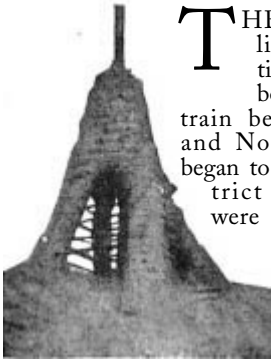


A WINTER ASCENT OF TAHAWUS.

By C. Grant La Farge.

Illustrated from Photos by the Author.



THE SIGNAL POLE.

THERE is nothing like the fascination of a map. We bought one on the train between Saratoga and North Creek, and began to look up the district for which we were bound. The investigation showed that if we should go up as high as to the camp on Lake Colden, which there

was some talk of doing, we should be right in the midst of whatever the Adirondack region has best to show in the way of peaks—among them Mount Marcy, as the map calls it, though I think it should still bear its old Indian name of Tahawus, "The Cloud - Piercer." Neither Pinchot nor I knew the country; he was going to look at the timber on the McIntyre Iron Company's tract, and I, because I wanted some fresh air and a chance to use the old snowshoes that had been laid away for three years since my last Winter caribou hunt in Quebec.

So our speculations concerning the cluster of hills among which we expected to tramp for a week, quite naturally resulted in a query as to the practicability of our making the ascent of Tahawus on snowshoes. Oh, yes, it could be done—there was indeed no great rush of tourists to the summit in Winter—but from Lake Colden it was only some five miles to the top, and if we got a good, clear, still day we ought to have no difficulty. We were warned though that such weather was rare on the mountain tops, and that any other might be troublesome. On the whole the impression conveyed was that we might try it if we wished, but that it would be pleasanter to let it wait, say until June. So we then and there resolved to go up to the camp on Lake Colden as soon as possible—as for Tahawus. we allowed that project to subside

into a sort of mild joke; each of us, I think, quite convinced that the other was not going to let him fail to have a try at it.

There was not a great deal of snow at North Creek; enough to whiten the landscape and make splendid sleighing, but it did not look as though we would need snow-shoes to get about with. The drive to the club-house is long, though—twenty-eight miles—and rises about 1,000 feet, and although the greater part of the way is through open country, there was a gradual and perceptible increase in the wintry covering, so that at the end of the day's journey we found good snow-shoeing conditions—fairly deep snow, sharp cold and a magnificent country.

In the morning the prospect upon which we looked forth gave good promise that our anticipations were to be realized. Before us the land fell away in a broad sweep to the winding course of the river below—the upper reaches of the Hudson River—here a brawling mountain stream, silent now beneath the ice and snow. Beyond the river rose a long slope of hill, and to the north and northwest the view was closed by the swelling masses of the tallest peaks: Colden, McIntyre, Wallace, Henderson, and Santanoni, first land upon this continent to emerge from the primeval waste of waters. Up the great valley which stretched away for miles until it lost itself within the bosom of the crowding hills, was the dense forest that once clothed all this land, and in its depths we knew that we should find the real winter wilderness. The glorious sunshine of a perfect winter day, clear and still, was over all; the brilliant purity of the snow; the gray and brown of the bare bushes in the river-bottom, making patterns of exquisite delicacy upon the white surface; the strong, sharp green of the evergreens and the soft, plume-like tops of the hardwood trees among them; the many blues of the mountains tipped with ethereal white.

We spent the day tramping about the neighborhood to get used again to the

old work; as evening fell we found ourselves upon the river. The sun had set; the sky was flushed with the rosy after-glow and in it floated a few streaks of violet clouds with golden edges; the expanse of snow upon the river and the bottoms lay blue and cold. Our eyes turned to the north where the twin snow-capped peaks of McIntyre still caught the last light of the sun and shone like two fire-lit gems; below them the deep purple hollow in which, seventeen miles away, lay the lake from which rose the Tahawus trail. That mountain itself, though the highest of them all, was hidden by the intervening heights. I knew, as we crunched our way homeward through the twilight and the gathering cold, that not to stand upon its lofty summit and survey the splendid panorama was a mistake not to be made.

The next morning was calm, but the snow fell heavily in great soft flakes, and we drove over the last ten miles of road to the Upper Works. It was heavy going; the road wound around the base of the hills through the deep woods; the snow piled itself more and more upon the limbs of the trees, and the forest depths grew ever whiter with the burden, and held forth a silent invitation to plunge into their dim recesses, away from the care and turmoil of the rushing world outside.

