Across the Border; some Side Valleys of the Val Pelline.

By C. G. MONRO.

(Read before the Alpine Club March 7, 1893.)

AFTER reading Mr. Conway's account of 'Exhausted Districts,' it occurred to me that there were many interesting details to be filled up in the outline which he gave, and therefore I cannot lay claim to much originality in the expeditions I shall describe.

The districts mentioned in his paper which attracted me most were Val d'Ollomont and Val Cournera, and I made up my mind to visit them as soon as I could.

The frontier dividing the Swiss and Italian portions of the Pennine Alps is more than the boundary line between the two States. For the Swiss side is well known to almost all, but there are not so many who cross the border to the no less beautiful valleys on the Italian side. Hence the title of this paper.

In January 1891 I was for a short time at Evolena, and I broached the subject to Antoine Bovier, the guide with whom most of my Alpine work has been done, and I found he entered heartily into my plans. After my return home he wrote, volunteering to go over to Val d'Ollomont early in the summer to prospect. I of course replied, 'By all means go,' and in June 1891 I received his report, which was to the effect that at By we should find a lodging 'si non confortable, au moins supportable,' that the range on the S.E. of the valley was 'un vrai mur de rochers,' and that we should have our work cut out for us.

I had by this time secured as a companion Mr. O. G. Jones, who has not only helped me in writing this paper, but has prepared the sketches to illustrate it.

On September 4, 1891, we left Arolla feeling sad, for the previous evening, at table d'hôte, we had seen a dreadful sight, in the shape of an individual, of the male sex moreover, in full evening dress. The significance of this incident was enforced by the recollection that the last time I had fed at that table I was clad in a somewhat airy costume consisting chiefly of stockings and mackintosh.

It seems, therefore, that a fresh danger, as well as drains and brigands, threatens those who frequent this hospitable inn.

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At Mauvoisin we encountered three villainous days. Then, however, the clerk of the weather recovering his temper at the loss of ours, there followed a fortnight of exceptional clearness.

Knowing that we should be unable to procure meat at By, I had brought with me tinned provisions for four days ; but not having experience in matters of this kind, I had invested in nothing more varied than beef and sardines. For this ignorance I paid the price later on.

Our party, consisting of our two selves with Bovier and Pierre Gaspoz, were accordingly somewhat heavily laden on our passage over the Col de Fenêtre, but we found that the fairer sex were able to convey, without any visible means of porterage, much greater loads. At the summit of the pass we perceived a woman sitting surrounded by a perfect mountain of sacks. On investigation it appeared that this was sugar, which was in process of being smuggled into Italy, and very soon we met crowds of people hastening up to participate in the spoil.

Val d'Ollomont lies, as you all know, at the S. foot of the Grand Combin. On the N.W. it is bounded by the Aiguilles de Valsorey, which are almost fantastic in appearance, the Trois Frères being just like a ruined castle, from which there runs N. a long ruined wall. Then comes Mt. Percé, with a great hole in it, and then Mr. Carr's Aiguilles de Luisettes.*

On the N. are the peaks forming the S. lateral boundary of the Sonadon and Mt. Durand glaciers. On the S.E. side is a range with four named points, of which Mr. Conway says :—'After seeing both faces of this range, we are not surprised to hear that all the peaks on it are still unclimbed,' and I heartily agree with him. I have rarely seen such vertical precipices or such splintered ridges.

After descending to the Alp di Balme we traversed the hillside to the Alp de By, our temporary abode. This alp is a very large establishment, almost a village, and from the fact that the huts are built of stone, it has an air of solidity lacking in the wooden châlets on the other side of the frontier.

Some days before I had sent a post-card to the 'patron,' by name Alexis Ansermain, and we were most hospitably received.

We were first conducted to the main apartment, in which an all-pervading bovine odour was present, which was not

* *Alpine Journal*, vol. xv. p. 301.

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wonderful, inasmuch as through the extensive chinks in the flooring the backs of the cows could easily be seen.

