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From Vallouise to Courmayeur.

By J. J. WITHERS.

(Read before the Alpine Club, April 8, 1902.)

'IN the grey beginning of years, in the twilight of things that began,' or, to speak prosaically, in the early days of this Club, the then members had a great advantage over the ordinary members of the present day in the matter of reading papers. The whole Alps, to say nothing of the more distant ranges outside Europe, lay before them; they had but to go and conquer, make a note or two, and on their return 'a round unvarnished tale deliver,' tastefully decking the same with proper quotations from the best classical authors of all languages. How different is the case now! Before many of us were born, as early as 1862, Mrs. Henry Freshfield wrote in her 'Summer Tour in the Grisons': 'Hitherto secluded Alpine nooks are almost overrun, while the rushing crowd circling round Chamounix and dispersed through the Oberland destroys the enjoyment formerly found by travellers who sought relief from the shackles of conventional life.' For us who are by fate and fortune limited to the Alps there is nothing absolutely new to do; besides, all the really good quotations about mountains have long ago been used up, and the member of the future who aspires to read a paper will have to climb some subsidiary point from a new side, underlining on his return suitable descriptive verses in a volume of one of the minor poets. The prospect is somewhat alarming, but that being the position, and the absolutely new being impossible, I must ask your indulgence for a paper which deals with districts which must be relatively well known to many members of the Club, though, I hope,

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relatively new to others, and which is unadorned by gems from either trilogies or triolets.

In 1898, while considering where I should go for a holiday, I found in my knowledge of the Alps 'a great gulf fixed' between Dauphiné and Mont Blanc. From Dauphiné I had looked across this rolling country, and that year the republication of Ball's 'Western Alps' made me decide to go to La Bérarde, and thence straight across country to Chamounix. I found that an interesting route of about eighty miles might be taken in an almost straight line N.N.E. from Dauphiné *via* La Grave, Modane, Pralognan, and Courmayeur, and the journey fell into four convenient stages, ending respectively at the places named.

Accordingly, leaving London about August 18, I travelled to Grenoble, and, finding the night express from Paris, went on from there to Vizille. I got out at Vizille, and changed into the very curious light railway which takes the place of the old lumbering coach, and which, following the road even through the narrow streets of the villages on the way, landed me at Bourg d'Oisans soon after 11 A.M. Here I found great changes. Instead of the old primitive inn of pleasant memories at the end of the village, two or three modern hotels had arisen, with excellent accommodation; and after a bath and a lunch of many courses I drove up to St. Christophe, and thence walked into La Bérarde at 8 P.M., only 34 hrs. from London, proving to my surprise that this centre is now as accessible as Arolla.

Next morning was fine, and the little place looked much as usual, hospitable and bright, but stony and bare. Mr. Coolidge says a place called Scarl, in the Ofen Pass district, is stonier. Out of sheer curiosity I am going to try to see Scarl this year.

I heard with interest that the Government Office of Woods and Forests were considering the advisability of reforesting the valley, but were being met by local opposition, which thought the trees would interfere with the so-called pasturage. One would hardly have suspected that the local conditions were conducive to a sense of humour. I confess with all its savage barrenness I am very fond indeed of this little place. One can here still, to use Mrs. Freshfield's words, seek 'relief from the shackles of conventional life.' There is no sign, nor even a local tradition, of a dress suit. It is perhaps the only great climbing centre which still remains unspoiled.

On the 22nd I went with J. B. Rodier and Christophe Turc, who accompanied me on all the following excursions,

