

FIRST ASCENTS OF THE AIGUILLE DE BLAITIÈRE, AND OF THE DENT BLANCHE FROM ZERMATT. By E. R. WHITWELL. Read before the Alpine Club, May 2nd, 1876.

THE month of August, 1874, was a most discouraging time for mountaineers, as the weather was made up of a succession of heavy falls of snow, with interludes of only a day or two of sunshine, which did not leave time for the snow to be melted off the rocks before the recurrence of another storm. Snow mountains and most passes no doubt could have been done, but there happened to be none of these on my Chamonix programme; and when in despair of other work I agreed to accompany two young friends of mine in an attack on Mont Blanc, we were driven back by a perfect hurricane of wind, at least a variation on the monotonous snow storms which usually pursued us on the morning following a bivouac!

I was, however, accompanied by my wife and another lady, so that during the three weeks we spent in the Chamonix neighbourhood time did not pass so heavily as it otherwise would, as there were many excursions to be made with them, and we varied the proceedings by staying nearly a week at the 'Montanvert,' and very comfortable for such a hovel the people made us.

Certainly to enjoy the beauties of the view from this place, unexcelled, in my opinion, if equalled, by that from any other of the mountain inns, you should pass a few days on the spot; and though you must not expect there the luxuries of the best Parisian hotels, you will find the place comparatively clean, and the people most anxious to please and oblige.

It was whilst we were staying at the Montanvert, and as Christian Lauener and I were returning from the glacier after taking stock of the Aiguille du Dru, and finding it in appearance much easier than we expected, that we met Mr. Morshead, who was trying to get an appetite for his dinner by an afternoon stroll from Chamonix, and finding that he and his party (Messrs. Mathews and Wilson) intended to try the Blaitière, we agreed to join forces and make the attack together.

Our plan, however, came to grief, owing to the usual snow storm; and a day or two afterwards I received a note from Mr. Morshead saying that they were tired of inaction, and were going to flee to other climes by a series of passes, on which

they would be comparatively independent of the weather, and that therefore I was to make my plans without reference to them.

Our first attempt on the Blaitière was on August 5, but we did not get more than half way through the pine woods before a heavy-looking morning gave place to a warm soaking rain, which drove us back to our beds before Chamonix was fairly awake. The afternoon improved, however, and the morning of the 6th was as clear and fine as could be wished, so we (i. e., Christian Lauener, his son Johann, acting as porter, and I) left the 'Hôtel des Alpes' at 3.15, and after about two and a half hours' walking through the pine woods and over the grassy slopes beyond found ourselves on the Glacier des Nantillons. After three-quarters of an hour's steady progress up the glacier, we reached a point where it is partially divided by a transverse barrier of rocks over which it plunges, thus forming on the right a wall of ice, flanked, however, on the left by rocks which extend to its upper level or *névé*.

Before ascending further we breakfasted and put on the rope, so that it was 7 o'clock when we were again under way. The small interval of glacier between us and the rocks caused us a most disproportionate amount of trouble and step-cutting, and the loss of half an hour of valuable time. Once on the rocks, however, 20 mins. sufficed to bring us to the upper glacier. Here we turned to the right, and for some little way found no difficulty till we came to a large crevasse which had to be crossed by cutting down one side till a step could be hewn in the other, up which a corresponding staircase had to be made. All this occupied considerable time, so that it was nearly 9.30 before we reached a col (3,265 mètres) between the Blaitière and the Charmoz, and near the latter peak.

On my remarking how easy of access the Charmoz looked, Christian said we might try it if I liked, and we should get so far—as far as the spot he and Mr. Stephen had reached the previous year, and then—then we should come back! It seems there is not much difficulty till within 50 ft. of the top, which rises quite perpendicularly. This, however, is a digression, and we did not spend all the half-hour we remained on the col in discussing the Charmoz, as we had still our work before us.

The Blaitière had two distinct peaks nearly facing us where we sat, with a blue ice-slope leading from our view-point to the gap between them—that on the left being the highest, and the other the one ascended by Mr. Kennedy, on which we could see his stoneman. It certainly looked the higher of the

two, and thinking that the highest of all might be hidden, we determined to ascend it first, and then take our bearings.

