

FOUR COLS IN THE MONT BLANC CHAIN.

BY THE REV. A. C. DOWNER.

- (1) and (2) *Cols Supérieur and Inférieur des Essettes*; (3) *Col Supérieur du Tour Noir*; (4) *Col de Saleinaz*.

THE Swiss end of the Mont Blanc chain is but little visited by our fellow-countrymen, at least, if we may judge from the entries in the travellers' book in the Cabane de Saleinaz. I was not a little surprised to find that my own name was the only English one appearing in that work during the season of 1894. In 1895 matters were pretty much in the same state. The Swiss Alpine Club is well represented there, while Englishmen, for some inscrutable reason, though there must be plenty of them scattered about the Massif du Mont Blanc, seem to avoid that particular district. I think it is a mistake, for there is plenty to interest there.

To say truth, however, I think that end of the chain is as little known to the great body of the guides of Chamonix as it is to gentlemen qualifying for membership of the Alpine Club.

Being at Chamonix in August 1894, my attention, somehow or other, became attracted to the Tour Noir district. In particular, I became interested in the Col Supérieur du Tour Noir, which, so far as I could learn from M. Kurz's 'Climber's Guide,' and from the brown-clad gentry who infest the surroundings of the Bureau des Guides, had never been crossed. This being confirmed, after further inquiry of Simond, at the Montenvers, I became desirous, on the principle *omne ignotum pro magnifico*, to make the passage of the col.

At first I wanted Simond to go with me, but as he was unable to leave his hotel in the height of the season for more than a day, I ultimately engaged a guide reputed to be better acquainted with the district I was proposing to visit than the generality. He was not a bad fellow, but if his geography of that part represented the high-water mark of Chamonix knowledge, undoubtedly much was left to be desired. With his aid I obtained a second man, and, after the usual preparations, we set out from Chamonix for the Pavillon de Lognan.

The walk through the wood towards Lognan is a pleasant one, but ours was a little marred by anxiety about the weather, and our fears proved to be only too well founded. After a night spent at that rather costly mountain hostelry,

we fared forth at 3.30 A.M. on August 16, passed up the Glacier d'Argentière, and at 5.55 A.M. reached the rocks S.W. of the Glacier des Améthystes. At 7.40, we took our second breakfast, hard by some water, after which we passed up the Glacier des Améthystes, and clambered up the couloir to the E. to the ridge, attaining the Col Supérieur du Tour Noir at 10.40. The time occupied in actual going up to this point was about 6 hrs. On the rocks in the couloir we found many crystals, and one of the guides picked up a large one on the glacier itself. On the col we built a small cairn, and prepared to descend the other side. At this juncture the weather, which had been threatening, began to give trouble. Fine snow fell, blocking the view. Mieulet's map, very good up to this point, was useless as a guide to the Swiss side. The guides knew nothing about what lay before us, and in that condition of the atmosphere were unwilling to try to get down; they were afraid they should be killed, they said. What was to be done? We could only go back again to Lognan. It was distinctly a disappointment.

In those days Kurz's map was not, and, as to the Swiss map, Chamonix did not sell it; for why? Had they not excellent French maps? And what could any one want with cartographical detail beyond the French frontier? All this to our disadvantage, as we lived to discover.

We agreed, however, to try again, but this time from the E.; so on August 22, starting from Lavancher at 4.30 A.M., we passed the Col du Chardonnet, and went down in a leisurely way to the Saleinaz hut, where we passed the night. The next morning, at 8.10 o'clock, we set out, mounted the little Glacier de l'Evole, S. of the cabane, and passed the Col de Planereuse, descending the rocks to the Glacier de Planereuse. Next we traversed this glacier in a south-westerly direction, neither ascending nor descending much, and crossed the ridge between the Planereuse and Darrei Glaciers, probably at a point just to the E. of the 'i' in the word 'Darrei,' on the Siegfried map. Crossing the head of the Darrei Glacier, we reached, about 1 P.M., the point on the Essettes ridge marked 3,124 m. on the Siegfried map. From this point we made a reconnaissance, arriving at the conclusion that the Col Supérieur du Tour Noir was perfectly 'franchissable,' and could be reached in about 4 hrs. from where we were. Clouds, however, came on, and as the day was so far advanced we had to descend to the La Neuvaz Glacier, and make our way to La Folly, whence we tramped to Lac Champex.