The day after, we set out for Colden; it had stopped snowing, and was turning cold, with a rising wind. The sunlight was pale and the sky not blue, but a sort of hard grayish white, though without definite clouds. I carried nothing but my camera strapped on my back, the guides whom our kind host had most bountifully provided having gone ahead with all our supplies; there was no attempt to do any camping upon so short a trip. After we had passed through the cleared area about the old deserted village of Adirondack, the way led for the most part through quite heavy timber, so that we did not feel the force of the wind. There were fine glimpses of steep forest-clad hillsides along the trail leading ever upward, and the snow lay deep upon the trees on every hand, but all distant view was obscured by the fine drift with which the upper air was filled.

Our progress was slow, for the woods through which we were passing were of

great interest to the Forester, and we stopped frequently to make photographs of characteristic growth.

With these many pauses the day was well spent when we mounted the last rise and came upon the Flowed Land. We were now at an altitude of 2,745 feet, nearly a thousand feet above the point we had left in the morning, and over the open space ahead the winter gale burst full upon us. Across the level reach of the Flowed Land loomed on the right the ghostly mass of Mount Colden, the great scars of its avalanches just distinguished through the gray veil of swirling, frozen snow. Nearer, upon the left, was a curved wall of low cliffs, topped by the sombre forest. What few faint vestiges of snow-shoe tracks remained in the drifting surface led between the two, and in this direction we went, guided more by the obvious lay of the land than by any trail, for this had soon disappeared completely. A few wide circles in the lee of the woods at the north end soon found it again, though, and a short walk through the spruce brought us to Lake Colden. Somewhere upon the farther shore, nestling under the base of McIntyre, was, we supposed, the camp; but we could see no sign of it whatever. Growing darkness and the driving clouds of snow-dust made it impossible to have aught but a sense of the steep mountain walls rising close about us in the gloom, but that sense was almost overwhelming of the remoter heights that keep their loneliness inviolate even in this little circumscribed wilderness. No wonder that to the Indians of old the pass just over beyond us was the abode of the Great Spirit, and that those of them dwelling near at hand were the guardians of the sacred spot, and therefore secure from the depredations of their ferocious neighbors.

How cold it was we had no other means of knowing than by comparison with our previous experiences, but though these did not suffice to determine degrees of temperature they left no doubt that the night was to be one of intense severity. We crossed the lake, and found the little cabin, concealed among the overspreading trees. Buried deep in curling drifts, it was lit by a roaring fire in the broad chimney, and once within, little cared we for the howling wind outside, but fell heavily



MOUNT COLDEN FROM THE PLOWED LANDS, AFTER THE STORM.

upon the hot supper in a way which you have got to go to the woods to know. Then we discussed the next day's plans. As well as I can remember, there was no word of climbing Tahawus—in fact, the conditions of weather seemed to preclude the attempt—but our canvass of the surroundings in every direction indicated that we should take the Tahawus trail, to see those woods still untouched by the axe, of which we had heard, and through which led that trail to the top of the mountain. Upon this decision we slept.

In the morning the gale was still raging, and the cold bitter; the sun shining faintly through the minute snow crystals with which the air was laden and the sky whitened. We set out betimes with two guides, who knew the trail, and at the lower end of the lake looked back upon the tumbled mass of Mt. McIntyre. We could see its white-capped summit, more than two thousand feet above us, though but as in a haze, which at moments became so dense as to conceal it almost entirely. The lower slopes, clothed with evergreens, were hoary with the snow piled thick upon the limbs of all the countless trees.

The trail followed the ravine of the little Opalescent River and plunged at once into the unbroken dense timber. It was tolerably rough, and the snow was both deep and soft, making heavy walking; it lay thick upon the rugged

bowlders in the bed of the stream, softening their harsh outlines, and upon the drooping branches of the trees crowded close on either side. We were out of the wind in the forest cover, and could enjoy now the exhilarating purity of the air, the frosty aroma of the balsams. And this is worth remembering about the winter woodland: that though out in the open spaces, the lakes and clearings, cold winds and drifting snow may make it seem that inside four good walls alone is comfort to be found and escape from the inclemency of such a season, yet once within the shelter of the great woods and all is changed. The immaculate beauty of the snow itself and its many wonderful forms; the hushed silence; the many records of the feet of passing animals and of birds, which reveal themselves now as never at any other time; the sweet notes of friendly little chickadees; the varied colors and textures of tree-trunks and sumptuous richness of the evergreens, and the air that is like new life; all these rejoice the eye and the heart and quicken the sluggish pulse of the dweller in paved streets, and strength comes into his step and he remembers what his limbs were meant to do for him.

It grew steeper as we toiled upward, glowing with the hearty exercise. At times we caught glimpses, through the notch of the stream, of the hills we were leaving behind, all pale and dim. It was hard to keep to the trail, which we

lost occasionally, and here was good evidence that these winter solitudes were not often invaded, for it was marked only by a summer blase, and this was often quite concealed by the depth of snow. The great spruces among which we plodded grew smaller and fewer by-and-by, firs taking their places; at length they disappeared entirely, and there were nothing but the smaller firs and some crooked, stunted birches.

