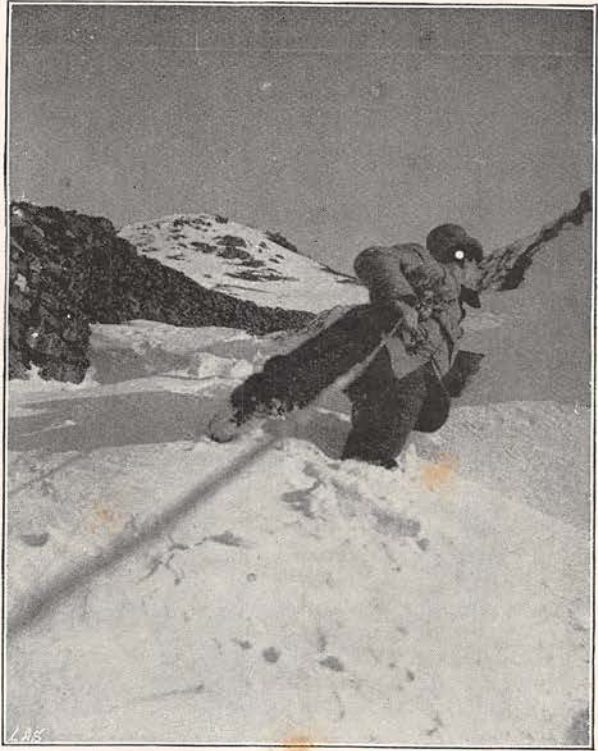
MOUNTAINEERING IN WESTMORLAND.

By JOHN FOSTER FRASER.

PEOPLE go to the Lake District at the wrong time. To see the beauty of the hills is to see them under a ragged robe of snow when their peaks are glistening a rosy tint. Westmorland in February and early March was a place of stern grandeur. The great lakes were frozen, and horses and carts were driven across them. There was skating for a dozen miles along Windermere without a break, and for a fortnight the hotels, usually deserted in the winter, were overcrowded. But the visitors confined themselves to Windermere, being content to admire the snow-covered mountains from a distance. Some of the valleys were practically shut off from the world. But in the company of a friend I penetrated the upper fastnesses of Langdale. It was a long tramp from Ambleside, through drifts often reaching waist-high, past the weird Blea Tarn and Wordsworth's "House of the Solitary," and then a sudden dip to the base of the Pikes of Langdale and the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel, where we were the first strangers for nearly two months. On the Sunday before Christmas a pedestrian called for a glass of ale, and till our coming the landlord had received no guests. We were eleven miles from Windermere railway station. The valley lay in deep silence, save that now and then the bleat of a straying sheep could be heard from the hills.

Mountaineers rush to Switzerland for perilous climbs. There is no need to go so far. I have climbed one or two Swiss hills, but I have never had any excitement like climbing Harrison's Stickle—the highest of the Langdale Pikes—in mid-

winter. Of course there is danger. You may have a dislocated collar-bone, or a companion who persists in reeling off stanzas of Wordsworth. Both are to be avoided. With a liberal length of rope, we set off in the early morning



SLOW PROGRESS.

to scale the mountain. The guide-book advised us to keep to the grassy path. As there was over two feet of snow, the advice was useless. So we just tied ourselves together, kept to the left of a great fissure in the rock—where in the summer-time the most majestic waterfall in the Lake District comes thundering down, but was now marked by long, irregular icicles—and pushed on. Progress was not rapid. At every



TUMBLING INTO A DRIFT.

step we went up to the knees in snow. Now and then one of us would pitch into a drift, and would have to be hauled out with the rope. A long détour was necessary to ascend the hill where it was steep. The snow was crisp and dry, and the exertion of climbing made one as warm as on an August afternoon. The higher we got the more majestic and delightful was the panorama revealed. Heavy masses of black cloud slowly swept up from the west, and for a few moments wrapped the hills in shadow; then the sun was free again, and the mountains were a glory of light.

The Langdale Pikes, though surpassed in height by other Westmorland ridges, are difficult to ascend even in summer; but in winter, when there is no perceptible path and you have to rely on your own judgment and calculation, the difficulties are many. So we soon found. A rock covered with a sheet of ice from melted snow was the first serious obstacle. Boots refused to grip. Crevices had to be chiselled in which to place our toes, and then we could only advance by lying flat upon our stomachs. We made

for a lofty ridge of rock called Pavey Ark. Somehow we got on a frozen streamlet which runs from Stickle Tarn, said to be famous for its trout. There was an element of danger which, while ensuring great caution, produced an excitement which sent the blood beating swifter through our veins. An insecure foothold, and we would have slipped down the terribly acute-angled hillside with the prospect of being whirled over the precipice. Had there been any traveller in the valley below to have spied us with a field-glass, he must have been astonished at the manner we were crawling up the



NEARING THE SUMMIT.

face of the mountain. It was an hour's hard work to advance a hundred yards. We were too busy to engage in conversation. Repeatedly we halted panting, and passed to each other an esteemed flask.



A HELPING HAND.

Just, however, when we thought our troubles were at an end, we had to face a piece of rock almost perpendicular. The snow was beaten against it to perhaps the depth of twelve inches. The foothold was insecure. We advanced with our faces on the ground. Pulling up one leg one had to kick a hole in the snow with one's toe, and then, cautiously edging forward, do the same with the other leg. This continued for about three quarters of an hour. We became exhausted. We looked in one another's face, and knew the thoughts that were passing. If one of us slipped we would both be hurled to the bottom. So we discussed the advisability of loosening the rope and letting each one take care of himself. But we decided against that plan. A shawl, a sketch-book,

and other impedimenta we pitched away, and tried once more. It was an exciting ten minutes. When we reached the top we could only lie down, smile feebly, and have recourse to the flask. Though our mountaineering had been arduous and perilous, we were rewarded by the view. As far as eye could reach was a vista of silver hills with crevices fierce and black. There was a delightful play of colour in the sky. It was a clear Italian blue, except that where it seemed to touch the hills there was the faintest tinge of green, while the clouds, soft and gauze-like, were of a tender pink. On one side was mighty Helvellyn, but not dark browed. On the other was Scafell Pike, the highest point of English ground, hidden under a cap of cloud.



WILD STRETCH OF CRAG AND SNOW.

Grasmere, no larger than a hand it seemed, lay far beneath our feet, and we could just distinguish with the naked eye there was skating on the Lake. Turning and looking down Great Langdale, the corner of Ambleside was seen, and the broad glimmering stretch which marked the head of Windermere. The wind had fallen away, and the day was hushed. The mighty impressiveness of it all seized my imagination, and before my mind appeared a world of beauty but of desolation.

It had been our intention to descend upon Grasmere by way of Easedale, but we hesitated flying into dangers that we knew not of, and agreed to go down the

mountain by the way we came. The descent was just a little less hazardous. Repeatedly we rested to admire the beauties unfolded before us. We marvelled that so few eyes sought them. At Christmastide, before the snow fell, a party had climbed the Pikes with guides, but since then, as far as we could gather, the hill had been untrodden. The picture we saw that afternoon, when the sun had grown large and red, and bathed in softened light the crest of the mighty hills, was probably the most awe-inspiring in all England, and yet there were only two men to see it. Yes, people go to the Lake District at the wrong time.

