

4. THE COL DU SONADON FROM ST. PIERRE TO CHERMONTANE.*

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EARLY on the morning of the 26th of August, 1861, a quaternion of Cantabs, E. B. Prest, G. Johnson, J. A. Hudson, and J. F. Hardy, started from Zermatt to try a cross-country route thence to Chamounix. We had obtained some useful hints on the subject from Jacomb and Mathews, and had been fortunate enough to secure the companionship of Pierre Perren and Moritz Andermatten.

The first day we proceeded by the Col de la Valpelline (described by F. W. Jacomb, p. 306) to Prerayen. When about half an hour from the châteaux, which are dignified by this name, we encountered a Piedmontese peasant, who inquired if we had come from Aosta that day. "No, we have come from Zermatt over the mountains." "Then you go to-night to Aosta?" "No, we sleep here, and pass to-morrow over the glaciers to Chermontane." Pity, fear, and wonder were written in his face, and distinguishable in his tone and gesture, as, with the words, "*Pauvres gens*," he turned, and fled as from hopeless lunatics. I have no doubt that the laugh with which his farewell words were received must have confirmed the opinion

* With the view of maintaining the continuity of the "High Level" route, it has been assumed that each excursion was made from west to east, and titles have been given in accordance with this supposition. The pass, however, described by Mr. Hardy, was taken in the opposite direction. — Ed.

which he had evidently formed of our insanity, and could he have been present every time the words "*pauvres gens*" were repeated in the course of the next week, he would have thought us madder than ever. Was the coffee thick, or the milk unattainable,—was the bread hard, or the cheese high,—was a crevasse too wide, or did a stone come rattling down,—"*pauvres gens*" rose simultaneously to the lips of all, and a choral laugh of twenty-horse power was sure to follow.

Leaving the Valpelline the next day by a lateral gorge which opens a little above Prerayen, we kept for about two hours along the regular route of the Col de Collon; then, bearing away to the left for three hours more we reached a col, which we proposed to call the Col d'Otemma, but which I perceive has received from Mr. Tuckett, the first person I believe who passed it, the high-sounding name of Col de la Reuse de l'Arolla. An easy stroll down the Glacier d'Otemma brought us to Chermontane by 3 P.M.

Here we met with a most hospitable reception: we were regaled with the choicest *serac* and an unlimited supply of milk. Shortly after our arrival a young guide of the neighbourhood made his appearance, bearing a large quantity of *fresh white* bread and Parmesan cheese, which he had intended for his own supper. He was easily, however, persuaded to part with these delicacies for coin, and to content himself with the black bread of the *châlet*, which to our taste was somewhat harder than paving-stones, and about as refreshing. As our young friend was anxious to attach himself to our party, we asked him some questions touching the Glacier du Mont Durand, and the Sonadon col by which we hoped on the morrow to reach St Pierre. He first asserted the impossibility of such a passage, and then offered to show us the way. Not exactly

perceiving the advantage to be derived from such uncertain guidance, we declined his services. Thus thrown on our own resources, we proceeded to make a careful examination with our glasses of the Glacier du Mont Durand. We soon perceived that its lower end was too much crevassed to allow of rapid progress, if of any; but we saw good reason to hope that by keeping to the slopes of Mont Avril for an hour or so, we should be enabled to strike the glacier at a point where no serious difficulties were likely to impede us.

Satisfied at having discovered the line of starting, more than half the battle in a new route, we returned to the châteaux to lounge away the summer evening. Soon the cows came trooping homewards, their bells making pleasant music; and we chatted with the herdsmen as they passed from one to another of their comely charges. We now learnt that this was the last night they were to spend at Chermontane, and had we been a day later in our visit, we should not only have met with no *serac* and no milk, but we should have found the châlet close-barred and locked for the winter. Congratulating ourselves on our good fortune, we gathered round the fire to partake of the coffee which Moritz had prepared with his usual skill, and then betook ourselves to our literally stony couches; but alas! not to sleep. The absence of hay, the paucity of covering, and the coldness of the night, would probably have been easily forgotten could we have secured quiet; but the excitement of our hosts in making preparations for their Exodus, the cleaning of pots and pans, the fuss made over the last batch of cheese which was to be turned out in the morning, and, above all, the horribly unmusical crooning songs of thirty or forty verses, sung to an air which sounded something like "Buy a Broom" reduced to a Gregorian chant, drove the sleepest of us to utter despair.

At length about 2 A.M. the last pot is polished, and the last song sung. Silence reigns in the hut; now perhaps we shall sleep. Oh, dear, no! nothing of the sort! A pig afflicted with bronchitis takes to railing at the coldness of the weather, and an asthmatic cow joins in his maledictions; a jackass, disturbed by the duo, gives them a bit of his mind; and in a few minutes the air rings with brayings and gruntings and lowings innumerable, "It's no use lying here: let's get up, have our breakfast, and start at once." No sooner said than done. Pierre and Moritz make up the fire and put on the coffee, while we turn out in search of a stream for our morning ablutions.