There had been at one time, farther down, some question as to how far we were going, and the men had been told that we should go as high as to Lake Tear of the Clouds, the little pool which lies upon the ridge connecting Tahawus and Mount Skylight, at an altitude of 4,300 feet; as the highest source of the Opalescent it possesses the distinction of being the extreme head-water of the Hudson River. So far we had had merely the exertion of trudging up a long, rather steep hill, and there was no reason why we should not continue. Now through the slenderer trunks of the diminishing forest, we saw ahead a somewhat steeper slope, and near its crest the trees had a singular appearance—as we approached we saw a strange spectacle. The little firs stood close together, and upon all their stems the force of continued storms had so packed the driven snow that it was plastered upon them for their whole height. It was the ghost of a wood, clad in its winding sheet, or some weird hyperborean fairyland; we began to feel that we were reaching heights where the elements worked in ways we had not known.

We passed along, through small, ragged woods, the ground becoming more and more level, and just at noon came out upon the clear space of Lake Tear, fifteen hundred feet above Lake Colden. A little, lonely, wind-swept bog, surrounded by close ranks of sombre firs—not very interesting in appearance, and even had it been more so we should have bestowed upon it but scant attention. For there at last, in full view before us, towered the snow-cap of that mountain up whose long flanks we had labored since the morning. It was not far now to the limit of the trees; among those just about the bog were a few of medium height, but upon the slopes above they diminished rapidly in size, became whiter and whiter with their,

burden of ice and snow, and then faded off into the smooth steep slant of unbroken white crowning all.

I heard a brief exclamation from Pinchot, indicating that in his opinion it would be no great task to go on to the end, to which I instantly assented. And it looked easy enough; there were no visible obstacles, no precipices or rough places of any kind: nothing but the same long upward incline. Surely we might as well climb on for another thousand feet, especially since it seemed so plain that upon that storm-beaten summit there could be little more than a thin layer of firmly-packed snow, giving good footing. There may have been a moment of reluctant, unexpressed acknowledgment of what was indicated by the swirling clouds of rime that enveloped and partly obscured the big peak and dimmed the sky, but that was all.

We crossed over to such lee as was afforded by the trees on the northern side of the meadow and set about making some tea. We were not any too successful, as dry wood was hard to find, and we had to be content with a wretched smudge eating its way down into what seemed to be a bottomless snow. Then the men failed to find water, so we melted snow—and at last produced a most vile mess, but which was hot and strong and therefore welcome. This and some partly-thawed doughnuts made our luncheon, and we were ready. I left my camera here, as it was rather heavy and would be cumbersome and almost entirely useless, but Pinchot carried his kodak.

We passed along to the eastward, over quite level ground for less than a quarter of a mile, and then turning sharp to the left began the ascent. The walking was bad, as the incline was quite steep and the snow very heavy, and the little fir trees grew so close together as greatly to impede our movements. For my part I rather welcomed the exertion this demanded, for I found that I had let my feet get cold while we were resting and I expected to warm them by action. At first we actually pushed our way through the branches, but as we climbed higher the trees stood farther apart. Queer little mis-shapen dwarfs, gnarled and perverted, struggling to maintain their kind in this forsaken place. Not only were they bent by their crushing burden of snow, but they were literally

cased in ice even to every separate needle. How little they looked like trees; how like some strange frozen elves, hoary with immemorial antiquity, grimly warning the intruding stranger from the region meant for the abode of the Red Man's gods alone.

One of the men, who wore very long snow-shoes, somewhat of the pattern of the northwestern shoes meant for open country, and which must have been quite awkward for the place we were

now in, here announced that the difficulty of their management and the painful condition of his feet necessitated his turning back; so we charged him to go down and do what he could to maintain the fire we had left smouldering below. We pushed on with the other guide and presently came to the end of the timber. Here we found a steep bank, rising above our heads and formed by the edge of the snow-cap reaching down over the matted tops of the dwarf spruce which fringes the timberline.

