

6. COL DE CHERMONTANE, FROM CHERMONTANE TO
AROLLA.

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THERE are probably few Swiss travellers who have not lamented over the length, the tediousness, the heat, and the dust of the long, dreary valley of the Rhone from Martigny to Visp, and who have not yearned after some more interesting route between Chamounix and Zermatt. With these feelings strong within us, our party, consisting of Mr. J. J. Cowell, my brother Mr. Edward Buxton, and myself, had designed to employ part of a short tour, in 1861, in the working out of a route between these two places that would take us as nearly as possible along the main chain of the Alps. Circumstances, however, compelled us to curtail our plan by that portion of it which lies between Chamounix and the Val des Bagnes.

My brother, who had just ascended Mont Blanc from the Aiguille de Gouté, having met us at Sixt, with us crossed the Mont Buet to Martigny, and reached Chables on the 10th of August. Monday evening, August 12th, found us busy preparing a bivouac on the side of the Glacier de Corbassière, whither we returned on Tuesday, after an unsuccessful attempt on the highest or S. W. peak of the Grand Combin, or Graffenière. Our failure was partly owing to the discouraging nature of our guide, old Bernard Trolliet. His passion for giving up any undertaking when about three parts accomplished

amounted to an absolute monomania; though I must add that he is a careful and attentive man, with a good head for remembering places that he has once visited, while his profession of chamois hunting has given him considerable experience of the neighbouring mountains. However, we were not satisfied in having him as our only local guide. Another misfortune befel us in the illness of our Chamonix porter, and we had only our well-tried and faithful Michel Payot, of Des Bossons, on whom we could depend. Wednesday, however, saw the difficulties cleared away. Mr. Cowell descended the valley to Chables in search of certain creature comforts and other desiderata, among which a new porter or two were indispensable, while my brother and I proceeded to the ch[^]âlet of Chermontane, a large stone cabin, which contained some dozen shaggy *bergers*. The next morning we sauntered up to the Mont Avril* (11,490 ft.), which well deserves the good character for ease of ascent and magnificence of view given it by Mr. W. Mathews in his paper in the former series of "Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers." From near the top of the Col de Fen[^]être we observed a change in the glacier that is worthy of being recorded. Professor Forbes speaks of the glacier that descends from the Col de Fen[^]être as one of the great arms of the Glacier de Chermontane; but last year, as far as we can remember, it failed to meet it by an interval of about 200 or 300 yards. Now, Mr. Mathews speaks of the Chermontane Glacier as advancing and ploughing up the pastures in front of it. † Here, therefore, is a remarkable instance of two glaciers close together, the one advancing and the other retreating.

* The heights given are calculated from my own observations on the temperature of boiling water, compared with the barometrical observations at St. Bernard.

† "Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers," 5th edit. p. 72.

As this glacier is on the way from the châlet to the Col, we hope it will receive the attention of future wanderers in the Val des Bagnes.

On descending to the châlet we indulged in a bathe in a bright stream that leapt in a string of tiny waterfalls down the flanks of Mont Avril, and then turned our thoughts to dinner. Near the châlet, and under an overhanging rock, there resided an old sow, who did her best to get fat on whatever might remain after butter, cheese, seracs, and other dainties of châlet life had been extracted from the milk of the herd. She was the happy mother of a large family of sucking pigs, so small that at first we thought them too infantine for the pot; their youthful curiosity, however, led them to examine us with an unpleasant degree of familiarity, an impertinence, on their part, that soon excited us to the chase. Then our opinion of their strength rose rapidly; we found them to be gifted with most extraordinary locomotive powers. Uphill or downhill, over rock or grass, they were for some time a match for us all; surely, selection, whether natural or artificial, never caused a greater difference than that between those piglings and their distant cousins who annually exhibit their fat sides in Baker-street. But the "struggle for existence" was in this case also to end in favour of man. Our efforts were centred upon the *filz ainé*, the biggest of the lot; and having run him down, and pronounced him sufficiently muscular for the food of man, we handed him over to the tender mercies of Payot, who proceeded to prepare him with all due formality for our dinner. An hour later, and Cowell arrived. Much success had attended his arrangements; but the best of all was that he had engaged two capital young porters at Lourtiers, Justin and Louis Fellay, who continued with us for some days, and proved themselves in the highest degree active