The ice-slope which I mentioned was flanked on the left by rocks coming down nearly to the *schrund*. A quarter of an hour's step-cutting brought us to them, and 50 mins. more to a little summit, from which a narrow *arête*, partly snow but chiefly ice, led to Mr. Kennedy's peak, branching off in the middle by a similar but shorter ridge to, what proved to be, the real summit. It took us 25 mins. to traverse this crest, and as much longer to get up the easy rocks of Mr. Kennedy's peak, the top of which was gained at 12.0.

We now saw that the peak we had passed was clearly the highest, and that we should have to retrace our steps. It was a very curiously-shaped summit, presenting the appearance of a heap of large boulders piled on one another, which seemed, from our view-point, to have most unpleasantly smooth surfaces. It might be ascended from the side we were looking at (the NW.), which was the most obvious and direct line of attack, if there was a way at all in that direction; but we concluded that Mr. Kennedy would have been sure to make the attempt, so we decided to 'flee to other (ills) that we knew not of,' and try it from the opposite quarter.

At 12.30, therefore, we left our first peak, and in half an hour had traversed the *arête* and were fairly committed to the final rocks. We got on swimmingly at first, having passed round from the NW. to the S. or SE. face, partly by a kind of ledge, and partly by climbing the rocks diagonally; but at length we came to what appeared a stopper. The rock seemed to have divided at some time, leaving a horizontal cleft of some



feet in depth and height, with the face up which we wished to go overhanging. Christian shook his head and said it was 'finished.' I suggested he should make a trial from A, and Johann and I would use our axes to help him up to a slight cleft at B, up which he might work himself to a ledge C. He answered that as I was the lighter man I might try what I could do from his shoulders, and if I did not succeed we should have to look for some other way. From this vantage ground I was able to get my hands and part of my body into the cleft, and Chris-

tian's axe helped me so much further that I got my feet in also, and then he cheered me by saying that he could do nothing more for me, as I was out of reach, but that I was

not to be 'rash.' The wriggling up this cleft was a desperate struggle; and the view at the corner round which I finally had to twist myself, a sloping ledge of rock, beneath which I could see the Glacier du Géant, or some unnamed tributary to it, pleasantly basking in the sunshine beneath without apparently anything between myself and it, was of the most approved sensational order. Of course I was roped, but I find it makes some difference in such places if the person holding the rope is about 30 ft. beneath you instead of above! However, the difficulty was surmounted at last, and as, so far as I could see, there was nothing to prevent our further progress, I holloa'd for Christian to follow, and placed the rope over a corner, by which I was able to give him the needful assistance—Johann, poor boy, 'giving a back' to his father, who is no light weight, but not assisting so effectually as I had been helped, seeing that he is only about half his father's height! However, the rope more than counterbalanced this defect, though I am afraid, when Christian asked me if I was 'ganz fest,' I rather exaggerated the security of my position, the fact being that if he had *really slipped* he would have swung outwards and the rope must have glanced off the narrow ledge over which it was placed, and—this paper would not have been written! But of such a slip I had no fear with Christian. On his joining me, he again took the lead; Johann we left below, as his father justly said his legs were too short for the kind of work we had just done.

Our difficulties were not yet over. The peak proved its resemblance to a pile of boulders more than ever now, as about perhaps 30 ft. from the top Christian had to clear away some débris, and we crawled through a hole under a big rock which seemed to take us from one side of the mountain to the other. But my memory may be rather hazy here, as the excitement at getting near the summit was too great to let me see on which side I was looking. After emerging from underground we found a boulder blocking up a cleft of a few feet leading nearly to the top, and this time Christian got on to my shoulders, and very heavy I found him! Indeed I may safely say that this acrobatic form of mountaineering is much pleasanter in retrospect than at the moment! One minute more and we were on the summit, which really is, as it looks from below, a huge block, with no loose stones about such as one usually finds, so that in order to build our cairn I had to go down about 10 ft. and tie stones to the rope for Christian to construct it with.

Thus ended the hardest and most exciting rock-climb I have ever had, and yet it is rather sad to think what a small height

the final peak must be, as in spite of our difficulties we were only $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hr. from the snow to the top, which we reached at 1.45 P.M.

