



MONT COLON.

THE DISTRICT OF AROLLA. By A. B. HAMILTON.

IT has been suggested to me that I may usefully supplement the account of an ascent of Mont Colon, which lately appeared in the 'Alpine Journal,' with some details of my own experiences in the same district. My acquaintance with the little inn at the head of the Val d'Arolla and the neighbouring mountains is a tolerably close one. During the summers of 1870 and 1871 I made there lengthened sojourns amounting in the whole to thirteen weeks. Other and older members of the Club, imbued with something of the spirit of Ulysses, and accustomed to wander on for ever from pass to pass and from range to range, will, I know, after this confession, look on me with compassion, if not with contempt. I try to console myself with the reflection that the position of a rolling stone is not always preferable to that of a '*bloc perché*,' and that in the former capacity I should never have gathered even such moss as serves to form the matter of the present paper.

At the village of Les Haudères, about an hour's walk above Evolèna,* the Val d'Hérens splits into two branches. The eastern mounts steeply to the great Ferpècle glacier and the Col d'Hérens, the other branch, steep at first, but subsequently more level, and penetrating far deeper into the heart of the Pennine chain, is the Val or Combe d'Arolla, so named from the abundance of the species of fir, so picturesque when old, known here as the *arolla*, and in the German Alps as the *arven*.

The Val d'Arolla offers in perfection the usual scenery of a high Alpine glen. A torrent, broken slopes and knolls crowned with weather-beaten trees, which tell in every limb of their hard six months' strife with winter storms, are always at hand; and it is seldom that some rocky pinnacle or icy crest does not show against the sky, and, in the eyes of the mountaineer at least, give a finishing touch of interest and suggestiveness to the landscape. At the first group of 'mayens,' called Satarne, just clear of the wood through which the path mounts, and at the junction of the stream from the Glacier des Ignea, with the main stream of the valley, the wanderer

* I follow the customary spelling, although the names are always pronounced in the valley Evolène and Arolle. A good deal of information on the nomenclature and traditions of Val d'Hérens will be found in an Article 'Über einige Ortsbenennungen und Sagen des Eringer Thals, von A. Ritz,' in the Jahrbuch of the Swiss Alpine Club for 1869-70.

from the direct path, who mounts the hillside on the left bank of the former stream, will soon light upon one of the loveliest of Alpine tarns, the Lac Bleu, a transparent, deep-blue gem, shining out of a setting of green moss and darker pines.

But as Dr. Johnson and the advertisements tell us, 'the most beautiful landscape in the world is improved by an hotel in the foreground,' and I must hurry on to the point where the majestic Mont Colon is seen for the first time abruptly closing the valley.* On this spot, a little over 6,000 feet above the sea, the landlord of the present inn built in 1865 a 'mayer' or *châlet* for summer use only, to which he could retire in the heat of August. Travellers arriving from the Col de Colon or some other glacier pass, and seeing a new *châlet*, insisted upon sleeping there, and, consequently, in 1866, my friend summoned sufficient courage to try and convert his summer palace—though not on quite the same scale as that of the Chinese emperors—into an hotel. I can vouch for its having contained at least one comfortable bed, though I believe the complaints sometimes made of the further sleeping accommodation have not always been without foundation. The question has, however, only an historical interest, as the old inn will be superseded in the course of the present summer by a new hotel of similar proportions to the one at Evolèna. When the plans were being drawn out, I pressed strongly on the landlord and architect the necessity of constructing sufficiently solid walls between the rooms to deaden sound, and I have consequently some hope that sojourners at Arolla will be spared the unpleasantness common to most mountain inns of over-hearing at night their neighbours' candid opinion of their persons or intellects, and the still greater inconvenience of being completely aroused in the early hours of the morning by every enthusiastic mountaineer who may be leaving his bed in order to attack some peak or glacier pass.

During my first visit to Arolla in 1870 my chief occupation was endeavouring to shoot a chamois, but alas! fate was against me, and I was obliged to content myself with the 'pleasure of pursuing' and with the thought that I was at any rate enjoying true sport. My guides were my landlord and a friend of his. The former, being the local magistrate, is commonly known as the 'judge,' and the latter, being the local Poole, is honoured with the title of 'the tailor.'

