

5. THE COL DU SONADON TO OLLOMONT, OR VALPELLINA; THE COL DE CRÊTE SÈCHE; AND THE ASCENT OF MONT GÉLÉ.*

BY FREDERICK WILLIAM JACOMB.

FROM the névé of the Durand glacier below the Col du Sonadon we struck straight up to the Tête de By on the south, over which, we conceived, lay our direction for By. Clambering to the top of the ridge, we looked southwards, on a wide snow-field at a considerable depth below us. In descending the rocks a little caution was requisite, the necessity of which was increased as we cut our way down a small couloir, which, ending abruptly on the edge of a bergschrund, separated the base of the rocks from the snow. A bold jump carried us across the bergschrund, but half buried us in the now softened snow.

After descending the snow-field a little way, we separated, and took different routes towards its edge, in order to save time in seeking for the proper direction. While thus occupied, we started some chamois up the rocks to the west. Jean struck away south-westwardly, Michel rather less westwardly, whilst I went south, and, reaching a few rocks, below which the snow-slopes fell away more rapidly, I halted to eat icicles, and await the pre-arranged signals of the others. Presently I saw Jean returning, a sure sign that his direction was not the right

* Mr. Hardy has described the passage between the Col du Sonadon and Chermontane. An alternative route, however, had been taken by Mr. Jacomb. After giving an account of his descent a short distance in an easterly direction down the Durand glacier, Mr. Jacomb continues his narrative.

one. Shortly afterwards I observed Michel, after carefully sounding with his pole, skidding away down the slopes—an equally certain proof that his route was practicable; so I made a *détour* round the rocks, and was soon glissading merrily towards him. From the foot of the slopes we passed on to some flat slaty rocks, over which the snow-water was flowing, and at 1.5 P.M. sat down in full view of the wondrous Grivola, in the Cogne country, to the south of Aosta.

There was no doubt now of our being able to get down to By, and thence forwards to Ollomont and Aosta, though these places were still a long way from us. We therefore halted an hour, feasting luxuriously and digesting with divers pipes.

At 2.10 P.M. we started again down the rocks and the mountain-slopes beyond, occasionally crossing a mild torrent, using alpenstocks as leaping-poles. Late though it was for the glorious Alpine flowers, and many as are the places in the Alps famous for a display of their varied beauties, I know few parts so profusely adorned as these slopes. I found *Campanula barbata*, *C. cenisia*, *Gentiana bavarica*, *G. campestris*, *Pedicularis rostrata*, *Geum montanum*, *Aster alpinus*, *Sempervivum alpinum*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Trifolium alpinum*, *Gnaphalium Leontopodium*.

At 3.30 P.M. we reached the *châlets* of By, and found them inhabited by quite a respectable-looking community; shortly after we struck the track from the Col de Fenêtre, which we followed to Ollomont, where we arrived at 4.20 P.M. From here to Valpelline, which we reached at 5.15 P.M., owing to the workings of the copper mines, the water was much discoloured. At the entrance of the village was a miserable little cabaret, whilst lower down, opposite the foundry, was another, looking a trifle better, and dignified

with the name of the "Hôtel des Mines;" but a traveller must be tired indeed to stop here instead of pushing on to Aosta. The foundry is a large establishment for the melting of the ore brought down from Ollomont, and the draught is supplied by a kind of culvert, carried up the hill-side opposite, instead of by a chimney.

From Valpelline we followed the road on the east side of the valley by Roysan to Aosta. The road was in parts paved with those villanous boulders, so teasing at the close of a *grande course*; but we never halted from the rapid pace at which we had started from the rocks some hours previously, and at 7.15 P.M. walked into Aosta, gladly passed the dirty hotel in the Place Charles Albert, and pushed on to the excellent Hotel de Mont Blanc, conducted by J. Tairraz, on the outskirts of the town.

Here I found Mr. Mathews just come in by the St. Bernard route; but his continued indisposition necessitated a postponement of our purposed expeditions into the Cogne country. Meanwhile, therefore, I filled up the time with a few excursions in the neighbourhood. One of these led Michel and myself up to the top of the Becca di Nona. We remained two hours on the summit, registering the Alpine Club thermometer, taking observations, and enjoying the wondrous view. Looking hence towards the Graffeneire and the Col du Sonadon, and following the line of Carrel's northern panorama, my eye rested beyond Valpelline, on the Mont Gélé, and the Col de Crête Sèche. It seemed to me that I could not do better than investigate those two points; first, because little was known of them, and next, because they were connected with the "High Level" route, and would give me an opportunity of overlooking a great portion of it, and especially the lower part of the Durand glacier.