The view was really unique, as we seemed quite surrounded by strange pinnacles of rock—one especially, on the opposite side of the small glacier flowing into that of the Géant, rose up to a great height above the general level in immense joints like a truly *Giant* column of the Giant's Causeway, looking as if it must rock to and fro in every gale, till it threw itself bodily on to the glacier beneath.

We spent 20 minutes on the top, and 40 minutes sufficed to bring us clear of the final rocks, which we found fairly easy in descent, as we were able to let ourselves down by the rope in the two difficult places. We hardly stopped at all on our way down to Chamonix, except for half an hour to chip off the crystals which we found in great abundance, and nearly an equal amount of time admiring our stoneman, which we were glad to find was quite visible through a glass from the col near the Charmoz.

It was 7.30, just too late for table-d'hôte, when we reached our hotel. Our worthy host was much excited at the success of our expedition, and surprised us by letting off fireworks and burning red and blue lights for the rest of the evening. This seems to be a playful habit they have in Chamonix, though I thought it was generally reserved for celebrating the arduous ascent of Mont Blanc; but if it is still the custom, now that the 'Monarch' is so often bearded, the expenditure in fireworks must be considerable.

I cannot leave Chamonix without saying a word in praise of the 'Hôtel des Alpes.' I have never tried the rival hotel of M. Couttet, so cannot make comparison between them; but I can speak highly of the comfort of this hotel, and of the attention of the host, who is quite a character. It is really as good as a play to see the excitement he is in on the arrival of any new guests, and the way in which he leaps on to the carriage box to bear them off to one of his numerous pensions, if, as usual, the hotel itself happens to be full. If, as from my experience is the case, the weather in Chamonix is all but invariably bad, any source of amusement is a decided pull!

After leaving Chamonix we went to Zermatt, and had a very perilous drive over the Tête Noire—perilous inasmuch as the mules we had hired to take us over had evidently not been used to collar work, and evinced an objectionable wish to go close to the outer edge of the road; and the old man who drove them having a most foggy idea of his office, it was rather

a wonder we did not roll down the embankment at one or other of the sharp curves! The weather was very fine till we got to Zermatt, when, the same evening, came the inevitable snow storm! The following afternoon, however, looked more promising; and as Christian said he thought the Dent Blanche could be ascended from the Zermatt side by a glacier which he had noticed when on the Matterhorn with me two years before, which seemed to lead up very high on to the mountain, we started for our bivouac, having a very hazy idea where we should fix our tent. We kept for some distance on the path by which you go when wishing to cross the Col Durand, leaving the Zmutt glacier on the left, and after following this track some distance we turned off to the right, up most abominable grass-slopes, towards a small rocky peak, which I should think is the Ebihorn, and on reaching the rocks followed them to nearly the top; but the evening was closing in with a thick fog, and such bad appearances generally, that we chose a suitable place for our camping-ground without having seen in what direction our mountain lay. We were on the rocks at the edge of, and about half way up a fine icefall of some glacier (ultimately proved to be the Hohwäng), which we imagined flowed from the Dent Blanche, but we subsequently found this was not the case.

We had hardly got our tent pitched before rain came on, and the following morning was as bad as the appearance of the evening had led us to fear. We started in good time, however, and got nearly to the top of the Ebihorn before we touched the glacier above the icefall. Here nothing could be seen except ice and mist, and though we waited a couple of hours in the hope of the latter clearing away, our patience was not rewarded, and we had to retrace our steps without having even *seen* the mountain we had come to conquer! We left our tent at the sleeping place to be used when the weather chose to mend its courses, thereby evincing a sublime faith that did not fail of its reward.

Next morning showed us fresh snow on the mountains, so we had to loaf about Zermatt, listening to the chaff of Almer and Melchior, neither of whom believed in the feasibility of our proposed route; but the day became fine and clear, so on that following (August 20) we again made a start, leaving Zermatt in the morning, as we wanted to have plenty of time for examining the mountain that evening.