At one end, unlighted by any window, one could perceive dim outlines of beds and hanging garments, and my soul revolted somewhat at the thought of having to sleep there; but no, a separate room was provided, with two bedsteads, plenty of hay, blankets, and—wonder of wonders—clean sheets. There was only one drawback to our room, and that was that somewhere in the immediate vicinity the cheeses were stored. Now there was only one aperture—namely, a door about 3 ft. 6 in. high—which was kept locked while we were out, and when this was opened on our return each afternoon it was a case of 'letting loose the Gorgonzola,' and we had to retire for a brief season till the flood had abated.

On the evening of our arrival cups, plates, and forks were fetched up from Ollomont, so that we were really very fairly comfortable. The situation of By is admirable. It lies in a beautiful grassy basin, surrounded by mountains of surpassing grandeur, and southwards the eye travels down to the haze indicating the Val d'Aosta, and is then caught by the pyramid of the Grivola, which to my mind looks best from this point of view. The beautiful curve of its northern ridge shows up so well, both in the morning and evening lights.

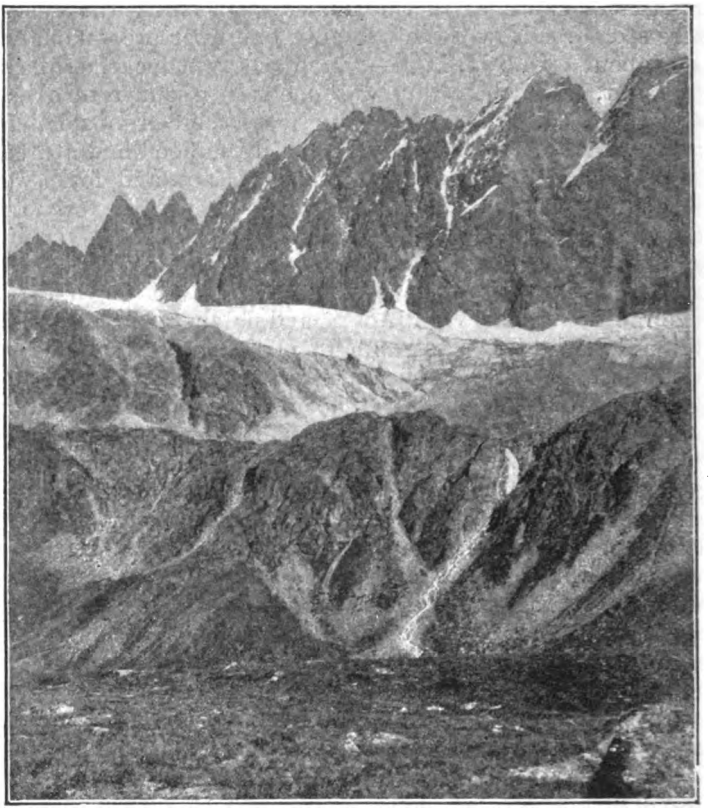
Just above the huts is a grassy plâteau, where we used to smoke the post-prandial pipe and gloat over the wonderful scenery. In this way the clangour of innumerable cow-bells was removed to a suitable distance. By the way, the cows of By resemble rabbits—not in appearance, but owing to the fact that they live in burrows, from which they emerge towards evening in swarms. If they all belong to old Ansermain he must be pretty well off.

Our sleep that night was not very good, chiefly owing to the strangeness of our abode; but during the whole of our stay we were not disturbed by any nocturnal visitants such as we expected.

The first peak we turned our attention to was the Trois Frères, and on September 8 we started to survey it. The face turned towards By looks perfectly impracticable, and its S. ridge does not look inviting, so we crossed the grassy ridge to the south of it, and came on a party of chamois hunters lying on their faces at the edge of a cliff ranging the rocks beneath with an old telescope. They told us in hushed tones that they had had their shot and missed. On our way up to the Col de Valsorey, however, we came on great drops and splashes of blood, and shortly

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afterwards espied a number of chamois almost on the top of the Trois Frères. They made for the summit by the S. arête, and seemed to regard that route as affording an 'interesting scramble.' The guides are both keen sportsmen, and we were soon sorry that such a thing as a chamois ever existed. It was with great difficulty that we managed to drag them away from the blood-track.