In returning from the Becca, we left the ordinary track,

and struck out one which is probably little known. We descended into a lower part of the gorge of the Dard, and examined a remarkable group of serrated rocks, run-



NATURAL PILLARS ON THE GORGE OF THE DARD.

ning out in a thin wedge-like form from the bounding ridge on the west side of the valley, at a considerable angle, towards the opposite range. At different points the rocks assumed the form of detached pillars, each surmounted with a capital in the shape of a huge stone, like a *bloc perché*. One of these capitals very strongly resembled the trefoiled head of a churchyard cross. This appearance, coupled with neighbouring objects, indicated the remains of the moraine of a vast glacier, which,

doubtless, at one time filled the entire valley, but which, by subsequent erosion, had become reduced to the thin edge mentioned, and had given place to the gorge of the Dard. The whole forms an interesting example of what are called natural pillars.

With the view of examining the Crête Sèche and Mont Gélé, I left Aosta in the afternoon (Aug. 10th), taking with me the two Croz' and two days' provisions. In a weak moment I was persuaded into taking a trap as far as Valpelline, under the vain idea that we should save time thereby, and so be enabled to get that night as far as Biona. But it was the first time that four wheels had ever traversed that road, and they were just twice as long a time on the journey as we had been in walking the same road when descending from the Col du Sonadon, and Michel, who walked, arrived at Valpelline an hour and a half before Jean and I crawled up in the vehicle. The driver was an absolute cretin, and his horse seemed to share in the deplorable malady, for which this valley has such an unenviable notoriety. At times, we had to lay strong purchase on one side of the crazy vehicle, to prevent its disappearing bodily over the little precipices at the side of the road, the driver all the time huddled up on his seat, as cool as a crevasse, as if upsets were included in the hire of the machine, and with that stolid look of hopeless indifference peculiar to persons affected with cretinism and goitre. At intervals the united efforts of the party barely enabled the horse to drag the vehicle out of the little "bergschrunds" worn in the road by rushing torrents, and to which the wheels clung with a tenacity worthy of a better resting-place. Jean was all the time furiously sacré-ing; for, no sooner had he lit his perpetual pipe, than he found all his spare breath was required for one of these hauling processes.

Consequently, when we reached Valpelline, we had to push on, and walk the two hours up the valley to Oyace in one hour and twenty minutes. A viper, darting out from the road-side, fell a victim to Jean's remorseless axe; but, to his disappointment, he could not get at any of the numerous bats which were whizzing round our heads. As we wound up the valley, the gorge below Oyace looked very grand, increased, as the effect was, by the shades of evening giving greater prominence to the bold rock of syenite, on which Oyace is picturesquely situated a great height above the valley, and forming, in fact, a barrier across it.

On arriving at the top of the rock, it was quite dark, and hopeless to reach Biona, or, indeed, any spot beyond Oyace that night; for there was no inn, and soon it would be too late to beg shelter for the night, even at a *châlet*, whose occupants would by that time have retired to rest. Hence we decided to stay at Oyace, and set to work to hunt up the *curé*, and get accommodation from him. This he readily granted, such as it was, and we of course paid him, as usual, when we left the following morning. It is far from my wish to express any want of gratitude to these worthy men, to whom most people who make Alpine expeditions are occasionally indebted for shelter; yet I have great doubts whether the worthy *curé* or his room were the dirtier. I was put to some ingenious contrivances to render myself oblivious of the one and clear from the other, during the meal, which we made from our own stores, and to which we perforce added a quantity of excellent wine, with which the *curé* supplied us at an almost nominal price. Such a thing as milk was not to be obtained in the village; and, as the *curé's* establishment seemed totally innocent of any such effeminate indulgence as fuel, all visions of hot coffee before leaving on the following morning were quickly dissipated.

