Caucasus mountaineering: Which of these fates had befallen the lost party?

By the late 1880s almost all of the mountains in the central group had been scaled by foreign mountaineers. Freshfield and his team took Kazbek in 1868. The same group also ascended the eastern peak of Elbrus, although the real credit may well belong to a Circassian climber who reportedly scaled the mountain in 1829.[49] Elbrus's western peak was reached by another British expedition in 1874, and from 1884 to 1887 many of the major mountains—all well above fifteen thousand feet—fell in rapid succession: Gestola, Tetnuli, Dykh-Tau, Shkhara.

The grand exception was Koshtan, located in what is today the Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria.[50] At just under seventeen thousand feet, it was known to be particularly challenging. Its summit was shaped like the hump of a charging ox and steep on all sides; roaring winds made clinging to the icy walls and snowfields exceptionally dangerous. It was only a matter of time before European alpinists attempted to add Koshtan to the list of conquered peaks. The assault occurred in the summer of 1888. Three British explorers assembled in Nalchik, on the plains skirting the northern edge of the highlands. The team consisted of Clinton Dent and W. F. Donkin, both experienced climbers and president and secretary, respectively, of the Alpine Club, along with the younger Harry Fox, who was also well known in climbing circles. Even before base camp had been set up, Dent returned to Britain owing to ill health, leaving Donkin and Fox to make the climb themselves, accompanied by two Swiss guides.[51]

The four-man group set out during the final days of August. Donkin and Fox planned to attack the mountain by a roundabout route, to ascend the glacier that falls from the northern slopes of Koshtan and then to work their way around to the western side and attempt an ascent from that direction. However, the party encountered a large rock wall barring their way on the western slope. The new strategy was to backtrack around to the northern face and trek around the summit to the east in order to attempt an ascent from there. They sent word to their outfitter to prepare the heavy baggage that they had left behind and to meet the climbing party and their guides in Karaul, a pasturage on the southeast side of Koshtan.

In late September word reached London that things had not gone as planned. The outfitter in Nalchik dispatched a telegram to Dent

informing him that he had not heard from the climbers in three weeks. They did not make the scheduled rendezvous in Karaul, and locals had reported no sign of the four men. A search was organized by Russian authorities, but due to the lateness of the season, the search could only be conducted below the snow line, where the climbers were unlikely to have met with an accident. No traces were found. A further search was undertaken on the personal order of Tsar Alexander III, but friends and associates feared the worst—that the climbers had been killed in an accident. "We feel sure," Dent wrote to the brother of one of the Swiss guides, "that our brave companions are lost."[52]

The international climbing community mourned the loss of two senior explorers, victims of a sporting culture that had already been widely criticized for treating the safety of its practitioners too cavalierly. However, in the following months rumors began to circulate claiming that Donkin and Fox had met with a different sort of tragedy. Highly placed sources in the Russian government were convinced that the climbers and their guides had inadvertently crossed into Svaneti, a region of northern Georgia known for its inaccessibility and hostile inhabitants. The climbers, it was increasingly felt, had not been swept away by an avalanche or slipped into a crevasse. They had been murdered by ferocious highlanders.

That version of events soon became standard fare in Russian newspapers, both in the imperial capitals and in Tiflis. The Svans on the southern slope of the Caucasus were known to be antipathetic toward outsiders. The recent quashing of a revolt in the area had left local populations more discontent than ever. Perhaps the climbers had wandered across the main range and fallen into the hands of the Svans or other natives. Details seemed to point toward foul play. A man in one of the local villages turned up with an unexplained injury, which could well have been made by an ice ax. Although the man had an alibi for the period when the climbers had most likely disappeared, his unusual wound fueled suspicion. Villagers also reported that they had seen footprints leading off the Koshtan glaciers and toward Svaneti or Balkaria, areas less visited than the environs of the major peaks. The Russian government dispatched Cossacks to several communities to flush out a possible perpetrator.