BEC DE FAUDERY, FROM HEAD OF VAL D'OLLOMONT.

The W. side of the Trois Frères does not look much more inviting than the other. Everywhere there are great vertical slabs, and every route we suggested was scoffed at by the guides, though I still hold to a theory of my own, which, however, I think I shall keep dark for the present.

Accordingly, we postponed the Trois Frères, and 'ridge-

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wandered' S.W. from the Col de Valsorey over Mte Cordina (where to our great disgust we found Mr. Leaf's cairn), and the Tête de Cordon. We then found a somewhat circuitous route through the crevasses which exist in the broad gap between the Tête de Cordon and the next point on the ridge, which we have named Tête d'Ariondet. The slopes of this peak are everywhere very steep, and the summit-ridge was very sharp and corniced, so we had to be careful. Just at the W. end of the ridge were two little snow-pinnacles, one of which was the actual summit, and this we proudly ascended. The next point to the W. is only the gable end of the S. ridge of the Vélan. As we wished to have another look at the Trois Frères we returned to the Col de Valsorey, and again considered the question, but ultimately decided to try it another day, which, however, has not yet come. Next day we attempted Mt. Faudery, the most northerly of the points in the range on the S.E. side of the valley. Although we did not succeed, we saw enough to show us that some, at any rate, of the mountains in this region are, to use the words of the immortal Baedeker, 'difficult and even dangerous.' Starting by lamplight, we kept to the right from the Alp di Balme, and after crossing a most villainous moraine got on to the glacier and went to the foot of the mountain. Our plan had been to go up a gully just below the highest point and strike the ridge on the left of it high up. But the heap of stones at its foot, and the fact that they began to fall soon after five, warned us off, and we took to the rocks on the left. We were shortly forced on to the crest of the ridge, where at first the rocks were easy though very rotten. Soon we came to a real difficulty—a vertical slab some 16 ft. high, which had to be taken straight up. About 5 ft. from the base was a narrow crack, into which Bovier thrust his axe so that it stuck straight out. Using this as a horizontal bar he manœuvred himself on to it, but still could get no hold. It was evident that 2 or 3 ft. out of his reach was a handhold; the puzzle was how to get to it. A brilliant idea occurred to him which was immediately carried out. Jones and I handed flat stones to Gaspoz, who placed them on top of one another on that part of the axe touching the rock and held them there in position. During this proceeding Bovier stood on one toe further out on the axe. When a sort of cairn about 2 ft. high had in this way been erected he got on it and just reached the hold. It turned out a good one and he got up, how I don't quite know, for when my turn came I found it

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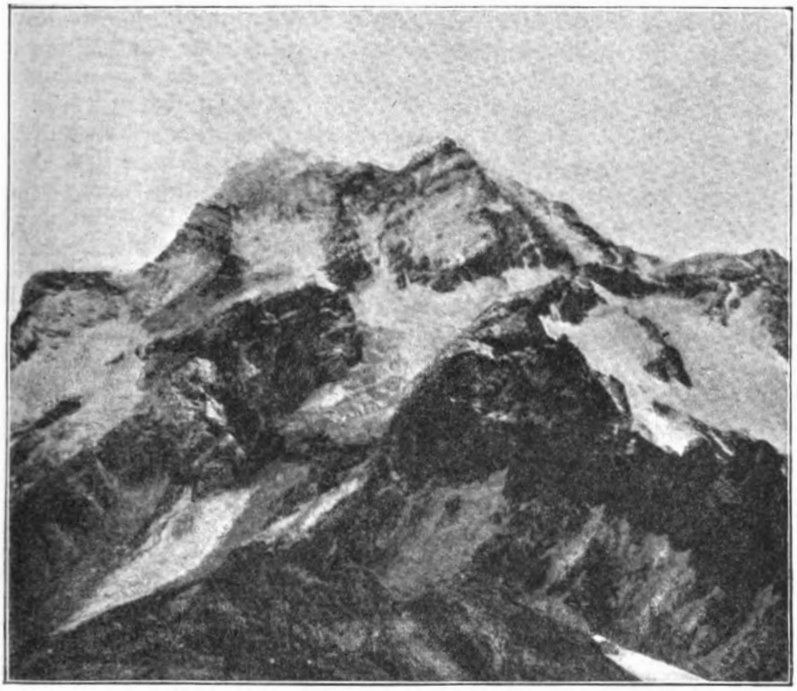
necessary to receive—well, much moral support from the rope.