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for a walk up the Tête de Chéret, getting from the top a good view of the glaciers to the N.W. of Les Bans, and on the way back an imposing view of the N.W. face of the Ailefroide. I had told my old friend M. Tairraz, of La Bérarde, my original intention to forthwith start for Chamounix, but he informed me that the great improvements visible at Bourg d'Oisans had also extended to the Chalets of Ailefroide above Vallouise, where a mountain inn had been opened, as well as the Chalets de l'Alpe and the Lac de Puy Vachier on the La Grave side. I thought, wrongly as it turned out, I had time to inspect these 'improvements' without interfering with my original programme, and on August 25 crossed the Col du Selé, getting a fine view of Les Bans and the glacier de la Pilatte, then down the glacier du Selé and the worst moving slope of stones I had ever seen, up to the Refuge de Provence on the Pelvoux. In the evening clouds began to gather, and the weather turned very bad. Next day it was hopeless to start. We played draughts all day. On the 27th the clouds were still low, but we started, climbed the Pelvoux by the ordinary route without seeing anything, and only as we got down to the hut the mists began to rise and we saw the view. A toilsome walk down the Celse Nière glen took us to the little inn at Ailefroide, above which we noticed some bold rock aiguilles, stated still to be unclimbed, on the ridge to the N.E. We found all the local talent employed in finishing a sort of giant hoe about 15 ft. long, with large iron teeth at the end, without which it was said one of these points could not be reached. A mysterious climber was reported to be about to make the ascent, armed with this instrument, but whether he ever did so I never heard. I was anxious to see the cave of the Vaudois, which is on the side of one of the valleys, but I could get no accurate local information. Accordingly, next day we strolled down the valley to near Ville Vallouise, the most distant point of our journey in this direction, and found the whole place full of Alpine troops. The inn at Ailefroide was very comfortable, and must be a great boon to visitors to these parts if it keeps up this character, which seems from later reports doubtful. On the 29th we returned to La Bérarde by the Col de la Temple and the Pic Coolidge in splendid weather. From the col the aspect of the Pointe des Etages was most extraordinary. Next day I packed up at La Bérarde, and dispatched the luggage by post to Chamounix, taking only a rucksack. On August 31 we crossed the Col du Clot des Cavales—the early sun gave us a view of the Meije—and found, instead of a dirty henhouse

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where I had slept before, a little mountain inn at the Chalets de l'Alpe, which must be very useful for climbs in this direction. This hotel is reported to be very comfortable. It was a great relief to get to the grassy valleys after the interminable stones, and we ran down in great spirits to La Grave.

[I may here interpolate that the following year, 1899, my friend Mr. A. M. Daniel and myself being at La Bérarde on August 26 crossed the Col du Replat, and ascending the south Tête du Replat descended to the Selle hut. This col had puzzled me. It was by the 'Climbers' Guide' stated to lie between the two Têtes du Replat, and yet to be lower than the Brèche du Replat to the N. and the Col de la Selle to the S. We found it obviously higher than both. Indeed, as the 'Climbers' Guide' agrees, we ascended the south Tête du Replat in about 20 min. from the col. The point is about 11,260 ft, so the col must be about 11,000 ft., instead of 10,107 ft. given in the guide.

Next day we crossed the Col de la Lauze, and, ascending the Pic de la Grave, came down, after a curious glimpse of the Meije, to the new inn near the Lac de Puy Vachier, getting fine views of the Tarentaise, and so to La Grave with its gorgeous view of the Meije, the end of the first stage of our journey.]

In 1898 I found La Grave, the end of our first stage, greatly altered. The Hôtel Juge, not long ago bare and rough, had blossomed out into a garden with awnings and seats, while the accommodation under the stress of the competition of the small but comfortable new hotel had greatly improved.

On September 1, 1898, I left La Grave for the second stage of our journey, and in the hot afternoon toiled up the path which leads over fertile rolling meadows, a change indeed from the stones of Dauphiné, with beautiful views of the Meije, to the Lyon Républicain Hut for the S. Aiguille d'Arve. The Aiguilles d'Arve, three very remarkable peaks, lie roughly in a line from N. to S. The northern aiguille is the lowest, and there is a question as to which of the other two is the higher. They are both about 11,500 ft. I felt indeed on classic ground. Almer and Croz had found these aiguilles 'relatively impracticable,' and feeling that one was guilty of almost irreverence, I went to sleep, waking up to find a fine morning. We left early, and walked over grass, shale, and snow to the Col Lombard, a curious ridge along which to the E. we reached the S. face of the peak. This we ascended over easy but rotten rock, and ultimately by a steepish couloir filled with ice, in one hour from the col reached the gap in

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Photo by J. J. Withers.] [*Swan Electric Engraving Co.*

THE DAUPHINÉ ALPS FROM SUMMIT OF SOUTH AIGUILLE D'ARVE 1809.