As I contemplated not only ascending to the Crête Sèche, but also trying to climb the Gélé, and getting back to Aosta the same night, it was necessary to start at a very early hour in the morning. Thus the first two hours, at least, would be before daylight. None of us had been here before, and it would be impossible in the dark to discover the direction to take for the Crête Sèche. It was therefore necessary to take a native with us up the mountain-slopes until daylight allowed us to judge for ourselves. A man was sought out, and we sat in solemn conclave over our pipes with the curé examining the native. Very little was known of the Crête Sèche. He had not crossed it, but was familiar with the mountain-slopes for some height towards the cattle Alp above, and could take us up them in the dark. Of the Gélé, nothing whatever was known, and its ascent ridiculed as an idea too absurd to waste an expression of opinion upon it.

With this cheering result I retired to the curé's bed. I had not seen it, but, judging from other appearances, was not particularly disposed to indulge in any anticipations of a "bed of roses." I ventured, therefore, delicately to hint that I had a particular weakness for hay in the cattle-shed; but he would not hear of it, and thus, not to hurt the good man's feelings, I was compelled to manifest an extreme gratitude for his consideration in surrendering his bed to my use. I marched in smilingly to my doom, though the prospect of a long and hard day's work was not made more encouraging by the more than probability that the two or three hours of previous unrest would be devoted to exasperating conflict with "*mauvaises bêtes.*"

I pass over the agonies of that night, and hasten to mention the extreme delight with which, at 1 A.M., I saw Jean enter the little cupboard which the bed and its

hapless victim occupied, and whose roof was too low to admit of my alpenstock standing upright. The first question about the weather satisfactorily answered, Jean brought some fresh water for ablution. I carefully filled therewith the curé's wash-hand basin up to its brim; and so ample were its dimensions that, when I essayed to dip my head in it, the water just covered my nose, as I flattened that useful organ against the bottom of the basin. This fact, coupled with a pungent recollection of the curé, induced the belief that the worthy man was accustomed to save himself all trouble in a morning by simply pointing his face at the basin, and persuading himself it was thereby washed, much in the same way as that ingenious fellow, Pat, does with his herring when he is banqueting upon "roots such as the children of Hibernia eat":—

Each mouthful of murphy and salt they take,
They point at the herring, a flavour to make;
Thus Pat makes believe he's had herring for dinner:
The fish lasts many days without getting thinner.

Our breakfast was necessarily much on a par with this, as it comprised an ample quantity of "make-believe." At 2 A.M. we started. For about a mile we followed the valley up towards Biona, and then struck to our left, or northwards, up the mountain-slopes. The native who accompanied us seemed to consider that, as it was pitch dark, it was no use being very nice about the nature of the ground, so he took us straight up, stumbling over rocks and plunging through streams in the most reckless manner. Mr. King, in his "Italian Valleys," alludes to existent proofs that this part was once covered with a glacier descending from the Crête Sèche above, which accounts for the roughness of the ground. After two hours of this amusement, streaks in the sky heralded the approach of dawn, and soon after we were blessed with a

magnificent sunrise, gilding the peaks of the Grivola and Ruitor to the south, and of the Mont Faroma and another mountain in the chain eastwards, separating the Valpelline from the Val Tournanche. Shortly afterwards we stumbled upon the remains of a hut, a station of the "*preposés*," at a time when contrabandism was more jealously watched than it is now.

At 5 A.M. we began to feel how excessively unsatisfactory our breakfast of "make-believes" had been; and as we had now reached the foot of the first snow-slope leading to the Col and found water issuing from it, we halted one hour for a more substantial meal. At the request of the native, we did not adopt our usual plan of shying stones at the empty bottles whilst enjoying the post-prandial digestive pipe, but left them for him to pick up in returning. A series of short snow-slopes, interspersed with rocky climbs, and a small half-formed glacier, succeeded. Each group of rocks which we surmounted we thought must be the Col, but, as usual, we found another set still to be mastered. At 7 A.M. we topped the last, and found ourselves on some broad flat slabs of rock, forming the Col de Crête Sèche, 9475 feet high.

It was well defined as a Col, for to the west ran up a ridge of serrated rocks towards the snow-slopes of Mont Gélé beyond, whilst to the east a shorter chain ended in a slope of the Trouma de Boucs. From our feet, northwards, stretched the Glacier de Crête Sèche, or d'Ayas, bordered on the east by the Trouma de Boucs, and on the west by the Pointe d'Ayas, a group of black rock, apparently connected with the Gélé by an impassable arête. Below the bounding ranges the glacier joined the magnificent Glacier de Chermontane, or d'Otemma, running up, north-east, to an immense distance. On the north side of it stood out the Pic d'Otemma. Mr. King rightly con-

jectured that "this pass must be a noble one, considering the splendid view it must afford of the very heart of the glaciers of Chermontane."