After this the rocks became rotten and treacherous to a degree. Apparently sound, even when tested, they often gave way when one's weight was put on them, and we had one or two decidedly near shaves. On one occasion Bovier was leading up a small chimney. The rest of the party, who were in somewhat sheltered but decidedly insecure positions, were suddenly startled by the advent of a huge block, which burst like a shell in their midst, happily without doing any damage. Bovier explained, in a somewhat scared tone, that he had tried the thing carefully, and that it only gave way when he was half over it. He added that he almost came with it. If he had, I think we should have felt bound to accompany him. After three hours' climbing we were only about half-way up the ridge, and the rocks showed no signs of improvement, so after a heated discussion it was decided to turn back. We took 2½ hrs. to get off the rocks, and even then our troubles were not over, for to get off the glacier we had to cut down a steep ice slope, along the top of which was an array of boulders ready to topple over at a moment's notice. I am bound to say I was uncommonly glad when we got on to the moraine again, though the sensation of being under fire was no novelty by that time. Our return to By was on this occasion decidedly less triumphant than usual, and the inhabitants, for some reason best known to themselves, seemed to think they had scored a point. Perhaps this arose from the fact that they regarded us throughout as a set of undoubted, though perhaps harmless, lunatics.

The ascent of the Grand Combin had been one of the chief objects of our visit to Val d'Ollomont, and we had examined it from Mte Cordina. Bovier pointed out that although the ridge running up to the Aiguille du Croissant from the Glacier du Mt. Durand looked extremely easy, it had turned back all parties who had previously tried it. So we thought we would see what we could do, and next day we started at 4, and went almost straight up to the pass which Mr. Conway calls W. Col de By. On this day Nemesis overtook me. Sardines for breakfast, beef (tinned) for lunch, and an admixture of the two, by way of variety, for dinner, resulted in a complex physiological problem which, later in the day, I was obliged to sit down and work out. However, I managed to struggle on till the really interesting part, and then had to give in.

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From the W. Col de By we crossed the Glacier du Mt. Durand, and reached the foot of the great south-east ridge of the Grand Combin, up which we walked. It is not steep, and there is no climbing about it till near the top. On the way up we found an old rusty axe-point, showing that somebody had been there before us. At a height of something over 13,000 ft. I had to give in; the others were very unwilling to leave me, but as I was the medico of the



COMBIN FROM THE W.

party they had to obey orders. So they tied me to a rock, in case I should go to sleep and slide, and went on. The rest of the account is, of course, written by Jones.

'The snow slope wanted no more than a scrape of the axe for each step, and the diminished party rapidly moved upwards. The great obstruction up ahead looked bad enough from this side, and we all hoped that appearances would be more favourable when we turned the corner over to the left. But arriving at the top of the snow slope, we found ourselves at one end of a short sharp ridge leading