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the S.E. arête of the peak. Here the fun began. A steep wall on our left was crossed by a narrow ledge. This ledge led on to the E. face of the peak, which at this point is like the side of a church; the roof of the nave leads down to a sheer drop of about 8 ft. to the roof of the aisle, from which a precipice falls away some thousands of feet. The whole is weathered quite smooth, except in one or two places where the pudding stone has faulted, or a plum has come out of the pudding, leaving a round hole. Rodier crossed the ledge to the aisle roof, and stood in a crack where on a real roof the rain-gutter would be, and told me to follow; I did so, and crossed past him. Christophe Turc followed, and at Rodier's bidding found a foothold on the aisle roof a little bit higher where he could lean against the wall supporting the roof of the nave. Then Rodier climbed up him, got on his shoulders, and getting his arms over on to the nave roof finally pulled himself up; he then fixed a rope. I followed over Christophe, and found myself standing with Rodier in a little hole at the bottom of the slope of the nave roof, which looked very smooth but for a crack some inches broad which ran up and across it. Rodier mounted this crack, and I followed; Christophe came up with the aid of the fixed rope, and we found ourselves in a few minutes on the church roof. The view was fine; it is perhaps the finest general view of the Dauphiné peaks. On the top we found that the adventurous Monsieur Torrent, who was afterwards killed on the Meije, had painted on a rock in red paint the words 'Torrent Seul' as a record of his ascent alone. How he got up the bad bit mentioned before I don't know, but I think, judging from some red paint marks, he followed the aisle roof further along where, though smoother, it apparently gets nearer to the nave roof, but the traverse of those smooth rocks, even without a paint pot, must be a most perilous proceeding.

I was interested to see in the 'Climbers' Guide' that nearly everyone who has ascended the peak thinks the central aiguille rather the highest. I had an Abney level with me, and on this as on another occasion when I ascended the peak I found that the point of the central aiguille was slightly depressed. The instrument, however, does not read with sufficient minuteness to enable one to found any accurate calculations on the measurement.

After a good halt we came down the same way without difficulty to the Col Lombard, thoroughly pleased with our climb, and, bearing to the E., crossed the glacier under the S.E. arête of the peak to a slope of very rotten rocks which

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led to the Col des Trois Pointes. Long slopes of the rottenest stones led us down to the Vallon des Aiguilles d'Arve, where the aspect of the three peaks is very different from that on the other side. A long rest in the sun put us in a good humour for the walk across the pastures down the Vallon des Aiguilles d'Arve to where it joins the Col du Galibier coach road at Bonnenuit. Along this dusty road we tramped for 5 miles to Valloire—a most unalpine place—where we found a decent hotel full of French pensionnaires, an ignorance that there were any mountains near, and a good lunch. In due time the Col du Galibier char-à-banc arrived, in which we had booked seats. The drive just before the last abrupt descent gave us some fine views of the valley of the Arc, and landed us in the considerable town of St. Michel de Maurienne, whence a train on the Mont Cenis main line took us to Modane, where we ended the second stage of our journey. At Modane, usually associated with long railway journeys and custom-houses, we seemed strangely out of place. We watched the trains de luxe, and strolled about looking at the forts which are perched in many directions above the town, and discussed our future course.

North of Modane, on our line of route, lay two considerable mountain masses; to the E. the mass of the Dent Parrachée and Glaciers de la Vanoise; on the W. the mass of the Aiguilles de Péclet and de Polset; between these two mountain masses lie two easy passes—those of the Col de Chavière and the Col d'Aussois.

On the occasion of 1898 we chose the Dent Parrachée group.

Accordingly, on September 3, after déjeuner, we left the town of Custom-house officers and drove up the picturesque road E. of Modane through the old fortifications to Aussois, where, while making inquiries, we were joined by a local guide, Antoine Damevin by name, who volunteered to show us the best chalets for the night. We toiled up in the sun for 2½ hrs. by a footpath in a N.E. direction to the Chalets of Plan Sec, where we were hospitably received. They lie in a magnificent position, with a fine view, and we spent a comfortable night in spite of the cheese-making and the bells of the cows which were stalled under the chalet. Next morning we left about 3 o'clock in good weather, and, bearing N.N.E. over pastures and stone slopes, at last reached by a steep ice-slope in 2½ hrs. the Col de l'Arpont, on the S.W. ridge of the peak. Here we waited, as it was early, and then followed the S.W. ridge mainly on the N. side till a final snow-slope,

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involving considerable step-cutting, brought us to the top of the Dent Parrachée (12,179 ft.) in about 1½ hr. The view was magnificent. The peak stands in an isolated position, and the whole range, from Mont Blanc to the Meije, lay before us. After a long halt, we descended to the Col de l'Arpont. I wanted to descend here to the Doron valley by the Genépy glacier, but the local guide, who had come with us, wrongly as I heard afterwards, told us it could not be done this year, so we ran down the little subsidiary glacier on the N.W., followed by a storm of stones from the slope above, and reached the Col d'Aussois route just below the col on the S. side. Hence a rough path led us to a great drop in the valley above the Ritort pastures, where some hundreds of cows were grazing below—a very picturesque sight. Here we came down into the valley and reached Pralognan, hot and tired, in about 3½ hrs. actual going from the Col d'Aussois.