At the time I was not aware that the Essettes ridge had never before been crossed at any point, nor did I take particular notice of the point at which we crossed it. It was not till afterwards that I obtained this information, upon which the point 3,124 received the name 'Col des Essettes,' subsequently, for reasons given below, changed to 'Col Inférieur des Essettes.'

We should gladly have spent the night at the Neuvaz chalets, mentioned at p. ix of M. Kurz's 'Guide,' but we could hear nothing of Rosis, who is mentioned as offering a hospitable reception there, and who, we afterwards heard, had left for Orsières. Since then a comfortable little inn has been opened at the Chalets de Ferret, a much nearer point than Champex.

The following year, September 3, 1895, with Mr. A. E. Field and Onésime Crettex, of Champex, I made a fresh attempt to cross the Col Supérieur du Tour Noir. We began by walking from Champex up the Vallée d'Arpette and over the Col de la Brea to the Cabane d'Orny. Leaving that favourite rendezvous of the Swiss Alpine Club at 2.42 P.M., and going up the Glacier d'Orny, we passed *via* the Col des Plines and the Glacier des Plines to the Glacier de Saleinaz and the Cabane de Saleinaz, which we reached at 6.23 P.M. There was a splendid moon that night. I remember it rose at 9 P.M., behind the Petite Pointe de Planereuse, and it illuminated a landscape of still and magnificent whiteness, which the altitude of the hut (2,693.5 m.) set off to both the eye and the fancy. Then we turned in; but at 6.50 A.M. we were out again, with the purpose of endeavouring to repeat my route of the previous year, having in view the double object of identifying the exact locality of the Col des Essettes and of making another try for the Col Supérieur du Tour Noir.

We managed to keep fairly to the route, but on the Planereuse glacier found we had got too high, and lost a great deal of time in cutting down the ice-fall. At 9.34 we reached the ridge S. of this glacier. On the Darrei Glacier we again got too high, and lost more time in having to descend to the left. At 10.34 we halted for 35 min. at the foot of rocks to refresh the inner man. Looking for a place to cross the Essettes ridge, we saw the point 3,222 m. (Swiss map) at the head of a snow couloir. We ascended to this point and then recognised that we were making another new pass, which it would be necessary to distinguish in nomenclature from the point by which I had crossed the previous season.

Later in the day, from the La Neuvez Glacier, I carefully scanned the Essettes ridge, and definitely decided that the Col des Essettes of last year was no other than the point 3,124 m. on the Swiss map. Henceforward, then, point 3,222 m. must be the Col Supérieur, and point 3,124 m. the Col Inférieur, des Essettes; and as such they appear accordingly on Kurz's new map, 'La Chaîne du Mont Blanc.'

On our way up the steep snow couloir leading to the pass, we looked back and saw a couple of chamois moving over the Darrei Glacier with remarkable rapidity, though they appeared not to be exerting themselves in any degree.

It was exactly mid-day when we arrived upon the ridge, and we only took twelve minutes to reconnoitre. Descending on the W. side by a short snow couloir and steep scree, we touched the Glacier de la Neuvez at 12.34, afterwards pushing up its slopes towards the Col Supérieur du Tour Noir. After a time we found ourselves amongst a number of very wide and profound crevasses, which that year had lost their snow bridges owing to the long spell of hot dry weather. We made some progress by circumventing a few of these, but at 1.54 were brought to a halt by a huge *rimaie*, stretching right across the glacier. There was no help for it. We were fairly beaten, and for the third time I turned my back discomfited on the Col Supérieur du Tour Noir.

We descended the glacier to the Val Ferret, going down by some grass slopes on the left bank of the glacier and then by the terminal moraine, on which there is one enormous boulder, the size of a cottage, over which it is necessary to climb. At last (7.30 P.M.) we reached the Chalets de Ferret, and stayed the night at the inn there.

Was I always to be baffled by this tiresome pass? It looked like it, for though I was not in the district in 1896, I went back in 1897 and waited two days in pouring rain at Orsieres, at the end of which time, the weather showing no improvement, I was obliged to leave and abandon all hope for that season.

This year I determined to make one more attempt, profiting by the experience of the past. Having secured Onésime Crettex once more, with his brother-in-law, Julien Rosis, for a porter, leaving Orsieres on August 2, in very hot weather, I went up leisurely to the Saleinaz hut. On the way up we grew very thirsty, but after a long search for water had to go without. As we approached the hut we saw the Swiss flag flying, and found a party from Neuchâtel in possession. They turned out to be very pleasant companions, and we

found that they were making the hut their headquarters for several ascents in the neighbourhood.