We remained on the Col an hour, examining these points of the "High-Level" route, and discussing the best way of attacking the Gélé. Seen from here, it presented two peaks hanging precipitously over the glacier. Between these ran up a magnificent ice couloir, the upper part of which was hidden by a projection of the nearest peak. At first sight, this couloir seemed to offer a possible, though difficult, mode of getting, at any rate, some way up the mountain, but on moving farther round towards the Trouma, we saw that it became impracticable. The only feasible plan appeared to be to follow the ridge to the west, ascend thence to the snow-slopes of the Glacier de la Balme behind the first peak, and then see if we could pass up them to the actual summit.

Dismissing the native, we started along the rocks; but as we were on the side to which the sun had less access, we found them so coated with ice that, after some step-cutting, Michel and I preferred going down to the ice-slope at their base, and cutting our way along it. We soon had enough of this also, so we descended on to the Glacier d'Ayas, though it involved a considerable loss of level; for, after crossing the head of the glacier, we had of course to mount the snow-slope again to our former altitude. Meanwhile Jean continued along the rocks, sending down showers of huge stones, which we had to dodge in the best way we could, hurling up meanwhile anathemas at him, of which he, of course, took not the slightest notice: he certainly had the best of the game. At times we lost sight of him, and could not hear the sound of his axe. He had got so far that he was obliged to go forwards, and hence, notwithstanding our détour, we reached the edge of the snow-field of the Glacier de la Balme as soon as he did.

This we now began to cross, keeping up as much to the north of west as we could. Eventually we rounded the first peak, and saw there was nothing but a huge crevasse cutting us off from the actual summit. This crevasse was a long way above, but we ploughed steadily up towards it. There was no difficulty: it was simply a grind, the snow being deep, and now soft with the sun. On reaching the edge of the crevasse or bergschrund, we followed up its side until we found a practicable snow-bridge, by which we gained its upper lip. A short stiff rise, a few steps cut, and we were on the summit of the Mont Gélé, 11,539 feet high, and, as its name implies, a small dome of ice-coated snow, wreathed up by the wind into a cornice. Twenty feet below us to the east was a group of rocks overhanging the couloir observed from the Col, and supporting the edge of the snow-slope, which, breaking away, displayed a wondrous ice-cavern, glittering in ethereal blue as the melting drops fell from its pendent icicles. On the farther side of the couloir was the first seen peak, whilst on the Col de Fenêtre side, the actual summit on which we were, fell off into a ridge, ending in a third and lower peak.

It was 11 A. M. Scarcely a breath of wind was perceptible, and the sky was without a cloud, and of that intense black-blue colour so peculiarly the property of Alpine regions. We descended to the rocks, and remained there two hours, in enjoyment of the superb view around us. Right in the centre of this wondrous ice-country, and of the "High Level" route, as we were, it was indeed a glorious scene. On either hand the whole Pennine chain from Mont Blanc to Monte Rosa was spread out before us: to tell the numberless well-known peaks and points would be endless. The Graffeneire appeared different from any aspect in which I had previously seen it. Under it lay the Durand glacier, which looked quite as practicable, as

an integral part of the route, as when I had been on its head a few days previously.

Creeping cautiously to the edge of the rocks, they were found to be an absolute precipice overhanging the glacier below. From it stretched up to the north-east the grand Glacier de Chermontane or d'Otemma. Beyond this again rose up the Mont Collon. Mr. Tuckett's previous passage of this glacier, as a part of the route, had established the fact, that there was no such barrier at its head as the Crête à Collon, marked on Studer's map, and the present view confirmed the non-existence of such obstruction, or as Mr. Cowell calls it, Mr. Tuckett's "slaughtered foe."

To the south were the Grivola and other peaks of the Graian Alps, and amongst them, to the east, was a giant, which I made out to be the Grand Paradis.