and attentive. As night closed in we entered the *châlet*, and betook ourselves to that end of it which had been given up to us. The *bergers* had grouped themselves round the crackling wood fire near the door, and were gently stirring the contents of the huge *marmite*. The portable soup and the little pig were soon ready, and while one log formed our table, and two more our chairs, we enjoyed one of those extra-pleasant hours which often stand out prominently from among the recollections of travelling adventures. Of course we had much to talk about: we discussed old Trollet, and agreed to get rid of him, entrusting that delicate task to Cowell, who performed it to the admiration of all, with the exception, perhaps, of the subject of it—Trollet himself. Then the prospects of the morrow, and the chances of a successful ascent of the proposed pass, were discussed. My curiosity concerning it had been chiefly excited by allusions made by Professor Forbes, in his "Tour of Mont Blanc," to the possibility of a pass over the head of the Glacier de Chermontane. From both ends he speaks of it as worthy of examination. The chief difficulty to be anticipated was a mythical ridge of rocks called *Crête à Collon*. This appears in Studer's map to run right across the head of the glacier, and to form a barrier between the upper *névés* of the Vuibez and Chermontane glaciers. It had the character of being quite impassable; but, as that easily-spoken epithet is recklessly applied to every place that has not received the honour of a trial, we were not disheartened at hearing it so freely used. Our chief source of encouragement arose from the information contained in two letters from Mr. Tuckett, who had a few weeks before discovered a pass from Chermontane to Prerayen. He had not, however, been to the summit level of the glacier, and we could not but place a certain amount of

unwilling confidence in old Trolliet, who insisted on the reality of the Crête à Collon, and who painted in the blackest colours the dangers to which we should be exposed without him. However, we were determined to try it, even without his aid; so we cut short all further debate by calling Payot, and with him completing the preparations for a start on the morrow. It was still early when each, with his knapsack for a pillow, laid himself down in the black hay at one end of the cabin, while round the fire at the other the *bergers* kept up to a late hour, singing a wild sort of song, the burden of which was the might and the glory of the great Napoleon. It was strange, as we lay in that desolate cabin, with the sky above scarcely hidden by the stony roof, to find that the storms of European politics of half a century ago left their echoes still reverberating in that distant valley.

In spite of their songs and the draughts that played merrily through the frequent interstices of the stone walls, we enjoyed a fair amount of sleep; and at about 2 A.M. the next morning were stirred up by Payot, who was busy making the fire and preparing to boil the chocolate. The difficulty of making a rapid start is one of the most provoking parts of Alpine travel, and is greatly increased when various extras, too hard or too bulky to keep in the pocket at night, have a tendency to secrete themselves in the hay. These causes of delay were, unhappily, not wanting on this the morning of the 16th of August; but at last, at about 3 A.M., we found ourselves fairly under weigh. The morning was fine, but cold; the moon had set, and the stars hardly gave sufficient light to assist us. We had a lantern which was intended to combine all the advantages and none of the disadvantages of others of its kind; but just as we neared the moraine of the glacier, where it was chiefly wanted, it suddenly went out, and left us to