The penalties inflicted on poachers by the laws of the

* The view of Mont Colon engraved for a frontispiece was taken from the slopes behind and above the hotel.

canton Valais are severe, fifty francs being the fine for shooting without a license (which costs ten francs), or for carrying even an unloaded gun before September 1st, the commencement of the proper hunting season. This fine is doubled if the offender is a public officer, and the latter is considered an 'accomplice after the fact,' and is liable to a double fine, if he does not report anyone he may see poaching. Notwithstanding such, at first sight, fatal hindrances, I have heard of Englishmen who have found no serious difficulty in hunting in August, although to preserve appearances they were at times driven to tricks of a transparency somewhat ludicrous. For instance, one of my friends, while engaged in unlawful pursuit of chamois, was forced down from the mountains by pouring rain which destroyed all hope of seeing game. In order to give the weather another chance, they proposed to take shelter in some cattle châteaux,—but the chief cowherd was a 'garde de chasse.' His companion, however, was ready with a means of evading the legal difficulty which did credit to his acuteness. He simply took the lock off my friend's rifle, and when it was discovered by the 'garde,' remarked that Monsieur had wanted an alpenstock, and in default of a better, had taken the gun, after removing the lock!

During the whole of August 1870, we had hardly more than one fine day, so that even had we been immoral enough to indulge prematurely in murderous intentions against the chamois, they would have been sufficiently thwarted by clouds. One lovely morning in September we sighted about 7 A.M. on a height called Mont Dolin a herd of twelve or thirteen head, which subsequently took to the rocks leading to the ridge called the Mont Rouge. After reaching the Col du Riedmatten (to the top of which, I may here state, ladies can ride on mules), we followed the rocks of the Mont Rouge to our right, keeping as close to the top as possible for the purpose of getting occasional glimpses of our game, but on the north side so as to be concealed. Presently we came upon an extraordinary chimney, being literally a four-sided shaft in the rock, with two sides coated with the most brilliant clear ice. Having ascended this, we had to cross some rather dangerous couloirs, narrow, but full of quite fresh snow into which one sank up to the waist. We could not help feeling some fear lest the whole mass should give way and carry us off bodily in an avalanche on to a small glacier beneath. Arriving at 2.30 P.M. at a Col called the Casierte, the judge and I (the tailor having gone to the other side of the herd) concealed ourselves, and anxiously awaited the report of our companion's gun, which it

had been arranged he should fire for the purpose of driving the herd towards us. If the chamois came my way at all, they would necessarily pass within very short range, so I was armed with an enormous shot-gun, much longer in the barrel than the rifles, and loaded with a very large charge of powder, thirteen slugs (each slug the quarter of a bullet), surmounted by a whole bullet. This murderous weapon, pronounced infallible at close quarters, was playfully called 'la mitrailleuse,' but, as the sequel will show, when the decisive moment came, it like the weapon from which it received its cognomen failed to do the meditated execution; and, if the case had not been too great a disappointment for words, might well have provoked the exclamation, 'nous sommes trahis.' About 5 o'clock the welcome sound of the tailor's gun was heard, and shortly afterwards I perceived four chamois coming leisurely towards me at a walk, evidently considering themselves free from all danger. When the leading chamois was barely twenty yards off, I pulled the trigger, the cap simply snapped; I put on a second, again the same result; and away scampered the chamois. It was evident that the powder must have got damp when crossing the snow, and there was nothing more to be done but to consider the moral: after crossing soft snow, always draw your charge.

My sporting failures were, however, partially redeemed by some mountaineering successes. On the whole the most satisfactory expedition of the season was our ascent of the Aiguille de la Za, an extremely sharp tooth forming part of the chain called 'Les grandes Dents,' and lying between the Dent Perroc and the Dents de Bertol. I had looked at this point with longing eyes for about six weeks, but a few remarks I had made about attempting the ascent had not been encouraged. The only previous ascent had been made three years previously by a party of guides, three of whom reached the top. They had reported it too difficult to be attempted by travellers, and consequently no one had tried it since. About this time two members of the Alpine Club visited us with Oberland guides, and one of them much wishing to attack the Aiguille a joint party was arranged, but bad weather prevented the execution of the plan. On September 16th I started with my usual guides (neither of whom had been with the first party) though the weather did not promise well. We crossed the chain at a Col de Bertol to the north of the Col which is taken when going to Zermatt. Here we encountered a most bitter southeasterly wind, which, though too intensely cold to allow us any hope of seriously attempting the Aiguille, yet softened the snow and made it heavy walking. Pushing on with the idea of at