Something under four hours' actual walking brought us to the glacier which we had previously reached, and we were surprised to find that it did not flow from the Dent Blanche at all, though

we could just see the top of that peak over a ridge of rocks forming its western boundary. An hour's walking across the ice brought us on to these, and we then found ourselves looking down steep rocks upon the Schönbühl glacier, perhaps about 800 ft. beneath us. The Dent Blanche rose up grandly directly in front of us, chiefly rock, with here and there snow couloirs, and I think three comparatively horizontal snow ledges, zigzagging into one another on the lower half of the mountain. On our right (E. of the summit) the glacier rose to the *arête*, and it was up this that Christian had calculated on forcing a way. The first glance, however, showed us that this was out of the question, as the upper portion was completely cut off from the lower by a wall of ice. We therefore turned eagerly to the face of the mountain, which looked anything but encouraging. As stated above, there were three nearly horizontal ledges of snow, and there seemed little doubt that, supposing we could ever get on to the first, and it should prove to be really snow, and *not ice*, our success was pretty certain. The question was how to get on to the lowest of these, as it seemed completely cut off from the glacier by smooth black cliffs of considerable height. Only at one place, on the W. of the mountain, was there any chance, as here a tongue of glacier approached the snow-belt pretty closely; but the rocks between, though not so steep as elsewhere, looked very rounded and smooth, and we felt far from confident of success.

Our descent on to the Schönbühl glacier was by steep rocks, with one ice couloir to cross, and from some cause or other we omitted to put on the rope. It would have been a wise precaution had we done so, especially as we were all so heavily weighted, I carrying not only my own knapsack, but the provisions for that night and the following day. I had rather a narrow escape at one of the steepest places, as a rock of which I had hold, and on which I was leaning a good deal of my weight, gave way, and it was with some difficulty that I kept my balance. Of course the height from the glacier was only a few hundred feet, still the sensation to oneself would not be vastly different if one were to descend quickly through space for that distance from what it would be were the fall ten times as great.

On reaching the level of the glacier we traversed it for a few hundred yards to the smallest moraine (if it was a moraine) I ever saw. It certainly was not more than fifty yards long by ten wide, but it was too far removed from the cliffs we had descended for it to have been formed of stones from them—indeed we took care to see that we were safely out of range of the continual cannonade they kept up.

We made the floor of our tent as comfortable as circumstances would permit by laying together as evenly as possible all the flattest stones we could find; still when all was done our bed was not so soft as if it had been made of feathers! Bitterly cold, too, we found it before morning, and we were up and preparing breakfast long before there was any possibility of our being able to start. 4.20 saw us fairly off, and 40 min. took us across the glacier and up the steep tongue of ice which we had noticed the previous evening; but, contrary to our fears, we experienced no difficulty in getting on to the rocks, which proved perfectly easy; so, instead of keeping to the first horizontal snow ledge, we crossed it and kept to the rocks till the second ledge was reached at 6.30. [I had almost forgotten to record the important fact that at 5.30 we stopped for half an hour for breakfast, and what Alpine paper would be complete which omitted such an indispensable particular?] This snow ledge lay at a high angle, and was hard enough to require the axe to be put in use; but we were obliged to follow it for a considerable distance, as the rocks above were smooth and utterly impracticable. We then struck directly up the face of the mountain, keeping rather to our right all the way, and crossing two or three ridges of rock, which the snow made difficult in places. Still of this we could not complain, as, had it not been there, what was now snow in other places would have been ice, and the mountain hopelessly unassailable. At 8.30 we made our second halt of half an hour for another breakfast; and when we started I relieved Johann of the provision-knapsack, as the continued steep ascent was rather trying; at the same time I must say that, though he is little more than a boy, he walks as strongly as any guide or porter I have been with. The sun had already considerable effect on the snow, and being only a few inches thick on the ice (in some places not more than three or four), it was rather apt to give way and go down with a run, so that some care had to be used. As yet we could see nothing of the top, but Christian led with unerring skill, till at length we saw the flag some 500 ft. above us, with only a few broken rocks between us and it. It was precisely where he expected it would be; and it speaks most highly for his skill that he should have hit it off so exactly, as the final ridge seemed, from where we were, to be nearly level. Of course we wished to reach the summit from the S. (or SE.?) face on which we were, without first touching the *arête*, so as to make the ascent without using any part of the route followed when starting from the Evolena side.