The weather being fairly good we resolved on an early start. I think, on the previous occasions, if we had started earlier we should have done better. We got under way at 3.15 A.M., pushing on to the upper part of the Saleinaz Glacier, which we found much crevassed, and the snow bridges soft. Several times a foot went in and emphasised the call for care. Our plan was to cross the ridge between the Saleinaz and La Neuvaz Glaciers by the Col de la Neuvaz, a plan possessing the double advantage over the previous route *via* the Essettes, that it would only be necessary to cross one ridge instead of three, and also that we should be landed at the very head of the La Neuvaz Glacier, above the crevasses which had proved impassable in 1895, and at the very foot of the final slope to the Col Supérieur du Tour Noir.

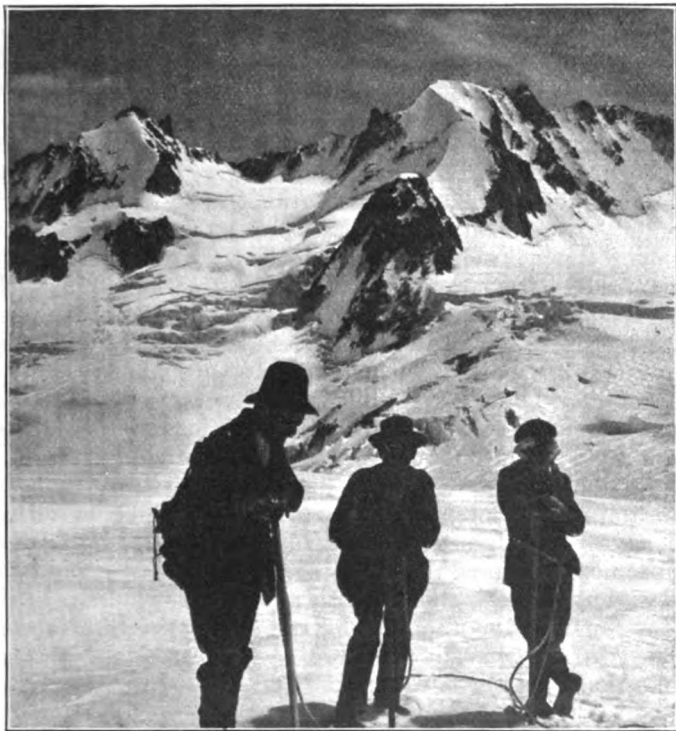
After 2½ hours' work we halted for a second breakfast on the upper snows, immediately below the Col de la Neuvaz. Resuming about 6 A.M., we crossed the bergschrund and cut our way up the ice wall, making holds for the hand as well as steps for the feet. This portion of the ascent was rather difficult and called for steadiness. We reached the pass at about 7.30 A.M., when the La Neuvaz Glacier came into view, and, without halting, descended on the S. side to the head of the glacier. Here the map came out and revealed that a steep slope of snow, broken with rocks, immediately above us to the W., would conduct us directly to the Col Supérieur du Tour Noir. This slope we at once attacked, and, as the snow was new-fallen, had to trample steps in it, and at each step sank in to the knees, which rendered progress remarkably slow. After about an hour of this sport we came to some rocks and found variety charming. A little rest was now permissible, and I should like to say how much we enjoyed the view, but unfortunately the clouds had come on and the prospect was limited to a few feet. However, we found as many crystals on this side of the ridge as I had found on the W. side in 1894. By strict attention to business we at last reached the pass at 10.10 A.M., shook hands all round and exchanged congratulations. The next thing, of course, was lunch. Opening the sack, we produced one of Silver's mess tins of Irish stew, the best kind for choice, so far as I am acquainted with these articles. The next step was to cook it. Now at 12,000 ft. spirit does not burn very vigorously and therefore we did not get this viand very hot. Also the vegetables in the stew did seem to bear an unusually high proportion to the meat.

Still, luncheon is luncheon, and we were too well content with our success to be particular. Comparing the surroundings with my mental impression of the same spot in 1894, I found they corresponded very well. This, of course, chiefly speaks to my recollection, as I could hardly have laid the blame on the pass if it had differed from my impressions. Having properly drunk its health, as if it had been a peak, I began to look at the mountains of Savoy. Crettex asked whether I wished to descend on that side, but having done this on the former occasion, I considered that I did not owe the pass anything; and being desirous of getting back to Orsières in order to leave for home the following day, I contented myself on this occasion with looking down the couloir leading to the Glacier des Améthystes, and sending down a few stones by way of revenge for the trouble I had had in attaining my purpose.