any rate reconnoitring our peak we were rewarded on reaching its base by a burst of warm sun and a sudden fall of wind. After a hasty meal and a shortly-abandoned attempt to ascend from the south-east, we set to work seriously at the north-east corner; the rock was very smooth, and boots had almost immediately to be discarded. This expedient is, I am told by experienced mountaineers, one seldom or almost never resorted to in the high Alps. I can only say that personally I found it a great help on really difficult rock. It was adopted in the present case at the suggestion and following the example of my companions. The occasional advantage of bare feet is, I believe, more felt by chamois-hunters, accustomed to move without the security of a rope over smooth faces of rock, than by ordinary mountaineers, who seldom encounter serious difficulties where there is no snow or ice and are naturally unwilling to expose their toes to frost-bite on the latter. Chamois-hunters pique themselves upon being able to pass wherever a chamois can, and I have known a hunter arriving at a very difficult spot to throw his boots down it first, and thus increase the necessity for descending by that route, and at the same time add to his physical powers. I may perhaps venture also to quote in support of the practice, the following story, current in the Italian Tyrol.

A hunter pursuing with reckless energy a wounded chamois was led on to the top of a tower of rock, where he at last overtook and captured his victim. But to his horror, on attempting to return, he found it beyond his power; the footholds by which he had climbed were not of a nature to serve in the descent. Maddened by the horrible situation in which he found himself, thus left to choose between slow starvation and a sudden death, the wretched hunter cast on all sides eager glances after some mode of escape. The reward of his search was little calculated to diminish his alarm. On a ledge close beside him, which had at first escaped his notice, lay, or rather crouched, a still half-clothed skeleton, grasping a gun. The story of a hunter having long ago disappeared from his village, flashed across his mind, and he saw before his eyes a prophecy of his own fate. Inspired with the courage of despair, the still living man tore off his shoes, and gashing his feet with his hunting-knife in order to gain all possible power of adhesion to the crag, made a final but successful effort to descend the rocks.

On the present occasion, we were not, I am glad to say, forced to resort to the last expedient of the Tyrolese, and to use our pocket-knives for any such unpleasant purpose. The crags proved sound, and afforded a fair number of small crevices

into which the tips of the fingers could be inserted. We mounted chiefly by V-shaped 'cheminées,' and in these the toes, not being fettered by a hard boot, played a most prominent part. An hour's wriggling, if I may so term it, brought us to the top. The peculiarity of this panorama, when contrasted with the views from the neighbouring peaks, is the Glacier d'Otemma, which, looked down on from this point, has the appearance of a gigantic high road. The precipice on the west side of the Aiguille is very fine. The descent of the rock occupied an hour, and no sooner were we off it than the sky clouded, the wind rose again, and we only reached home just in time to escape a storm. The ascent has been made twice during the last year by Englishmen.* This ended the season of 1870.

In 1871, though I still failed to get a chamois (my companions, in consequence of the number of visitors, being seldom at liberty to accompany me in their pursuit), I enjoyed several most exciting 'hunts,' and made some very successful mountain expeditions.

One great disappointment I endured in the matter of chamois deserves to be mentioned, as showing the character of the guides. An Oxford doctor of divinity, who was recruiting his exhausted powers in an Alpine tour, wished to go up the Point de Vouasson. When I came down and found both judge and tailor preparing to go, I, considering this ascent not sufficiently dangerous to require two out of three of the party to be guides, said, 'No, it is not worth making "Le Monsieur" take two guides; you (to the tailor) go after chamois, and I will go to make a third on the rope.' Chamois-hunting had not been as yet very successful; however, the tailor acquiesced in the arrangement without a murmur, and virtue was rewarded by his getting in less than two hours, in a place where cattle go, a chamois with the finest pair of horns I have seen, which, as the largest known in the valley, were subsequently presented to me, and now adorn my room.

On August 22nd, I had a severe lesson of the imprudence of attempting any difficult ascent with only one guide. The tailor was away, but the weather was fine, so the judge and I determined to go up the Mont Blanc de Cheillon,† the second

* The time now occupied in the ascent is, to Col de Bertol, 3½ hrs.; to foot of Aiguille, 1 hr.; ascent, ¾ hr.; less time being required now that the route is known.