At 10.40 we stood on the top, and were rewarded by a glo-

rious view, which I shall not attempt to describe, as it has been spoken of more than once in these pages; but our old friends the Matterhorn and Weisshorn looked every inch the king and queen of mountains, beside which the Dent Blanche is a fitting emperor. We spent rather more than half an hour on the summit, smoking the pipe of peace, and seriously discussing the desirability of descending by the ordinary route instead of by that we had discovered, as we by no means relished the prospect of having to traverse ice-slopes so thinly covered with snow, a state of things which the sun was every moment making more hazardous. However, the fact that the expedition from the Zermatt side would be only half completed if we did not go back the same way decided us to make the attempt; so at 11.5 we began to retrace our steps. The rocks close to the top are, I think, the rottenest and most trying-to-the-tempered (to coin an adjective) that it has ever been my lot to be on, as, take what care you will, they break away about every other step; and fortunate it is that there is no danger except to the temper and garments.

I will not weary my readers with a minute account of the descent. The snow was quite as bad as we had feared, and required the utmost care; and without such a most exceptionally favourable day as ours was, I think the descent could hardly be made in safety. From our second breakfast place to the top had occupied us 1 hr. 40 m. Coming down took us 10 m. longer, though in neither case did we ever stop a minute. Johann led all the way down, and I cannot speak too highly of the care and steadiness with which he went—indeed, he was so very careful that I grew rather tired of the slow progress we were making, and got justly snubbed by Christian when I gave expression to my feelings.

The risk from stones and avalanches, at any rate during the descent, must be always great on this side of the mountain, especially when going along the snow ledge under the wall of rock mentioned before. A stone came within about 6 inches of my head with the speed of a cannon-ball, and a little further on a (fortunately) small snow avalanche passed between Johann and me, just catching Johann and taking him off his legs down the slope. However, he was soon pulled up again, none the worse—indeed somewhat improved, as it decreased the care with which he placed each foot before moving the next, and thus enabled us to make a little faster progress, the necessity for which that very avalanche had rendered apparent.

At 3.50 we reached the glacier, having never stopped except for half an hour's luncheon, and here we remained 10 m.; and

25 m. more brought us to our last night's bivouac. About half an hour sufficed to pack up our belongings, and then, instead of returning by the way we had come the previous day, we descended by the Schönbühl glacier to its junction with the Zmutt, which we followed till it led us into the track from the Col Durand. It took us 3 hrs. 40 m., walking without a single halt, to get to Zermatt, which we reached at 8.40; but during the latter part of the way we could only go slowly, owing to the darkness, so I have no doubt it is a quicker route than that taken on the previous day, which had occupied 6 hrs. walking (but uphill) exclusive of halts.

I am sorry I am unable from personal experience to compare this route with the usual one from the Evolena side, as I have not made the ascent by that way; but Christian's opinion is that the new route has the questionable advantage of being more dangerous, and the decided pull in being shorter and more direct from a chief mountaineering centre like Zermatt. The chief disadvantage, leaving sleeping quarters out of the question, is that, except in perfect weather, and with exactly the right amount of snow, I think the expedition could not be made without great risk. I should recommend anyone wishing to try it to do so when there is a good deal of snow on the mountains, for if *it is in good order*, I believe any reasonable amount would only make the ascent at least, the easier; whilst with no snow it would be simply impossible, owing to the number of ice-steps that would be required. There is no doubt that the day of our expedition was as favourable as possible, as the snow of two days before was compacted and well frozen; there was enough of it to enable us to get on as a rule without cutting steps in the ice beneath, and yet not so much as to come down with a run.

A TOUR IN THE ALPS IN 1800. Edited by the Rev. J. Sowerby.

DURING the summer of 1875, when travelling in Switzerland, I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a gentleman and his wife who were following the course of a tour made by his father, then a young man of 20 years, in the year 1800, in the hope of finding in the visitors' books at the hotels some record of his passage; but no entry was to be found of an earlier date than 1824. On his return to England he was kind enough to send me the manuscript account of his father's tour, of which the following is a brief summary. It extends to 170 closely written pages, besides a chapter on the natural history and productions of Switzerland. Though containing various invocations of Nature, Freedom, and Solitude, and other reflections written in the inflated