All's well that ends well, but these pleasant moments must come to an end. Fifty minutes is as much as we can spare for this sort of enjoyment. Leaving our col at 11 A.M., we descended in our own tracks to the upper snows of the La Neuvez Glacier. Here the question arose by what route we were to return to the hut. The choice lay apparently between the Col de la Neuvez, by which we had come, and that of the Grande Luis. Partly on the principle *vestigia nulla retrorsum*, and partly as I did not feel particularly enamoured of the idea of descending the ice-wall by which we had come up the Col de la Neuvez, I rejected that way back. Besides, the Col de la Grande Luis had the advantage of novelty, and accordingly we turned our steps in that direction, eastward of the peak of the Grande Luis.

We were not, however, destined to cross the ridge by this col. Crettex, wishing, I think, to give me a surprise, struck up a couloir W. of it, and after a good scramble, at about 12.30, we attained a col just to the E. of the peak of the Grande Luis, and till then uncrossed. The height we estimated as about the same as that of the Col de la Grande Luis, marked on Kurz's map 3,379 m., or 11,086 ft. At the top there was a pool of clear water, frozen over, and we broke through the surface-ice to get a drink. We could now see down the other side, and became aware that from this point an exceedingly steep slope of snow goes down towards the Saleinaz Glacier. Down this we peered anxiously to see whether we could descend in safety. At first this certainly seemed doubtful, but presently Crettex declared that we could do it *facilement*, and we prepared to try. The slope was

covered with soft new-fallen snow and we were obliged to adopt the backward descent, a method of progress not, so far as my experience goes, frequently required in the Alps. Turning our faces to the mountain and making handholds in the snow to steady, and partly support, ourselves, we proceeded to kick steps down backwards, at the same time driving the axes in vertically with the right hand to afford additional hold. The process was hardly to be called easy, *pace* Crettex,



THE GRANDE LUIS AND COL DE SALEINAZ FROM THE N.

for each step had to be taken with extreme caution ; but by distributing the weight over as many points of contact as possible and moving gradually downwards, we avoided breaking away the snow and worked down to the upper lip of the bergschrund. We had to jump the schrund on to the soft snow below, and below this the gradient was generally easier and we were able to glissade ; from time to time, however, we met with rocks, negotiable with circumspection.

After this we kept along under the ridge in an easterly direction, and by glacier, snow, and rocks, made our way back to the cabane, arriving at 3.30 P.M.—12½ hrs. from the start. In the hut I found my dry clothes, which I donned with much satisfaction, and, it now being time for afternoon tea, there followed a meal and some rest. Our Neuchâtel friends and their guide had returned from their climbing and exchanged friendly accounts with us of the day's work. They were vigorously plying the camera upon one another, and seemed to extract great amusement from the process.

A little later we set out for the descent to Orsières. Below the snout of the glacier we noticed the wooden trough, extending far down into the valley, by which ice for commercial purposes is conveyed to a small dépôt. At Praz de Fort, the point at which the Saleinaz valley joins the main Val Ferret, we called upon M. Louis Kurz, who received us hospitably and offered congratulations upon our two 'first ascents.' I was glad to hear the views of so great an authority upon this chain in reference to the second new col, which he remarked had previously been looked upon as impassable. Since then I have consulted him as to the name of this pass, which I propose to call the 'Col de Saleinaz,' and I am glad to possess his entire concurrence in this name. After a pleasant half-hour with him we resumed our way, and reached Orsières at 9 P.M., ready for supper and a good sleep before my departure for England the following day.

I attribute much of our success to Crettex, who led admirably, and, though the entire expedition was as new to him as to myself, never hesitated. On former occasions I have sometimes failed through the ignorance or timidity of guides, but Crettex showed both pluck and resource. He is a young married man, and I think has a good future before him. I parted from him and Rosis with regrets and pleasant recollections, hoping to come back and employ them again.

THE AIGUILLE DE TRÉLATÈTE.

By ALFRED HOLMES.

EARLY in July last year I made some ascents in the Dolomites with Mr. E. J. Mazzuchi, and when he left me in the middle of that month we agreed to meet at Courmayeur later on, and climb the Aiguille de Trélatète together. In accordance with this arrangement I arrived at Courmayeur on July 27. There was a severe thunderstorm