On August 31, 1899, the following year, we, the same party, without the local guide, but with Mr. A. M. Daniel, decided to take the other route from Modane to Pralognan, mentioned before, by the very unfrequented Aiguilles de Péclet and de Polset group. We drove this time westward out of Modane about five miles, and, leaving the main road before reaching Francoz, mounted by a good path to Bonvillard, and so, through most picturesque woods and pastures, in 3½ hrs. to the Chalets of Plan Bouchet, filthy and abominable, but beautifully situated, with a magnificent view of the Dauphiné Peaks. I do not think any of us will ever forget that sunset. The people at the chalets seemed absolutely astonished to see us, and in answer to our inquiries stated they had been there many years, but could not recollect any other party. After a horrid night on the floor of a shed we left on the morning of September 1 about 2 A.M. Bearing too soon to the N. to gain the Rénod glacier, we got lost in the dark in a great desert of stones, and it was not till 5 A.M. that we reached the Col Rénod. Here we halted, much surprised at the extent of the great Chavière glacier at our feet. A steep descent of ¼ hr. brought us to the level of the glacier, and we made direct for the Col de Gébroulaz in front of us. A long toil of 2 hrs. brought us to the lofty col (11,385 ft.). The wind was bitterly cold, but the view fine. After a halt we traversed the snow slopes to the E. and ascended the highest point of the Aiguille de Polset (11,608 ft.) in ½ hr. Returning to the col we went down the Gébroulaz glacier, turning off after about ½ hr. in a N.E. direction down an easy side glacier past

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the Lac Blanc to the Doron valley, where ultimately we joined our route of the year before and reached Pralognan about 5 P.M.

Pralognan lies prettily situated in a green basin, and may be taken as the end of the third stage of the journey. It has a large new comfortable hotel usually full of French visitors, and would be a starting-place for many excursions. In 1898, after a good night, at 8.30 A.M., I decided, as time pressed, to cross the Cols de Vanoise and de la Leisse to Tignes. So in the hot sun we started up the well-made path under the cliffs of the Grande Casse, which we could not wait to climb, past the lakes, and the hut which lies a little off the



Photo. by J. J. Withers. *Swan Electric Engraving Co.*

THE COL DE GÉBROULAZ, FROM GLACIER DE CHAVIÈRE, 1899.

path, then before the drop to 'Entre deux Eaux,' where we got a fine view of a peak to the E. I could not identify, we left the path, turned sharp to the left under the cliffs of the Grande Casse, and past the Grand Motte to the uninteresting Col de la Leisse, with grand views of the Mont Blanc range in front. Late in the afternoon we passed the Lac de Tignes, and as darkness fell, not having time to go on to Val d'Isère, reached the foul inn at Tignes, of which our President speaks so feelingly. Tired out as we were, we were glad of any accommodation. Next morning, starting early, we drove down past Sainte Foy, with views of the Mont Pourri to Bourg