Dent, the president of the Alpine Club, had his own reasons for believing in the murder scenario. His earlier experiences in the region had taught him to distrust the natives, whom he found at best lazy and at worse venal and treacherous.[53] Freshfield, too, had had run-ins with unfriendly villagers. Several times during the 1868 expedition he found

himself with ice ax or pistol in hand, ready to fend off an attack by a highlander eager to seize his equipment or demand payment beyond the amount agreed upon for some service.[54] Nevertheless, Freshfield remained skeptical. The basic geography of the region would have made an accidental incursion into Svaneti unlikely, and he remained unconvinced that the generally affable highlanders could suddenly have turned into murderers. Would Donkin and Fox be credited with making the first confirmed ascent of Koshtan, or would they go down in history as mere victims of the landscape and peoples of the Eurasian frontier? Freshfield set about organizing a new party whose chief purpose would be to determine, once and for all, the fate of the climbers and their guides.

The new team represented perhaps the finest array of foreigners ever assembled for a high-altitude expedition in the Caucasus: Freshfield, with his two decades of experience in the region; Dent, the public face of British mountaineering; Charles Herbert Powell, a captain from the Indian Army who knew Russian and served as interpreter; and Hermann Woolley, a noted photographer. The group was joined by four guides with experience in both the Alps and the Himalayas, including the brother of one of the lost guides. The team set out from Vladikavkaz in midsummer 1889. The plan was not to follow the route taken by Donkin and Fox but rather to begin the search from the point where the missing climbers were to have rendezvoused with their outfitter. From there they could make their way up the slopes of Koshtan and hopefully find some evidence of what had happened to their comrades, now missing for nearly a year.

It is impossible to overstate the difficulty of the task that the members of the search party had set for themselves. They were covering a vast stretch of mountainous territory, where rockslides, avalanches, floods, and storms were constant dangers. They had no reliable maps. Many of the passes, glaciers, and safe routes were unexplored or unnamed. Worse, a prominent physical feature, such as an escarpment or valley, might be called one thing by local villagers or Russian informants and another by experienced British climbers.

As it turned out, Dent and Freshfield were not searching in the dark. There was a critical piece of evidence that the earlier Russian rescue parties had recovered from the base camp—Fox's diary—which gave a sense of what had happened in the final hours before the ascent. The last entry, dated Tuesday, August 28, also contained several ominous asides that seemed to point toward exactly the fate alleged by Russian authorities and newspapermen.[55] Fox recorded that one of the

highland villagers had accompanied the climbers to base camp and had proceeded to quiz them about their precise route. A native intimately familiar with hidden passages across the glaciers could well have set a trap for the foreigners. There was also a reference to Donkin having spent time in camp firing his revolver at "imaginary enemies." Was Donkin merely killing time or had some earlier incident given him reason to believe that he needed to hone his skills as a marksman? From Karaul the search party began the ascent toward the pass separating the northern glacier from its southern counterpart. On July 28 one of the guides stopped suddenly. "Der Schlafplatz!," he cried out, the sleeping place! In the snow a small tin box, used for holding snow glasses, sparkled in the sun.

With nothing to go on but their own suppositions about the likely route that Donkin and Fox had taken, the Dent and Freshfield party had come upon exactly the spot where the men had made their final bivouac, a high pass between two glaciers, at an altitude of about fourteen thousand feet. It was a small outcropping next to a sheer precipice, guarded by a makeshift wall of piled-up stones. The search party hacked away at the rock and ice that nearly covered the encampment and managed to dislodge what remained of the lost climbers' personal effects: a stew pan, rucksacks, sleeping bags—even Donkin's revolver. No trace of the men was found, but the key to their mysterious disappearance lay in what was not there. Three things were conspicuously absent: the team's supply of climbing rope, their ice axes, and Donkin's camera.

That was enough to convince Dent and Freshfield of what had happened eleven months earlier. The climbers had probably left their camp to make the final assault on the summit, which lay about three thousand feet above them. They had taken only light gear, including ropes for the ascent and a camera to record the event, expecting to return to the bivouac in due course. From the ledge the only route to the summit was along a narrow ridge, which dropped sharply away on either side, and even the first part of the ridge was separated from the sleeping place by the flat face of Koshtan. An accident along this route would have sent the men plunging thousands of feet to the rock, ice, and snow that lay below.