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straight to the middle of the face of the obstacle. Now this face had none of those pleasant irregularities of rock features that call for our admiration and caressing affection, and the snow ridge we all felt led to nowhere in particular. To turn off by the right appeared to be a hazardous undertaking with no prospect of a successful issue, for we had speculated on that right-hand face from below, as we toiled up the snow slope. The left-hand side looked rather worse, for the first slip would involve a preliminary drop of a hundred feet or so, as loose boulders testified. Bovier had been firing off remarks to Gaspoz in the vernacular tongue for some time, but was ominously silent as we cautiously crept along the ridge, just a few feet down on the left-hand side of its crest. Then we reached the wall of rock, and huddled up close together for a consultation. Bovier looked seriously at me, and said he thought we had better leave the thing alone. My reply was, "Think of our failure on Faudery yesterday," or words to that effect. I had no further share in the conversation that ensued, and didn't much mind, for Bovier began to make preparations for a departure round the corner to the left. He took about 40 ft. of rope, and descending a little, disappeared from sight. Then there arose much noise of falling stones, and I speculated on the stress produced on a rope by 10 stone falling 40 ft. Just when I began to think it time to return to Monro, Bovier shouted for me to come on. Gaspoz came close behind me, and we passed along a slippery ledge, applying ourselves closely to the face of rock at our right. It seems probable that the rock is usually glazed in certain parts, for water drips down from above in all directions, and the alternation of temperature gives a thin coating of wet ice.

'The ledge terminated at the foot of a 15-foot chimney, pleasing to behold after the open banded traverse. At the top of this chimney was Bovier seated, with a geniality of expression that gave us every hope. He swarmed up another similar chimney, just above, before we started up; then an animated conversation sprang up again between him and Gaspoz, and my happiness was complete. There was no mistaking the route when once the first chimney was climbed. Whether the chimneys were hard I don't know. Most things of the sort are easy if it is only a matter of following in the tracks of a leader. The whole rock climb lasted only about half an hour. At the top of the second it was necessary to traverse along the edge of a sloping slab, very like a roof, over towards the head of the rock overlooking

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our arête and the snow slope we had ascended. Then, moving towards the summit, we first passed ever the chimney stacks of the aforesaid roof, and then on to the snow above. The ridge remained of an interesting narrowness till a charmingly curved cornice was passed, and then gradually broadened out to the summit of the Combin. We had continually reverted in thought to Monro lying alone nearly a thousand feet below us, and felt bound to hurry back as soon as possible. So we made at once for the obstacle, and in about 20 minutes reached the snow ridge again. Then we tripped down lightheartedly to Monro, happy in the thought that he would not be called upon to return alone to By.'

The return route was the same as that of the ascent, and we reached By about 5 o'clock. Considering that we had gone very slowly, it is evident that the ascent of the Grand Combin could easily be made from By in about 7 hours. And in other ways the route is a good one, for it leads direct to the summit and is the best way to attack the mountain from Val de Bagnes.

A rather amusing incident connected with this ascent happened afterwards at Bourg St. Pierre. Bovier fell in with Ballay, and proceeded to 'draw' him. After getting out of him an admission that he had tried the ridge several times, and that he considered the rock near the top perfectly inaccessible, Bovier triumphantly told him that he had not found it at all inaccessible, having just made the ascent by this route. Ballay professed not to believe him, and proceeded to relate how he, with an English climber, whose name, as told me by Bovier, sounded like that of a former editor of the 'Alpine Journal,' had climbed all the four points of the Faudery ridge as well as the Trois Frères. Subsequent inquiries, however, have led me to believe that Ballay on this occasion was romancing.

Next day we said good-bye to Val d'Ollomont with some reluctance, tempered by the thought that we were also bidding adieu to a diet of tinned beef and sardines. At Val Pelline we hired the village machine, to use a Scotch expression, which in this case is much more descriptive of the reality than 'carriage,' and proceeded to Aosta. We were warned that the mule which drew the conveyance could only trot down hill, but no guarantee, written or other, was given that it would do that. How palatial the Hôtel du Mt. Blanc seemed after our late place of abode, and how we revelled in it! I do not know which is the more delight-

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ful—to cast off black coats and top hats, and live in a place where even washing is a perfectly unnecessary refinement, or to return from such a place to the luxuries of civilisation; but the combination of the two is perfection. The only danger is one into which we promptly fell—namely, that one is very apt to over-eat oneself.

