

2. THE COL D'ARGENTIÈRE, FROM CHAMOUNIX TO ORSIÈRES AND ST. PIERRE.

BY STEPHEN WINKWORTH.

THERE is perhaps no portion of the Alps which, considering its proximity to one of the great centres of Swiss travel, receives so little attention in proportion to its interest as the range of Mont Blanc to the E. of the Mer de Glace. How few, for instance, of the thousands who every year cross the Col de Balme, or ascend the Montanvert, think of visiting either of the two great glaciers that flow into the valley of Chamounix between those points. One of these, the Glacier du Tour, has been already described in the first series of "Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers," and the following account of the Argentière, and of a passage effected from it to the Swiss Val Ferret by the Glacier of La Neuva, will, it is hoped, afford a further proof of the yet unexhausted variety of scenery in the ice-world of Mont Blanc.

If the reader will turn to the map he will see that the Glacier of Argentière flows in nearly a straight line from the axis of the main chain almost to the village bearing the same name. It is, in fact, the largest glacier having one name, and flowing in one direction, in the whole range. The lower and middle parts are very much crevassed, but the upper portion is level and easily traversed. The passage across the main chain, described in the following pages, is not, as its name might seem to imply, over

the rocks at the very head of the glacier, which seem from the north quite inaccessible, but through a gap, reached by a long and steep climb up a kind of bay or recess at the S.E. corner. It is by far the highest pass in the Mont Blanc range, being, as computed by Mr. Tuckett during a three hours' halt at the top in August, 1860, 12,556 feet above the level of the sea, and ranking fifth in order of height among Swiss passes, — the other four being in the Monte Rosa district. The discovery of the passage was made by Auguste Simond, to whose coolness and readiness the writer is indebted for the success of the expedition,

In the summer of 1860 I visited Chamounix, and in an excursion to the Jardin, and a passage of the Col du Géant, acquired my first knowledge of the peculiar character and sublimity of the range of Mont Blanc. I had procured the services of Auguste Simond in these expeditions, and he told me of a new col he had discovered while searching for crystals among the rocks at the S.E. corner of the Glacier d'Argentière. He had not crossed it, but thought he knew its situation well enough for us to attack it from the S. on our way back to Chamounix. We were, however, foiled in our attempt by a heavy fall of snow on the Col Ferret, which forbade all hope of success, especially as Simond knew the southern side to be very steep and liable to avalanches; so we returned to Chamounix by the Val Ferret, the back of the Mont Catogne, and the Tête Noire,—a very interesting and varied walk. In the summer of 1861 I revisited Switzerland with my wife, and again had A. Simond as guide. He met us by appointment at Andermatt, and was not long in telling me that the Col d'Argentière had not yet been crossed,—Messrs. Tuckett and Wigram having, indeed, reached the col under his guidance the day after I left Chamounix, but having been unable to

complete the passage, owing to the soft and dangerous state of the new-fallen snow. Of course we settled to attempt it on our arrival at Chamounix, though the earliness of the season, and the amount of snow in the higher regions of the Alps, made Simond doubtful of success. We were, however, rendered more sanguine in this respect by the favourable state of the snow on the Col du Géant, by which pass we reached Chamounix on the 19th of June, and I at once engaged P. Tobie Simond, who had been my second guide in 1860.

The weather had been beautiful, but a change was evidently brewing, and I felt that no time was to be lost in making our attempt. Accordingly, on the afternoon of the 21st of June, I walked up to Simond's house near Les Tines, where I found him and his son François busily engaged in preparing the wherewithal to make our party comfortable at the chalets of Argentière. Simond told me he wanted to take his son as porter to the chalets, and on to the upper glacier, and eventually the lad made the whole expedition with us. We left Simond's house about 4 P.M., ascending sharply through meadows into a wood, and soon found ourselves looking down on the Mer de Glace from a point nearly above the Chapeau. We then turned to the left, still ascending among trees, whose shade was very refreshing in the hot and rather sultry afternoon. In about an hour and a half we emerged into an open space, and crossed some streams which flow from the Glacier de la Pendant. A little more wood and another stream or two brought us to the chalets, which are some little distance from the Glacier d'Argentière, and not far from the N.E. corner of the Glacier de la Pendant. These chalets, like most of those on the higher Alps, are not inhabited till July, and we therefore had the place to ourselves. In the one devoted to the art of cheese-making we soon had a

good fire, and proceeded to unpack and attend to the comforts of the inner man, by this time grown somewhat clamorous. Auguste now found, to his great regret, that he had forgotten to bring candles, and also some fresh butter he had made expressly for the occasion. We managed to make ourselves very comfortable without these luxuries, and before long I clambered up to a sort of wooden hammock, above the cow-pens in the other chalet, and with my knapsack for a pillow, and the stars looking down through the gaps in the roof, soon fell asleep.