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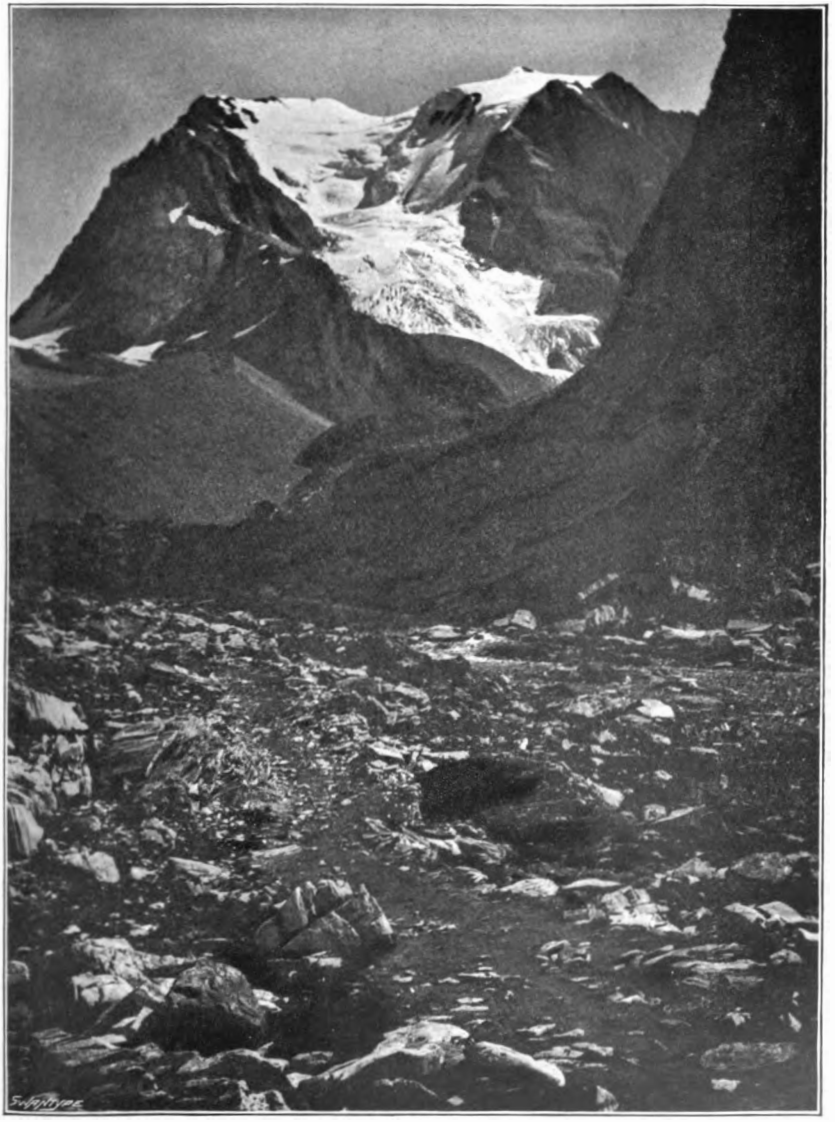


Photo by J. J. Withers.] [*Swan Electric Engraving Co.*

THE GRANDE CASSE FROM ABOVE PRALOGNAN. 1898.

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St. Maurice, where we ate some of the excellent trout from the Lac de Tignes, and then over the little St. Bernard to Courmayeur, reaching our hotel at 11 P.M. This ended the fourth and last stage of our journey proper. Next morning we wandered about in the little street, getting our boots nailed and revelling in ripe fruit. The Dauphiné guides were somewhat disappointed at the view. Approaching the range from the direction we had come, we had day by day admired the magnificent snowy mass in front of us, and after that the restricted view from Courmayeur itself was somewhat surprising. That afternoon we went up to the Mont Fréty, rested an hour or so, and, crossing the Col du Géant, climbed the Aiguille du Géant, and reached Montanvert and our baggage after dark. Next morning we awoke to see the view which after all nothing can spoil, and knew we were on our way home.

I wish we could have spent more time about Pralognan, but I hope some day to fill up the gaps. We met in the two years only two Englishmen between La Bérarde and Courmayeur, so I recommend the district to the jaded centrist. The journey in itself is very interesting, passing, as photographs show, from the barren and desolate rocks of Dauphiné over the rolling pastures of the Tarentaise to the wooded scenery of the Swiss Alps. It should certainly be taken in the direction we took it, for the beauties grow as one comes N.

Moreover, such a journey enables one to visit places such as the Pelvoux and the Aiguilles d'Arve, which will be ever memorable in the history of Alpine exploration. And this brings me to the one advantage which we younger men have over our older brethren. The stirring tales which we have read in our boyhood have invested the scenes of their early adventures with a glorious romance. They had 'the first fine careless rapture'; but the pleasure of visiting those places of heroic deeds, which we have known so long, was not for them. We have it, and prize it, as our one superior possession.

Some Reasons why the Science of Altitude-Illness is still in its Infancy.

By M. L. HEPBURN, M.D., F.R.C.S.

At a meeting of the Alpine Club on April 2, 1901, Mr. Bryce made the following suggestive statement in connection with mountain-sickness: 'The fact that we are still in

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