The best way in future to reach By is undoubtedly from Aosta, from which provisions could be taken up, and even, perhaps, arrangements made for the supply of some fresh meat, &c. The beauty of the scenery and the good quality of the climbing combine to make Val d'Ollomont a very excellent *excursions-gebiet*, and, as we have shown practically, something more than a mere flying visit should be accomplished. And it possesses the advantage, now I should think almost unique, of being surrounded by at least seven unclimbed peaks.

As interesting as Val d'Ollomont is the head of the Val Pelline, also visited and described by Mr. Conway. Referring to a mountain situated near the head of the Val Pelline, he says that the point 3,355 metres at the very head of Val Cournera, which has been called Mt. Redessau, is not Mt. Redessau, but Dôme de Cian, and that the situation of the former was a mystery to him. Our idea was to do what we could towards solving the mystery.

The party was the same as in the previous year, with the addition of my brother. We left Breuil on August 22, and crossing the gap to the S. of the Château des Dames, which might be called Col de Vofrède, descended to the head of the Cignana valley and reascended to the Col di Val Cournera. Leaving the baggage and all the axes except one, we proceeded to ascend the Punta di Fontanella by the ridge running up from the pass. Turning the rock towers just N. of the pass by snow and ice slopes on their E. side, where, being axeless, all our powers of balance were called into play, we struck up a short scree gully, and got on to the arête, which we followed to the top, in $1\frac{1}{4}$ hr. from the pass. The rocks are good and steep and not too easy, especially just below the top. On the summit we found a well-built cairn, but nothing to show who had built it, so we left a goggle-box with our cards. Naturally our argument during this interval of repose was concerning Mt. Redessau. We came to a satisfactory conclusion, but were a little perplexed by clouds around the Cian ridge. From this point it was a few minutes' run down and up snow slopes to the N.E. and lower summit. As the weather seemed likely to turn

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bad we did not stay long here. After again reaching the gap between the two summits, we turned down a broad stony gully on the E. face for a short time, and then turned right on to the face, which we traversed till the ridge by which we ascended was struck, and so reached the pass again. Before this, however, fine snow had begun to fall, which lower down became pouring rain, and the descent into Val Cournera was most unpleasant. Once in the valley, however, the sun came out, and we got somewhat dried before reaching Prerayen.

Here we had a little difficulty in getting rooms as another party was there, but finally matters were arranged. The inn is a very primitive place; there is no fresh meat, only tinned, and not too much of that, and though there are hens we found that they always laid to-morrow morning about eight o'clock. The beds are comfortable, and the place as a whole is clean.

My brother and I selected the best front bedroom after winning the toss for rooms, and then continued, for swarms of excellent reasons, tossing during the rest of the night. Therefore to future visitors I say, take any room but that if you wish for peace and comfort.

On the following day we set out to look for Mt. Redessau. On the Italian map the name is, perhaps intentionally, marked in such a way that it is difficult to say which mountain it refers to. One thing is certain, it cannot apply to the point 3,355 m., called on Reilly's map Mt. Redessau. The name, moreover, does not seem to be known in Valtournanche, and therefore Dôme de Cian is a better name for the point 3,355 m. Now the mountain at the head of Val Cournera with two points, 3,230 m. and 3,217 m., is a conspicuous one, and the name Redessau, as printed on the Italian map, certainly might apply to it. We therefore determined to ascend it first. Going straight up Val Cournera, we crossed to the E. bank of the torrent by a snow bridge and followed the E. lateral moraine of a nameless glacier descending from a broad snow pass at the very head of the valley. This must be the Col de Chavancour of the Pennine Guide. A very broken glacier descends from the N. face of the Dôme de Cian, and at its snout almost touches the glacier descending from the Col de Chavancour, which might appropriately be named Glacier de Chavancour, and the former Glacier de Cian.

