



THE HERO OF MONT BLANC.

THE glaciers of Mont Rouan are interesting to those who care about the great names in Alpine story, as the scene of the tragedy which closed the career of the adventurous Jacques Balmat, the hero of Mont Blanc, perhaps the hardest and most indomitable mountaineer that ever drew breath, even beneath the shadow of the Alps. He had, unfortunately for himself, contracted a habit of gold-seeking, which kept him poor all his life; and he had long had an idea that some veins, apparently of carboniferous earth, which streak the calcareous precipices near the glaciers of Mont Rouan, gold-ore might be found.

In the month of September, 1834, being then no less than seventy-two years

of age, he started, accompanied by a single chasseur of Val Orsine,—one Pache by name,—on his perilous tour of discovery. He was seen the following day, in company with the huntsman, making his way towards the head of the Fond de la Combe. Late in the afternoon they reached a solitary hut, called La Cabane des Bergers, perched on one of the largest of the patches of grass already mentioned, and here they passed the night. The next day the hunter returned alone, and Jacques Balmat was never seen again. His companion betrayed great reluctance to answer any questions concerning him, and when pressed, always asserted that they had separated in the morning, Jacques Balmat making his way towards the glaciers, he returning in the other direction, as the old man insisted upon going into places of such danger that he dared not follow him.

Of what befell Balmat after they parted, he declared he knew nothing. The Val Orsine man stuck to his story whenever interrogated, and unsatisfactory as his manner was always felt to be,

nothing could be discovered to contradict his account; and there the matter rested till fresh light was thrown upon it by an incident which illustrates curiously the state of society at Sixt, and the nature of the objects of primary importance in the eyes of the village politician.

Years after this occurrence, a disclosure was made by a man who, at the time Jacques Balmat disappeared, had been Syndic of the commune, an officer deriving his authority from the fact of his being the representative of the central administration, not, as now, from being the free choice of popular election. This person now divulged, for the first time, that the day after Jacques Balmat was last seen, a peasant of his commune had informed him, that on the previous day his two children had been playing on the grassy slopes on the northern side of the Fond de la Combe, when they beheld a man, who had been apparently creeping along the naked face of the rocks opposite, above a great accumulation of broken blocks of ice, which had been pushed over a precipice by the advance of the glacier, suddenly fall and disappear in a chasm between the rock and the ice.

Influenced by motives which the reader would scarcely guess, and which it would appear were shared by his informant, the Syndic strictly charged the children never to breathe a syllable of what they had seen, and threatened them with all the undefined terrors of the law if they ever ventured to tell the story to any one else. The children were young, and probably living at a solitary chalet, where they had no one but their parents to talk to, and either forgot or only faintly remembered the incident, and the secret had been kept to that hour. The Syndic was well aware that the relatives of Balmat had made anxious but fruitless searches for his remains, and that some sort of suspicion of want of candour had fallen upon the Val Orsine hunter, and, whether his conscience at last smote him,

that he had suffered him to remain so long under a cloud, or for what other reason does not appear, but he now for the first time told this story to the then Vice-Syndic of Sixt. The Vice-Syndic communicated the intelligence, first to Jean Payot of Chamouni, and afterwards repeated it in the presence of my informant, Auguste Balmat. The children in question were inquired for, but it seemed they had left the neighbourhood. The spot, however, from which the figure had been seen to fall, a little green oasis in the desert of rock, was pointed out; and a fresh expedition was organised, on an extensive scale, from Chamouni.

Among the explorers were Auguste Balmat and several other relatives of the deceased, and one Michel Carrier, the artist of the great plan in relief of Mont Blanc, known to visitors at Chamouni, and a tolerable draughtsman.

With incredible difficulty, and taking the utmost precautions against accidents, they succeeded in reaching the green knoll near and at the side of the glacier. Here they found below them a precipice, and at the foot of this the broken masses of ice shot over the edge of the platform on which the glacier rests. Auguste was tied to a rope, but found it impossible to descend the face of the rock, or to get any nearer to the chasm which had received his great uncle. He described it as a black gulf, the bottom of which he could not see, into which a stream issuing from the glacier was thundering, and stones and blocks of ice, broken off as the glacier poured over the ridge, were continually falling. All hope was therefore finally abandoned of the possibility of finding any traces of the great pioneer of Mont Blanc. Carrier, however, took a sketch of the spot, and the party returned to Chamouni. Some time afterwards he and Auguste Balmat went together to the Val Orsine.