About 12.30 A.M. Auguste came in to wake me, with the intelligence that the weather continued fine, but was not frosty, and he feared the snow would be soft. We were soon at breakfast, and at 1.30 started on our way, the moon, in her third quarter, giving us just light enough to see our steps for about twenty minutes, when she sank behind the hill, and left us to pick our way with some difficulty across the streams and beds of snow. The path ascended slightly, and then lay along the face of the hill. We made but slow progress, owing to the darkness, and did not get to the glacier till 3, though even then we were too early, and had to wait a little for sufficient light to see our way properly. I regretted very much that we were thus unable to enjoy the full beauty of the crevasses, which in this part of the glacier are very numerous and grand, the incline being considerable. The ice on which we stood has its origin in the snows of the Aiguille Verte, and we did not get on to that which flows from the head of the valley till we reached the upper level of the glacier.* This took us till nearly 4, so that we had now the full light of early morning. It was beautifully fine, a few misty clouds to the N. being the only vapour visible.

* The two glaciers are, however, undistinguishable, as there is no moraine to separate them.

We had now reached a point whence we could see the whole upper glacier, though not the col. The view was very grand, and of a character quite different from any glacier scenery I had previously seen ; and while Simond adjusted the rope, which it was now thought prudent to use, I had time to engrave the principal outlines deeply on my memory. Before us lay the glacier, level, with scarcely a visible crevasse, piercing to the very axis of the main chain, and surrounded on all sides with seemingly inaccessible precipices, save where it fell in magnificent confusion towards the valley. Immediately on our right towered the Aiguille Verte, white to the very summit, and yet so steep that one wondered how snow and ice found any lodgment. S. from the Aiguille Verte, and tending rather to the E., ran an uninterrupted chain of precipices, separating the Glacier d'Argentière from the Talèfre, and crowned by those beautiful and often fantastic aiguilles which form one of the most striking characteristics in the scenery of the Mont Blanc range. These precipices were mostly too steep for snow to rest on, except in the couloirs, which streaked their sides with white ; but midway between the Aiguille Verte and the head of the glacier rose a graceful snow-covered peak, the highest point of the Tours des Courtes. Right before us, at the southern extremity of the glacier, the Mont Dolent rose in a beautiful cone of snow, fully 4000 feet above our level. Across the glacier on our left were the craggy precipices of the Aiguilles d'Argentière and Chardonnet, more massive and rugged than the Aiguille Verte or Mont Dolent. The eastern boundary of the glacier, connecting these Aiguilles with the Mont Dolent, is more broken than the two others, and to the glacier explorer even more interesting. Between the Chardonnet and the Argentière is a tributary glacier, steep and crevassed, but I thought not impracticable, and leading — who knows

where? Simond thought to the Glacier du Tour, and at the time I agreed with him; but it seems to me now quite possible that a passage may exist by it to the Glacier de Saléna. At any rate it is an interesting question, and had we not been engaged in the solution of a still more attractive problem, we should have tried to decide it.

We had, however, no time to lose, and pushed on towards the S.E. corner of the glacier. In about half an hour we came in sight of the col, and stopped for our second breakfast, just before quitting the level to begin the ascent. Looking back from this point we had a fine view of the Buet, over the shoulder of the tributary glacier lately mentioned. The ascent proved, as is constantly the case on the snow, much longer than I had anticipated. We were now in a kind of recess, invisible from the point where we got our first view of the upper glacier, and rising pretty sharply towards the S.E. The rocks on the N.E. of this recess are said to be very rich in crystals, and some of the finest smoky varieties, the most expensive in the Chamounix collections, are found here. It was while hunting among these crags that Simond had discovered the col we were now approaching. Near the top we took to the rocks, and met with several crystals, one or two of considerable beauty.

We reached the col at 8.30 A.M., and found at once the bottle which Messrs. Tuckett and Wigram had placed in a convenient niche the year before, and also Mr. Tuckett's thermometer, which indicated a minimum temperature of -14° Fahr. After carefully noting the latter, I sat down to rest and enjoy the glorious view, while Simond almost immediately began reconnoitring for the descent. The weather was still fine, though not so clear as in the early morning, and the tops of the Italian Alps were mostly obscured by mist. Still we saw enough to make us think

that our point of view was superior to that of the Col du Géant, chiefly from the fact that we were at least 1400 feet higher, and some peaks, including the wonderful cone of the Grivola, were quite clear.

To the E. the view was free from cloud and very extensive. Immediately before us were the Mont Vélán, resembling the nave of some vast cathedral, with huge rock-buttresses springing from its side, and the still more massive Grand Combin or Graffeneire. This latter particularly attracted me, and gave me a greater sense of size and power than almost any other mountain I know. The Matterhorn, a little further to the left, was partly covered by the Dent d'Erin (or d'Hèrens), but the Dent Blanche was free and very beautiful. Beyond these again was the graceful form of the Weisshorn, still a virgin summit, though destined soon to yield to the indefatigable enterprise of Professor Tyndall. Then came a number of lesser mountains, and a gap indicating the Rhone valley; and beyond this were more snowy summits, some belonging probably to the range W. of the Gemmi, and some to the Bernese Oberland. I feel, however, that in thus picking out a few of the most conspicuous names, I am giving the reader but a faint idea of the host of mountain peaks which filled the view, range beyond range, till their outlines were lost in the soft haze which enveloped the horizon.