From the moraine we took to the ice, and mounted the easy glacier to the col. The S.E. point of the mountain,

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which we hold to be Mt. Redessau, rises just to the W. of the pass and looks very formidable, but on attacking it, it turned out a regular fraud. We kept along the left-hand side of the ridge running up from the col for about twenty minutes, and then turned over to the other side. Here we found a broad scree-covered ledge, almost a road in fact, which we followed till it ended at the foot of the steep wall forming the backbone of the mountain. Up this we shinned with much enjoyment to the ridge, and then along it to the left till the point marked 3,217 m. was reached. On this was a tall cairn, apparently of some age, but no record was found in it.

We now saw that the mountain consisted of a long narrow and very jagged ridge running N.W. from the point we had attained to a second and higher point.

We left by a steep chimney overlooking the Torgnon valley, and then turned over on to the S.W. face, which we traversed by a series of interesting ledges, and reached the N.W. point by an easy clamber up steepish rocks. Chamois were seen several times, and the mountain is evidently a favourite haunt of theirs, and no wonder, for it abounds in all sorts of delightful caves and crannies. The usual chamois hunter who, as is well known, has inevitably made the first ascent of any given mountain, was in this case probably less mythical than usual, for during the traverse we found an old bâton, which possibly still adorns the cairn we made on the N.W. point. But whether any chamois hunter ever went to the top of any mountain is, I think, extremely doubtful. For his object would be, of course, to find game, which does not usually grow on summits. When he said he had been on a certain mountain he meant on the slopes of it, which is considered, by this Club at any rate, a very different thing.

From this mountain a very good idea of the geography of the district is obtained, for it stands at the head of four valleys—Val Cournera, the Combe de Livournéa, Val St. Barthélemy, and the Torgnon valley, so that it is of some topographical importance.

The point 3,195 m. of the Italian map which forms the other boundary of the Col de Chavancour is a fine double-headed rock peak not yet climbed, which we propose to call Pta de Chavancour; and, following the curve of the ridge eastwards, then comes the very striking Pta di Cian, and then, separated from it by the uncrossed Col de Cian, comes the Dôme de Cian, the Mt. Redessau of Adams-Reilly's map.

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It certainly seems, however, not to be known by the name Redessau, at any rate in Val Tournanche, and we therefore propose to give the name to the mountain ascended by us. It is a pity that an old-established name like Redessau should go a-begging for lack of a mountain to which to attach itself; and as this peak is of some importance topographically, and as the Italian map lends itself to this view, we think that the name Mt. Redessau should be henceforth appropriated by our peak.

Our return route was practically the same, shortened by glissades, and we reached Prerayen at a quarter past four. I had in my mind another expedition, just to finish off the exploration of the district, but we found that provisions were running short; in fact, besides tinned beef, only two tins of sardines and three loaves of bread remained. So we took them all, and departed to Mauvoisin, not stopping to inquire what became of the other party who remained at Prerayen. One of the loaves was decidedly interesting, from a geological point of view, for it first had to be broken by battering against a rock, and then was found to consist largely of chopped straw. One day it will form a puzzling item in the terminal moraine of the Glacier d'Otemma.

Prerayen, however, deserves to be encouraged, for the supply of provisions &c. is probably proportional to the number of visitors; and it is a great pity that it is not better supported, for it is an admirable centre—I beg Mr. Conway's pardon, I mean, of course, starting-point—for many interesting climbs. And there is one great advantage, which I personally cannot over-estimate—that the surrounding mountains are not draped with chains and ropes. There is, moreover, a freshness and simplicity about this part of the Alps which certainly no longer exists, I am afraid, even at such places as Arolla.

One word before I close about the guides. The keenness and energy displayed by both of them in the exploration of a district entirely new to them are highly commendable. Bovier's leading was on all occasions thoroughly sound, while Gaspoz, as second, was always steady and reliable.

There are very few parts of the Alps where anything like exploration, even in the mildest way, is now a possibility, but if neither guides nor amateurs know a district, all operations are to some extent exploratory. I have always tried to adopt this plan, and have found that it invariably added to the charm of the expeditions undertaken.

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