† More correctly Seilon. The mountain takes its name from the Alp Seilon, at the head of the Val des Dix. This pasturage was once so rich that every cow at milking-time filled her pail. Hence the name Seilon, meaning milkpail.

in height of the surrounding peaks, and one which he had not before ascended. At the Col de Cheillon we, or rather I, made a light meal, and decided to make the ascent, my learned friend, who had been complaining of indisposition, pronouncing himself better. One hour cleared us of the ridge of rocks running south-east from the Col, and about forty minutes more across very hard snow, still in the shade, where occasional steps were required, brought us to a dip in the arête which joins the Mont Blanc de Cheillon and the Ruinette. Now came the real business of the ascent. The arête was formed of a very steep slope of ice, thinly covered with frozen snow, blown at the top into a cornice overhanging the precipice on the other side. Keep below this cornice, and you ran no *positive* danger; cut your steps on it, and of course the danger was very great. Unfortunately, my companion, who was now seriously out of sorts, and in whom the exertion and illness combined produced a sort of blindness, chose, despite my remonstrances, the latter course. It was not till we got to the summit (in $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours from the dip) that I found how ill he really was, and I was not sorry when we had retraversed the arête, especially as in the worst part there was a glimpse of daylight to be seen through two of our steps, which were in all 300 in number.

At the Col de Cheillon we had a discussion as to whether we should return to Arolla, or descend as we had intended, upon Mauvoisin. The judge, though he could not eat anything, wished strongly to do the latter, so I took the knapsack, and we descended by the Glacier de Giétroz, my companion remaining at the cattle châteaux on the Alp. I can strongly recommend this passage from the Val d'Hérens to the Val de Bagnes. The Glacier de Giétroz is quitted (when descending to the Val de Bagnes) on the left bank just above the fall. While crossing the Alp several fine views of the ice-fall, and down the Val de Bagnes, are obtained, and six hours' walking takes one from the inn at Arolla to the inn at Mauvoisin. At Mauvoisin the only travellers were one of the 'Sanitary Commissioners of the Lancet' and his wife, who were purposing on the morrow to go to Prarayen *en route* for Zermatt; I, however, persuaded them to go with me to Arolla instead by the Col de Mont Rouge. At the châteaux we found the poor judge, who had eaten nothing the previous evening, or that morning, but pronounced himself capable of getting over, which we did in eight hours (gaining three hours on our friends, who had no reason for hurrying), a wonderful performance on his part, as he had only touched a morsel of food once since he

left Arolla. All's well that ends well, and rest and chlorodyne restored the invalid to health in due time.

On August 31st Mr. Rickman and I started with the judge and tailor for the Dent Perroc,* which had never been ascended, a party of guides who attempted it having been driven back by bad weather. At the base of the mountain we stopped to breakfast, and I may take this opportunity of recommending to the notice of travellers the black bread of Arolla. To those who have not tried black bread and cheese for walking on, I say, Try it; and those who can speak contemptuously of mountain fare as being composed of 'coarse rye-bread and acid curds' (*vide* 'The Switzers') are, to my mind, to be pitied. Black bread varies like other things, but, as a rule at least, that found in the highest châteaux, which has generally been kept three or four months, is most nutritious, and for mountaineering purposes very portable.

From this point the ascent required all our energies, and we were glad to put on the rope. The view of the Aiguille de la Za with a hanging glacier below it is very fine, and is best seen when a little above the arête connecting the Dent Perroc and the Aiguille. The tailor once or twice exhibited some really wonderful powers when endeavouring to find a practicable route, but though great care and attention was required, when putting down one's feet, to avoid sending stones on to the heads of those below, the rocks afforded better holding than we could have hoped, looking at their general steepness. There were several places which we, the amateurs of the party, could certainly not have ascended without the aid of a rope, even had mattresses been kindly held beneath in case one fell, and the descent was considerably harder, occupying 3 hrs. 40 min., as against 3 hrs. 30 min. of ascent. The view was magnificent, embracing the Oberland, the Weisshorn, Dent Blanche, Monte Rosa, the majestic Matterhorn, and the precipitous side of Mont Blanc. Immediately below us was the junction of the Glaciers de Ferpècle and Mont Miné. The expedition is *very* stony, and will therefore probably not become popular, but the view is worth the trouble of the ascent, and the climb itself is also good practice for those who appreciate rock-work. We left Arolla at 4.30 A.M., and got home at 6.40 P.M., having spent two hours in building our stone man at the top.