blunder over the loose stones, and slippery mud-covered ice, as best we might. When the moraine was fairly left, and the clean ice was beneath our feet, we at once had amply sufficient light, and soon enjoyed the oft-described charms of an Alpine sunrise. After awhile we were forced by large and frequently recurring crevasses to the south side of the glacier, abutting on the Mont Gélé, and for about half an hour had to take some care in threading our way through the intricacies of the broken ice. The excitement, however, was far from unpleasant, and tended to keep out the cold of the frosty air. We next came to smooth ice, which, however, was crossed at regular intervals by long straight crevasses, just too broad for a jump, and which extended almost entirely across the glacier. These caused some delay, but were at last left behind, and we entered upon as smooth and easy a surface of ice as could well be found. The glacier at this point curves round towards the north-east, and we therefore bore away to the northern bank of the stream. The exceeding ease of our route left us now at leisure to enjoy the scene around, which was one of great grandeur. The view towards the lower end of the glacier was shut in by the steep cliffs of the Mont Gélé and Mont Avril. The northern wall of the glacier, which is the base of the Pic d'Otemma, is too steep for any ice, with the exception of here and there a small secondary glacier, but the southern side was a source of continual enjoyment; it was composed of a succession of headlands, the bays being filled by magnificent lateral glaciers, many of which exhibited cliffs of white névé, scarred by avalanches and crossed by fissures of every size and form. To us, however, the most interesting side was that in front, where the constantly retreating line of the glacier's horizon still kept us in doubt of what we were to find when we reached the top.

Was that gently-rising slope to be cut off by steep precipices? If so, were those precipices practicable? Or was the whole story of the Crête a myth? These were the questions that the day was to answer — this the doubt that gave a sense of adventure and added largely to our enjoyment. At 6 o'clock we halted for breakfast. We had now reached the névé, and, having laid down a strict rule, always to use the rope immediately on reaching névé, however easy and smooth it might look, we proceeded to rope ourselves together. We had, at Cowell's suggestion, adopted a plan which greatly facilitated that often troublesome operation; every one of us had a piece of cord, four or five feet long, tied round his waist, with the ends left dangling at the side. In the long rope we had tied a succession of loops, to which each man could tie himself far more expeditiously than when the main rope has to be adjusted round the waist of each in succession.*

At a quarter to 7 A.M. we started again; the snow was in first-rate condition, and we made rapid progress. The doubt concerning the Crête à Collon still hung over us; for, as we continued to ascend, a ridge of rocks and ice came clearly into view, and looked so near, that for some time we could not but believe that it rose out of the head of the glacier which we were ascending. We were so entirely convinced that it did represent the Crête, that we at last began to consider which of the gaps we should aim at first. It is, perhaps, of but little use to inquire into the origin of popular delusions; but if it is permissible to do so, surely this appearance that now deceived us is very likely to have strengthened, if not to have originated, this old and mischievous bugbear. However this may be, we continued to believe that the barrier in front had to be

* The mode of roping together adopted by the guides in the Ober Engadin is described at page 166.

crossed, till we had nearly reached the summit level of the glacier, when we found that in reality it lay two or three miles away on the opposite or eastern side of the Arolla glacier. Nothing could be of a more opposite character to the expected Crête than the scene that now received us. Before us stretched an extensive plateau of snow, so level as to make it difficult to decide which was the highest point, and yet we were at such a height that we saw to the left the Weisshorn, and to the right some of the mountains of the Valpelline, including possibly the Pic de Zardezan, lying close against the southern shoulder of Mont Collon.

Here at 9 A. M. the guides threw down their knapsacks and nearly an hour was consumed in observing the height (10,417 feet), and taking the bearings of the neighbouring Peaks. This last operation was necessary to enable us to correct our maps, which for the mountains and valleys around were far from accurate.* We were highly gratified at having traversed in six hours the whole length of the glacier, and at having still before us the best part of a brilliant day for dealing with any difficulties that might yet turn up. By the map, the direct route should lie down the Vuibez glacier, enough of which was seen to show us that it was much steeper and more difficult than that by which we had come. About half an hour's walk brought us to the first crevasses; and now we observed immediately on our left a gap through the ridge to the north, of which more presently.