But Simond is already some distance below, and will be signalling for us to follow him directly; so I write our names and deposit them in the bottle, and look to see the kind of work before us. The col on which we are standing is a ridge of snow like a Gothic roof, running from rocks connected with the Mont Dolent on our right, to those we are just leaving on our left,—a distance of about one hundred yards. The last ascent has been about the steepness of an average Gothic gable, but the southern

side is much steeper, so that the little strip, which is all we can see of the Val Ferret, seems just at our feet, and yet the châlets of the hamlet of Folie are scarcely visible. This snow-slope, by which we have to descend, is broken here and there almost from the top by furrows, which soon deepen into channels more or less deep and wide, and down which, in the present soft state of the snow, avalanches are often pouring. Simond has made his way down a ridge between two such channels, and now signals us to follow him, as he has found some jutting rocks which will help us. I go first, with a rope round my waist, held by Tobie Simond, and François brings up the rear; and as the snow is soft, and gives good foothold, we soon reach the rocks. These, interspersed with short snow-slopes, last about half an hour; and then, to gain a fresh series, we are obliged to traverse about 150 yards of steep snow, scored with deep avalanche channels. Of course we cross as rapidly as we can, but for some reason the lad François lingers, and Auguste will not stir till his son has passed the danger. He crosses safely, and we scramble on down rocks, then another snow-ridge, and then more rocks, some of which task our climbing powers. At last they get too precipitous, and we must take again to the snow.

We are now approaching the Glacier proper, and see, to our perplexity, that the slope we are on ends in a snow-cliff or precipice, inside which runs a crevasse. This formation is bounded on either hand by precipitous rocks, and seems to bar all egress. After some time Auguste discovers a channel, so deep that it cuts the snow-cliff to the bottom, and allows access to the glacier. The dirty colour of the channel shows it to be a frequent passage for débris and stones, as well as snow; and while we are debating whether to commit ourselves to it for the few minutes that would

be necessary, we hear a noise overhead, and, looking up, see an avalanche coming upon us. Happily the rocks on the left are very near, and we get to their shelter in time; but as it is the hottest part of the day, it is thought prudent to wait an hour or two before attempting the channel again. Accordingly we find a little perch on the rocks, and proceed to dinner, as it is now 1 P.M., and we have had nothing since 4.30 A.M. After dinner my companions settle themselves for a siesta, and leave me to the contemplation of the view. It was of course much more circumscribed than that from the col, but still very beautiful,—the Monts Vélán and Graffeneire being the chief points of interest.

About 2.30 we started again, and descending the channel in safety, reached in a few minutes the Glacier of La Neuva*, and had seen the last of our difficulties. We went merrily and rapidly onwards, looking back now and then with no small pleasure at the col and the descent, and at our perch on the rocks, which at one time Tobie thought would have been for many hours our prison. I now discovered that the Glacier of La Neuva did not owe its entire origin to the snows we had just left, but came principally from higher ground to the N.E. It was much crevassed, but looked practicable, and I thought might possibly communicate with the Glacier de Saléna.

We left the glacier where it began to break down into the valley, but found we had made a mistake, and should soon lose our way in hanging woods; so, regaining it, we had a tedious and dirty walk down the moraine, after which at about 4 P.M. we crossed a long waste of stones. I am too little acquainted with the marks of glacier action to decide whether this stony tract is owing to the retreat

* La Folie was the name given to this glacier by the peasantry in the valley, from the hamlet in the Val Ferret, just below its *débouchure*.

of the ice, or to the impetuous rush of the glacier torrents in the spring. As soon as we had got fairly beyond it, and our feet had felt the turf again, we halted for our last meal, and rarely, I think, have cold veal and *jambon* been more appreciated, or St. Jean tasted better than on that occasion. Of course we drank to the new col, still full in view, though now looking so little like a pass that we thought no one would ever find it from this side.* Nothing now remained between us and civilisation, as represented by the little hamlet of Folie, but the main stream of the Val Ferret, called, like its brethren of the Val d'Entremont and the Val des Bagnes, the Drance. This did not at first seem feasible, as the torrent was swollen and rapid, from the melting of the snow by the hot morning sun; but the passage was managed at last by the help of a fir-trunk which we threw across. From Folie we walked down to Orsières, where we arrived at 8.30 P.M., and the next day I returned to Chamounix by the Col de Balme.

I cannot conclude without strongly recommending this excursion to all lovers of glacier and mountain scenery. It is one upon which I look back with great pleasure, and I am sure no one undertaking it could be disappointed, either in the magnificent aiguille and glacier scenery of the Upper Argentière, or in the view from the col, embracing, as it does, the mountain ranges of Savoy, Piedmont, and Southern Switzerland, or finally, in the exhilarating excitement of the steep descent. I think it best to take the pass, as we did, from the northern side, and it is certainly advisable to sleep at the châteaux of Argentière, otherwise the expedition would be too fatiguing.

* In this, however, we were mistaken; for I understand that the Rev. J. F. Hardy reached the col from the southern side not very long after our passage, but did not cross it.