When they drew near to the hunter's cottage, Carrier went on alone to the



HAUNT OF THE CHAMOIS.

door, and asked Pache if he had seen Balmat, adding, "I expected him somewhere about here; he is gone to seek minerals." The man answered that he had not seen Auguste, but invited Carrier to sit down and wait for him. Half an hour afterwards Balmat came by, as if casually, and asked Pache if he had seen Carrier. The hunter insisted on their taking a bottle of wine, to which they assented, on condition that he should come to Val Orsine and dine with them. Accordingly the three adjourned to the inn at Val Orsine, where they sat down to dinner, and Balmat and Carrier took care to ply the old hunter freely with wine. When it had begun to tell upon him a little, and the suspicious reserve he always maintained in the presence of those whom he associated with Jacques Balmat had a little worn away, Carrier, who was sitting beside him, suddenly pulled out the sketch he had taken, and laid it before him, saying, "Connaissez-vous cette image?"

The hunter, taken off his guard, started back, exclaiming, "Mon Dieu! voilà où Jacques Balmat est péri!"—"What, then," said Carrier, "you know *where* he perished?" The man appeared confused for a moment, and then recovering his habitual caution, said, "No, no, I know nothing about it; but I saw the scene near which I left him, and it struck me as the kind of place he might have fallen down." He then got up, and no entreaties could prevail upon him to stay; and by no artifice could he be induced to approach the subject again.

It is not difficult to understand that an ignorant peasant, fearful of being charged with having had a hand in the death of Jacques Balmat, should have imagined that his safety lay in pretending absolute ignorance of every circumstance connected with his fate; but the conduct of the Syndic, to whom the whole mystery was known, requires to be explained a little more in detail. It is not easy for a person unfamiliar with the Alps to con-

ceive the importance justly attached by the members of a mountain community to their forests. Not only do they depend upon them, and upon nothing else, for their supplies of fuel and for their building materials, but also for the still more important service of at once breaking up into detached portions the accumulations of the winter snow which falls upon the area they cover, and of forming a protecting barrier against the avalanches hurled from the heights above them. These avalanches bring with them not merely snow, but rocks, stones, and *débris*, and, sweeping over the unprotected mountain sides in prodigious volumes and with incredible velocity, not unfrequently tear off large portions of mould, and, kneading it up with their own substance, cover the comparatively level ground, which finally arrests their progress, with a compound of earth and snow. When the spring comes round and the snow melts into water, the land is covered with a thick deposit of mud, through which it will perhaps take two or three seasons for the herbage beneath to force its way; so that even if houses, men, and cattle be out of the reach of the avalanche, it may do damage enough to impoverish a whole neighbourhood. Anything, therefore, which tends to the destruction of their forest ramparts is regarded by the peasantry as a deplorable calamity.

Jacques Balmat was a noted gold-seeker, and, despite his ill success, enjoyed considerable reputation throughout the communes near to Chamouni as a person of great knowledge and experience on such subjects. The moment the Syndic heard that the children had seen a man fall down the precipice of Mont Rouan, he conjectured that Jacques Balmat, who had been seen in the valley a day or two before, had been searching for gold in that neighbourhood, and that it was he who had met with the terrible fate described by the children. A vague local tradition had long been current,

which asserted that gold was to be found in the valley, and that some Swiss adventurers had even made their fortunes by working it; but little heed was paid to the story, and no one had assigned to the popular notion any particular locality.

So if Jacques Balmat were once known to have selected a definite spot for his researches, his example would be followed, and the discovery which had been frustrated by his tragical death would be accomplished by others. Mines would

be opened, vast quantities of wood would be needed to smelt the ore, the interests of the valley would be sacrificed to the influence of persons who could gain the ear of the authorities at Turin, and their forests would be destroyed to feed the cupidity of strange adventurers. Such was the train of thought which passed through the mind of the wary Syndic, and determined him, at all hazards, to suppress every trace of facts which might put future gold-hunters on the right scent.



IN THEIR NATIVE WILDS.