The character of the glacier had now completely changed; at every step of our onward progress, it was becoming steeper and more crevassed. We were, in fact,

* We had not the new sheet No. 22 of the Federal map by Dufour, which has only just been published, and which will supersede all former ones. The maps which illustrate this route are based upon Dufour.

on the edge of the ice cascade that forms so noble a feature in the view from the eastern side of the Arolla glacier. This, however, we could not yet see; and though appearances were against us we determined to descend as far as the state of the ice would permit, in order to reconnoitre the middle and eastern parts of the glacier. The axe was in continual use; but at last our further descent was cut off at the end of a promontory of ice, enclosed between two yawning crevasses. A halt was now called, while telescopes and glasses were energetically brought into play to assist in examining the rocks on both sides for the chance of finding them practicable; but never were crags more black and frowning, especially those which defend the base of Mont Collon, from the very top of which they seem to fall in sheer precipices. The ice, too, was carefully scanned, but every imaginary route that we tried to work out came to grief in a maze of crevasses, or at the edge of towering seracs.*

Among other magnificent sights, none excited more interest than the surface of the Arolla Glacier, straight down upon which we were now looking. It exhibited by far the most beautiful arrangements of dirtbands that I have ever seen. We examined them most carefully, both then, and from the other side on the following day, and came to the conclusion that they certainly owed their existence to the causes explained by Professor Tyndall.† They can only be seen on that portion of the stream which flows from the cascade of the Vuibez Glacier, and are

* The next day we still more accurately examined the fall from the mountains opposite, and came to the conclusion that the descent, at all events, would have been extremely dangerous. It must be remembered, however, that the spring of 1861 was remarkably hot in the Alps, and, therefore, all ice falls more than usually difficult, so that what was true for that year need not be so in ordinary seasons.

† "Glaciers of the Alps," p. 370.

incomparably more distinct than those of the Mer de Glace; perhaps because the former falls far more abruptly than the latter, and its successive terraces are more clearly defined. However, but a short delay was allowed for looking about us when the right-about-face was given, and we retreated towards the gap on the north, already alluded to; intending, if that proved impracticable, to make another effort on the eastern side of the Vuibez, and knowing that, at the worst, our early start had left us ample time for reaching the châteaux of Chermontane. The ascent to the gap, about 250 feet, was rather rough, over very loose stones, and a secondary glacier. The first part was very steep, and required some care on the part of those in front to prevent the big stones from falling down on those behind. Having surmounted the steeper part, we turned sharply to the right, where the névé meets the rocks up which we had just climbed. Then a rapid slope, up which we have curved to the left, brought us to the top of the ridge (10,348ft.), just two hours after leaving our halting-place on the highest part of the glacier. The prospect that now opened before us was most encouraging. From the ridge on which we stood the extensive Glacier of Pièce flowed down as far as we could see towards the valley, which joins the Combe de l'Arolla, whose bright green meadows and tiny châteaux were clearly seen, while the horizon was shut in by the noble peaks of the Weisshorn and the distant Oberland. To the south the view was yet grander; the intensely white snow fields shining out in contrast with the bold black precipices of Mont Collon, and the sun's midday rays glancing from couloirs of ice, as from plates of frosted silver; while through the blue haze of Italy appeared many a distant peak.

It was a position, which for interest and grandeur of

scenery can be rivalled by few; and which, moreover, had taken us only nine hours to reach, including an hour-and-a-half of rest, and nearly two hours wasted in searching for a passage down the Vuibez glacier. An hour-and-a-quarter were spent at this place in the enjoyment of the view, and another application to our provision bags. While my companions clambered up a peak on the right, to gain a better view of the glacier before us, I boiled a thermometer, and compared our maps with the panorama of valley and mountains around. On their return, we set up a minimum thermometer on a ledge facing the north, about twenty yards to the west of the point where the ridge sinks below the ice. This done, we proceeded again, roped together, sometimes running, and sometimes glissading at a rapid rate down the steep slopes. According to the observation from the peak, the left side of the glacier offered the best route; but several difficulties yet awaited us. In spite of axes, which were freely used, we had, more than once, to return and cut out a path elsewhere. At one part, where the ice was much broken, our route lay alongside a cliff, the radiation from which had hollowed out a sort of chimney, where, with one hand on ice and the other on rock, we found good practice for our climbing powers. At last, the moraine was reached and surmounted, and then an extraordinary scene of desolate rocks displayed itself to our view. It was a perfect wilderness of moraines; six in all lay side by side, while in the midst was the white stream of the Otemma (Studer) or Cijorénove (Federal map) glacier far below us. Here we sat down for a few minutes, and, should any future wanderer care to examine the rocks, his search may, perchance, be rewarded by a pair of green spectacles which my brother left behind him. A steady descent of thirty minutes brought us to the base of the moraine, a