Over the bank came an icy blast that for a moment made me quail at the prospect it revealed of what lay above. I took my old "habitant" sash from about my waist and wound it around my head and the lower part of my face, for I knew that the single plush cap I wore would be utterly insufficient. Then with a series of wild plunges I scrambled up, the others having preceded me. I found that the snow above was a kind

of crust over the tops of the trees and was coated with shell-ice, just strong enough not to break under the spread of the snow-shoes and so slippery as to make control of them impossible. There was only one thing to do—fall down; and this I did and took off my snow-shoes. Pinchot had got ahead but came back to help me. The guide who was near, shouting to make himself heard in the awful wind, complained that he had a sort of numb feeling in his leg, and

when we told him to go back, he turned and disappeared in the direction whence we had come. Then I struggled on—it was only about a hundred yards or so, but I was thankful it was no more. The crust would bear me up for a few paces, and then give way and down I would sink to the waist in a tangled mass of thick-set branches. The wind caught the big snow-shoes and tugged at them with vindictive fury, and the thought of the predicament the loss of them would entail filled one with a kind of angry terror. When



"THE BEAUTY OF THE SNOW AND ITS MANY WONDERFUL STORMS."

we reached firm ground, we first sought safety for the snow-shoes and found the strong, crooked top of a fir tree peeping above the snow, to which we tied them securely.

The way now led straight up-hill and mighty unpleasant it looked—what we could see of it, that is, for the wind was no more to be faced than a battery of charging razors; and to stand upright in it was more than we cared to attempt.

The ridge up which we were crawling on all fours was in large part smooth ice, with only occasional patches of snow or little projecting tips of rock to afford hold for hands and knees. We worked our way slowly and painfully, gaining one of them after another, and when the more furious gusts of the ever opposing wind would descend upon us like malignant fiends, we lay prone at full length and buried our faces in our folded arms, that we might breathe; and hoped not to be dislodged from that precarious holding, for close upon our right hand the mountain fell steeply away to what seemed to be a precipice, and between us and that dreadful brink was no obstacle to a descent into the abyss. The cold was such as I had not ever imagined, and I have seen something of cold weather both in Quebec and on the Minnesota prairies; it cut

sisted against my fear and dislike I cannot say, for the question was decided for me by two things: one, the discovery that my feet, if not actually frozen, were at least frostbitten; and the other that I simply could no longer stand the cold, which was benumbing my whole body, and so I had to give it up.

We were about two hundred feet below the summit, I think. As Pinchot wanted to go on, I went down alone to where we had left the snowshoes. Here was a kind of notch in the side of the mountain, at the other end of which was a hollow under a ledge of rock, partly sheltered from the wind, where I found some soft snow, in which I tramped a hole and proceeded by stamping my feet to restore circulation in them. It took some time and became extremely painful, but it was a most fortunate thing for me that it succeed. I could



"THE TUMBLES MASS OF MT. MCINTYRE."

and choked and hurt with maddening cruelty. All view of the world below us was cut off by the dense curtain of drift, and all that we could see was the treacherous slope to which we clung, vanishing dizzily down into a gray-white nothingness.

How much further I might have per-

see Pinchot, still creeping upward with many pauses, until finally he disappeared over a shoulder at the top. He seemed to be gone a long time. I knew him to be an experienced mountaineer and not likely to get into a scrape, but it was a very considerable relief to my anxiety when I saw him again and he began the

descent; and I gave him as warm a welcome as the frigid surroundings permitted when he came within speaking distance. He had been to the signal-pole marking the summit and had brought

into laughter-truly we presented a peculiar appearance, though we had not noticed it before. Icicles hung even upon our eyelashes, and Pinchot's beard was coated so solidly with ice that he



"I CARRIED NOTHING BUT MY CAMERA STRAPPED TO MY BACK."

back with him a fragment of the wood, and he had even taken a photograph of it. On the topmost rock of Tahawus he had felt the unbroken weight of the merciless gale, and everything from New Hampshire to North Carolina was beneath him. But of it all he saw nothing, for the panorama, however splendid, was hidden by the stinging drift.

He, too, was nipped, and it says something for the cold that his ears were frozen through a thick sealskin cap, pulled well over them. I rubbed them for him, and when he in turn had stamped and swung himself into comparative warmth again, we made our homeward start. Again we broke and crashed into the tree-tops, but we went faster now, for when we found ice we slid, and cared not how we landed—anything to get out of the devilish wind. When we did, and stood in the deep snow among the poor frozen trees, it felt like the warm breath of spring. Then we looked at each other, and burst

looked like nothing I can think of, unless, perhaps, a walrus.

We got back to Lake Tear at half-past two, having been about two hours engaged upon the climb. The rest of our downward journey was devoid of incident; the guides went on ahead, and although we stopped frequently upon the way down-hill to take pictures, we arrived at Lake Colden before dark. One of the guides—he of the snowshoes—was badly frozen, and was lame from it until the following autumn. My feet gave me some little trouble for about a month after, but not serious, thanks to my timely stamping. When we came out again into civilization and found a world of snowbound trains and bursted waterpipes, we made the interesting discovery that we had selected as a suitable and convenient moment to go to the top of the State of New York, 5,344 feet above the sea-level, the beginning of the blizzard of February, 1899.