At noon, with a temperature of 12° Cent., or 53° Fahr., my black-bulb thermometer rose, after three minutes' exposure, to 37° Cent., or 98° Fahr. We built up a well of stones between two of the huge slabs of rock, and covered the aperture with a flat stone, previously depositing therein a minimum thermometer, marked "Alpine Club, No. 384," together with accompanying bottle and register paper, for registry of the thermometer by any future traveller. The requisite notice of its position was posted up at Aosta and other convenient places. When deposited, the actual temperature had risen to 14° Cent., or 57° Fahr.

That this part of the chain is little known may be inferred from the fact, that during the day we saw no less than six different groups of chamois, one herd alone comprising seven of those graceful animals. Whilst we were seated on the rocks, deeply immersed in an attack on the contents of the provision knapsack, three chamois emerged from below on to the top of the couloir. They were not five yards from us when they halted, apparently

quite unconscious of the presence of their enemy, man. It was evident, however, from the nervous motion of eye and nostril, that they had already detected all was not right. They were quickly satisfied on that head; for, before I could restrain Jean and Michel, they were on their legs, hurling down huge stones after the chamois (now rapidly vanishing down the couloir and rocks), and shrieking out yells and whistling, which sounded almost unearthly in the hitherto solemn silence around. Talk about the excitement of the hunter, sportsman, or gorilla capturer — it was nothing to that of these two men at finding their favourite game so unexpectedly close to them. They acted like madmen, and I was half apprehensive that, in their excitement, they would throw themselves over the rocks after the chamois, which we shortly afterwards saw galloping over the glacier below us, and taking the crevasses in the most approved style.

At 1 P.M. we commenced descending rapidly in a south-westwardly direction towards the route to the Col de Fenêtre. Traversing the farther side of the snow-field, and Glacier de la Balme, up which we had ascended, we had an occasional jolly little glissade. The usual rocks, bits of glacier, villanous moraine, and mountain-slopes, succeeded. At 2.30 P.M. we reached the lower part of the Col de Fenêtre, and turned round to look at the Mont Gélé before we left him. This is so well described by Mr. King that I must borrow his description. He says, "The scenery continually increased in wildness and grandeur. On our right, Mont Gélé rose almost perpendicularly, like the face of a rift pyramid, its summit backed up behind by a continuation of the chain, a ridge of savage aiguilles stretching down to Valpelline. On a lofty cornice of this dark range overhung the glacier of La Balme, at a vast height above us, streaming down from behind Mont Gélé

and showing its igneous mass literally, as it is crushed up against the base of the fold, igneous which rise above it. Another small granite share part of the same shelf; and the specimens presented by the two handed up by the black craggy ridge behind is one of the most singular granite stones I ever saw. M. de Orléans seen from this point is a wondrously grand and few of the minor peaks of the Pennine range can compare with its shape and snowy form." And describing its aspect from the Chermouline side he adds: "The face is so short & descent from its left summit, that the snow only adheres in fringed sheets, so called with the parallel furrows made by falling fragments from above." Professor Forbes also speaks of this side of M. de Orléans as "almost too steep to bear snow, presenting a perfect ridge of pyramical alps, that stretching towards Valpelline."

Turning in the steam, we passed the little lake and the chalets de la Balme, joined our former route from the Col de Sion, and passed through Villeneuve and Valpelline, and during the lower road reached Aosta at 7.15 P.M. At Valpelline the natives expressed themselves much delighted at our success and safe return, and I left Jean and Michel here, using the evening with the usual quietness.

On reaching Aosta I was glad to find Mr. Mathews sufficiently recovered to attack the Great Alps, which we accordingly did the following morning.

and showing its gigantic mass laterally, as it is crushed up against the base of the bold *aiguilles* which rise above it. Another small glacier shares part of the same shelf; and the spectacle presented by the two, backed up by the black craggy ridge behind, is one of the most singular glacier scenes I ever saw. Mont Gélé, seen from this point, is wonderfully grand, and few of the minor peaks of the Pennine range can compare with its unique and stately form." And, describing its aspect from the Chermontane side, he adds, "The face is so sheer a descent from its cleft summit, that the snow only adheres in frosted sheets, scored with the parallel furrows made by falling fragments from above." Professor Forbes also speaks of this side of Mont Géle as "almost too steep to bear snow, presenting a perfect ridge of pyramidal *aiguilles*, stretching towards Valpelline."

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