second and ancient one of the Otemma succeeded, and lastly, the modern one led to the ice itself—here about 200 yards broad. This glacier shows unmistakable signs of having suffered unusual diminution. Its northern flank is defended by three mighty ramparts, the outermost of which is well clothed with grass and junipers, while the second is less so, and the youngest has hardly commenced grassing on its outer side. It would present a fine position for a botanist curious to examine the comparative powers of plants for dispersing themselves over fresh ground. Along the base of the last moraine there flows a most refreshing stream, cleansed to brilliant transparency, by filtering through the moraines. The descent for the last hour, in the broiling sun, had been dusty and hot in the extreme, and here was an opportunity not to be wasted; so, about 3 P.M., while the rest of the party proceeded up the opposite side of the valley, to a large dairy establishment, I luxuriated in a delicious bathe, and then threw myself on the soft grass and watched a light-hearted water-ousel as it flitted merrily from rock to rock. The others had intended to return, but, after waiting for them some time, I sauntered up the grassy slope, guided towards the châlet by the tinkling of the many bells of the herd. There I found them reclined at length, having sacrificed the bathe to the grosser luxuries of huge bowls of clotted cream and bread, in which I eagerly joined them. The châlet was a large one, and offered prospects at least of a good floor of hay; but there was also a whole family of women and children, whose company we did not covet, and, as there yet remained some hours of daylight, we followed the advice of the owner of the Alp, and descended to the valley. He carried a plentiful supply of milk and butter, and led us to his own châlet, about half-a-mile from the

lower end of the Arolla glacier. A large basin of portable soup and the remnants of the little pig were ready about sunset, and we retired early to rest in a well-filled hay-loft; and thus completed one of the most interesting and enjoyable of our Alpine excursions.

On the following day we crossed the Col de Collon, and, being en route for Zermatt, had our attention strongly drawn to a snowy Col on the N.E. side of the Pic de Zardezan, at the head of that branch of the Arolla glacier that flows from the east. Sunday, the 18th, was spent in the neighbourhood of Prarayen, and on Monday we crossed to Zermatt, by the Col de Valpelline. Having climbed the cliff of rock, loose stones, and snow, at the head of the Glacier de Zardezan, we again observed a depression through the ridge that runs north from the Pic de Zardezan. Should this correspond with the Col seen from the other side, it would connect the Col de Valpelline with the Col de Collon, and thus the Combe de l'Arolla could be reached from Zermatt in about the same time as Prarayen. To this, or a somewhat similar direct communication between the Combe de l'Arolla and Zermatt, the following allusion in Fröbel's volume* would appear to refer. After describing the Alp and châteaux of Arolla, he repeats the statements of the chief herdsman, or "Pâtor," as to several points connected with the topography of the district, and then proceeds as follows: "The 'Trois Couronnes' are the most remote (*i.e.* southerly) summits of the sharp rocky ridge which separates the valley of Arolla from that of the Ferpêche Glacier. By traversing the elevated valley which follows the direction of the lower portion of the great Arolla Glacier, it is possible to cross behind this chain to the

* "Reise in die weniger bekannten Thäler auf der Nordseite der Penninischen Alpen." Berlin, 1840; Reimer.

summit of the Glacier de Ferpécle at the western foot of the Dent d'Erron (Dent d'Hérens or d'Erin), and passing round to the north of that peak, reach Zermatt without ascending a mountain range. This, the Pâtor distinctly asserted, but with the remark that it was not very easy of accomplishment ('*man nicht gut dahin würde gehen können*').” It is to be hoped that the point will be thoroughly cleared up before long, by actual examination, and I hand it over to lovers of topography and mountaineering, as amongst the *agenda* of the coming season.