"As we looked along the stupendous cliffs of this great peak," Dent wrote to the London *Times* upon his return, "we felt that any accident whatever in such a place meant almost instantaneous death."[56] The expedition surveyed the cliffs and the valley floor for signs of the party but to no avail. Anything left of the climbers and their guides would

have been covered by the snow of the previous winter. "We were well satisfied to leave the mountaineers in their high tomb," Freshfield concluded in his report, "warded by the frosty walls and watched only by the stars, with the brightest peak of the Caucasus for their perpetual monument."[57] Today, somewhere deep inside the glacial ice and crevasses of Koshtan, the remains of Donkin and Fox await their accidental discovery by some future visitor.

The Dent and Freshfield expedition was intended not only to settle the question of the fate of the climbers and their guides but also to get at a deeper question: Were the peoples of the Caucasus still so backward that they could be suspected of murdering foreign travelers in cold blood? Was it still safe, as it had been for decades, to travel into the mountain vastness with little thought of being waylaid, robbed or even killed by rebellious mountaineers?

On this score there was one final bit of evidence that seemed, if not conclusive, then at least convincing: Donkin's ice-encrusted revolver, recovered from the final sleeping site, was still fully loaded. Even if a group of natives lacking professional equipment had managed to climb up to fourteen thousand feet—across glaciers, rockfalls, and sheer cliffs—solely in order to rob two foreign climbers and guides, it seems highly unlikely that they would have done so without encountering at least some resistance.

The local Turkic-speaking villagers—today's ethnic Balkars—were greatly relieved that the expedition had finally placed the blame squarely with the mountains themselves. "You have come from far to remove the suspicion and its consequences from us, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts," one elder reportedly told Freshfield.[58] As the search party passed through villages on their way back to Vladikavkaz, there were numerous gatherings at which the story of the lost climbers was recounted in detail, through translators, to the assembled highlanders. As Clinton Dent later recalled, the search party made sure to round out its account with a declaration that the locals had been fully cleared of any wrongdoing. The memory of the search team's exoneration of the highlanders remained fresh well into the twentieth century. When British climbers first returned to the mountains in 1958, they were greeted enthusiastically by a bearded old man. He explained that his father had assisted the Dent and Freshfield expedition and that it was only Dent's account to Russian authorities that had prevented the men of the village from being rounded up by Cossack cavalry and punished as murderers. The ghosts of Donkin and Fox, captives of the landscape but not of its inhabitants, helped to

prevent the mountaineers from becoming victims of their own government's reprisals.[59]

There was something to be gained on the heights, Freshfield concluded, but also much to be lost. The Caucasus produced the sublime and also consumed it. That, however, was part of the region's undeniable appeal: a place where danger lurked beyond each rockfall and where the promise of emotional fulfillment was counterbalanced by the prospect of tragedy. It does not take a great deal of imagination to uncover these sentiments in the work of Güldenstädt, Bronevskii, Lermontov, or virtually any other writer since the late eighteenth century. To be in the Caucasus was to exist on the edge, at the extreme limits of civilization, propriety, and human emotion, where the rules of polite society no longer applied and savagery was within reach.

The Caucasus was a place whose gentle contours and fissures could be probed not only for scientific and artistic reasons but also for the opportunity to interact with the transcendent beauty of the mountains. Journeying there could even become, in a way, an erotic experience. These elements would eventually come together in one particularly enduring vision of the imaginary Caucasus—that the people who lived there were not simply valiant denizens of the unmastered heights, as Pushkin believed, nor merely welcoming inhabitants of an unforgiving landscape, as Freshfield thought. They were also extremely sexy.

Eros and the Circassian

In David Lean's masterful film *Lawrence of Arabia* there is a scene in which Lawrence is taken captive by an Ottoman bey, played with oleaginous verve by José Ferrer. The sadistic overtones of the scene are clear. Lawrence is stripped to the waist, held down over a bench, and whipped while the bey looks on voyeuristically from behind his office door, his tubercular cough occasionally interrupting the whack of the cane. At the beginning of the scene the bey approaches the demure Lawrence. "You have blue eyes," he says. "Yes, effendi," replies Lawrence. "Are you Circassian?" the bey asks. "Yes, effendi" is again the reply. Then the beating begins.

The bey's question is reasonable enough. In the Levant during the First World War, it would not have been unusual to find a light-skinned man in Bedouin garb, a descendant of the Circassians who had been expelled to the Ottoman lands in the 1860s. (Their descendants are still there today, a privileged military elite serving as personal