At 3.40 A.M. our landlord receives our adieux, which have a certain chinking sound about them, and we set to work to climb the lower grass-slopes of Mont Avril. At first we bear away to the left till we are close to the Glacier de Fenêtre, whose pinnacles glitter in the moonlight; then, zigzagging to the right, we find ourselves with the earliest dawn some 200 yards above the right bank of the Mont Durand glacier. Dropping down by some easy shale screeghs, and crossing the moraine, we push up the centre of the glacier for some distance, till we are forced by the increasing crevasses to take to the rocks on the left bank. Creeping carefully along these, we rise above the level of the highest ice-fall, and about 6 A.M. pass on to a nearly even plateau of unbroken névé.

We now make rapid progress; and finding that we have plenty of time before us, we determine to leave our direct route, and examine a col which apparently leads in the direction of Aosta. We reach the col at 7.15 A.M. and find our ideas correct. There is evidently an easy descent* past the châteaux of By to Ollomont, and thence to Aosta itself, upon whose turrets the morning sun is playing.

* This route had been previously taken by F. W. Jacomb.

Beyond, ridge behind ridge, rise the beautiful Italian hills, with colours as rich and as delicately blended as the tints of a ripe nectarine, while Mont Vélán, with its massive buttresses, and the long ridge of the Tête de Chenaille, form a noble foreground. We must not, however, linger here too long. We retrace our steps for half an hour, and then bear gradually away to the left, sweeping round close under some rocks, which we afterwards discover to be the base of the Graffeneire, till at 9.30 A.M. we arrive at a col no doubt; but can it be the col of which we are in search?

Before us lies an extensive glacier stretching far away into the valley beneath. No such glacier appears either in Studer's or in Mathews' map between the top of the Glacier du Mont Durand and St. Pierre; and though we know the maps are incorrect, we can hardly believe in so serious an omission as this. No! we must have blundered in some way; we have kept too much to the right; this must be the Glacier de Corbassière, the valley, the Val des Bagnes. One thing is clear: we must go forward, either down the glacier, or by the rocks into the ravine at our feet, and then hold a council of war as to our further progress. Snatching a few moments for the enjoyment of a *petite goûte*, and of the superb view which our station commands of the whole range of Mont Blanc, we start with all the excitement of explorers down our unknown glacier. For the first few minutes all goes smoothly enough; the snow is in fair order, the crevasses neither numerous nor wide; but we have scarcely descended 500 feet, when these assume so ugly an appearance that Moritz and Pierre run off to examine the rocks. They come back with serious faces, which say clearly "no go" without any need of words, and again we attack the ice. An hour and a half passes, we have been on the move the whole time, yet we have hardly made any perceptible

advance; the crevasses get larger and more entangled, till at last one stupendous chasm bars our path, and deprives us of our last hope of reaching the valley by the glacier. Back again in our old footsteps for upwards of an hour, and then we try for the rocks at a lower point than that at which we examined them before. An ugly moraine separates us from them, and we have to try two or three places before we succeed in crossing it. Once fairly on the rocks, we feel certain of ultimate success; still, from the point at which we have struck them, *descent* is utterly impossible, and we sweep away to the right, rising some two or three hundred feet. At length we come to a queer-looking gully, which some one at once christens "*Le grand Escalier*;" and, though the stones slip from beneath us, and fall from above us in tolerably large numbers, we determine on risking the descent.

Down we go slowly and steadily till we come to a point, where our grand staircase changes into a perpendicular trough, and matters look uglier than ever. Moritz, however, undertakes to get us down. Fastening the rope round me, he dismisses me with an, "*Allez, Monsieur, allez, seulement*," which being interpreted means, "Go-a-head, stick your feet anywhere you can, and nowhere if there isn't anywhere." Proceeding on this principle, I get to the bottom of the trough in safety, unfasten the rope from my waist, and await my companions, who come down one by one in the same fashion, till Moritz is left alone at the top with no one to hold the rope for him. He, however, has long ago made up his mind how to act. Throwing down to us the now useless rope, he spreads himself out as much as he can, so as to get the largest amount of friction called into play, and then with a catch here, and a kick there, rushes down in a mysterious manner, which makes him very hot, and which would carry him consider-

ably farther than he intends, did we not stand with outstretched arms to catch him, and bring him to a safe anchorage.

This was our last difficulty. The rocks became less precipitous every minute, and at 2.30 P.M. we were seated at lunch at the head of the valley. Scarcely had we started again when we met some intelligent natives, who gladdened our hearts by informing us that we were but two hours from St. Pierre. We had discovered the right col, after all. We learnt that the name of the glacier was the Sonadon, and that it was considered quite impracticable. Indeed, as we looked back we saw that it was broken in the most singular manner by a ridge of perpendicular rocks some 300 feet or 400 feet in height, which stretched right across it from one bank to the other. Had we succeeded in dodging the crevasses, we could never have effected a descent by this wall, which was worn quite smooth by the drippings from the glacier.

An easy walk brought us all well pleased, though well tired, to the little village of St. Pierre at 5.30 P.M.; and a good dinner, with a bottle or two of excellent *Fully*, finished the day.