The next day, whilst I was basking in the sun, and resting my shoulders, which were stiff from the effects of alternately

* Dent Perroc, or Pirroc = stony tooth, *pirra* being the local patois for a stone.

clinging to rocks or pulling at the rope, the guides came to say, that they had been talking the matter over, and that as I had been the first traveller up the Aiguille de la Za and the Dent Perroc, they considered that if it were possible I ought to secure the remaining peak of the chain, the Dent des Bouquetins, but that they would go on only one condition—namely, that they should not be paid for the expedition. Such love for their craft was not to be checked, and on the morning of September 6th we started along the familiar route of the Col de Bertol. An hour's walk from the Col, passing on the way the glacier, which comes down from the point marked in the Federal map 3,783 mètres, carried us to the base of the central peak, the highest of the three. About twenty minutes of rock brought us close to the base of a small glacier, and here we deposited my axe and our provisions, with the exception of *the* bottle of wine. This glacier abruptly terminates in a wall of some forty or fifty feet, from the upper edge of which depend large hanging icicles. We were obliged to pass under the drippings from these, which was not very pleasant, as the sun was melting them, and on a prior survey we had been much impressed by the number of falling icicles. Soon after we cut steps across a snow couloir, and had to run the gauntlet of a few falling stones. Higher up, our route led us to the edge of the glacier mentioned before, and to avoid the loss of time incidental to cutting steps on the ice, we passed what I found rather an awkward place. The rocks retaining the side of the glacier had a fault in them, and a section some eight or nine feet deep of the glacier was presented; the ice gave bad holding for the hands, whilst the small portion of moraine which remained on the steep slope of the rock, seemed to afford but an insecure foothold. With this exception our task resolved itself into rather stiff rock-work. The final ridge was three or four feet in breadth, but formed of large loose stones, which we were afraid, if once disturbed, would carry others away with them. The precipices on either side, especially on that of the Glacier d'Arolla, were splendid. The finest objects from the summit were the glaciers descending from the Dent d'Hérens. It is not, however, so good an 'all-round' view as that from the Dent Perroc, the neighbouring Italian ridges being only brown, burnt-up, grass-covered Alps. Looking down on the Mont Colon, one regrets that it has been as if were 'nipped in the bud,' having splendid proportions down below, but being ruthlessly cut off above, and having been left like an unfinished pyramid, with, roughly speaking, a large table summit. We managed our descent quicker than

we expected, and were glad that the sun had left our side of the mountain in the shade so that we were freed from falling stones. My guides considered this expedition the most difficult of the three above described; and certainly at times our chance of success looked most hopeless; but one's powers were not on the full stretch for so long a time as when on the Perroc.

I will add in conclusion a few remarks on the expeditions mentioned in the Alpine Guide. In crossing the Col de Chermontane, the Glacier de Vuibez should not be descended unless a local guide who has traversed the pass that year advises it, as the route is not easy to find, and in the afternoon there is considerable danger from falling seracs. In ascending, you take the right bank of the northern stream, work gradually across it, and when about half-way up the fall, return to the right bank again. In descending by the Glacier de Pièce, it is best to keep to the right bank till the lower part of the glacier is reached, then cross it, and keep under the rocks (called 'Luet quonda'), on the left bank. Some years one can keep to the left bank all the way. In crossing the Col de Colon the route is somewhat altered, and you now follow the lower part of the Glacier d'Arolla as long as possible, then take to the moraine or ice at the foot of Mont Colon, and skirt round it until the Col is reached. The best route from the 'flat, stone-covered plain' mentioned by Mr. A. W. Moore in his account of his first passage of the Col de Bertol, to the Glacier de l'Arolla, is quite clear of the precipitous ravine through which the stream descends, and is a little to the south of it. There is more or less of a path, and though rather steep and consequently trying to the knees, no great care is required, as is the case if the stream is followed. In going to Zermatt, the Glacier d'Arolla must be left before the fall, and the bank ascended at right angles to the glacier. Last year, a very celebrated guide kept too much to the right, and trying the Glacier de Bouquetins instead of the Glacier de Bertol, and being overtaken by bad weather, failed altogether to effect a passage.
