The Gran Paradiso by the South Face.

By HAROLD RAEBURN.

AT Ceresole, in the beautiful Val d'Orco, the 'Stabilimento' is a delightful place to spend one or two off-days in bad weather.

Ling and I appreciated its advantages, gastromomic and otherwise, to the full, as they came between a long day of 20½ hours over the peaks on the Franco-Italian frontier, and several days' wandering in the lovely remote Italian valleys lying between Cogne and the Rutor. Chased from the Pic Central of the Meije by blizzards of wind, hail, snow, lightning, and all unkindness, we turned towards the Tarentaise—over the long, two-mile arête of the Dôme de la Sache and Mont Pourri. Then passing to Italy over five of the frontier peaks, we gained the hospitable roof of the Grand Hôtel Reale at 9 o'clock on the night of August 5, 1907.

In mist from the Cerru lake we were overtaken by darkness some way above Ceresole, and as in a semi-somnolent condition we steadily tramped down the seemingly never-ending, ever-descending track, a dream-like feeling stole over us. The dim, mysterious pine forests, the chalets, or groups of stone houses, half ruinous and seemingly deserted, from which no friendly light gleamed; the muffled sound of a bell (tolling from some invisible church) breaking the stillness of the night, the path bordered by the fairy lamps lit by numerous glowworms—all combined to induce a sense of unreality, as if we were wandering in another world. At last, seeing a cottage from which a light shone, we stopped to enquire regarding the whereabouts of the 'Stabilimento.' We were told that it was *tre quarti d' ora* off. But we were still able to step out better than the good lady's calculation, as in 20 m. we reached ultra-civilisation at the Grand Hôtel, with its electric light, *table d'hôte*, evening dress, and *baths !*

Two days of mist, rain, and thunder followed, our greatest exertion a short stroll, and the greatest excitement, watching the persevering young Italians snatch a game or two of tennis between the showers.

On the evening of the second day the weather cleared, and we resolved to start next morning to sleep out for the Gran Paradiso by the S. face.

The ordinary and the easy way to climb the Gran Paradiso is from the Victor Emmanuel hut in the Val Savaranche. Even from Ceresole this is the route usually followed.

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The first day the Nivolet Col is crossed either on foot, or more usually on mule back, and ascent made to the hut.

Next day the mountain is climbed by the easy glacier on the west, descended to the hut, and return made over the Nivolet Col the same day.

From Cogne the usual route is over the great Tribulation glacier to the top of the Col de l'Abeille, then turning sharp to the right, a snow, ice, and rock couloir is climbed to a notch between the central rock tower and the highest point, which is on the N. ridge.

If the ascent is made by the N. ridge the climb is a fine one. On the S. side of the mountain a large glacier, the Glacier di Noaschetta, lies on a kind of shelf stretching along the N. side of the Noaschetta glen, the upper part of which is called the Val di Goj.

Above this glacier rise the great cliffs of the S. face. These extend round from the vertical, or overhanging, arête of the Becca di Moncorvé, to the Col de l'Abeille. The latter is the first 'weak' point in the formidable aspect of the peak on this side. This col does not, however, lead directly to the peak itself, but to the upper part of the Tribulation glacier lying on the N.E. side of the Gran Paradiso, where it joins the route from Cogne. Our idea was to find a way up these cliffs, leading more directly to the final ridge, and in order to get an early start, we resolved to make the Bruna chalets our first night's objective. On expressing our intention of attacking the Gran Paradiso from the Noaschetta valley, we were dismayed to learn that the King of Italy was expected on the following day at Noasca. The King has a hunting chalet on a green alp high up in the recesses of the Val di Chiamosseretto, and the route from Ceresole to the huts of Bruna passes through this glen and alp. These King's paths are a great convenience to the climber. That we were to follow ascends steeply up the hillside above Ceresole to the W., and then passing over a shoulder, swings round the Broglie glen without losing height, over another shoulder into the Chiamosseretto glen, and to the King's camp. Thence it ascends to a little rocky col, descends steeply to Bruna, and passes by the Motta chalets in the direction of the Col Noaschetta. When the King is shooting of course these tracks are closed; but the opinion was expressed, that as he had not yet arrived, perhaps the authorities would let our party through. A day later would certainly be too late.

—We accordingly resolved to make an early start.

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At 8.15 on the morning of August 8, our porter, ordered overnight, turned up in good time. He was a tall, lean, active-looking man, who rejoiced in the sonorous names of Bartolomeo Rolando, and is, as we presently discovered, one of the leading guides of the district. As we were only going to take him along a mule path, from which it was impossible to stray, we could not be considered underguided with only one. Rolando is a pleasant, obliging man, and carried a pretty heavy load without complaint, and I have no doubt the floods of Italian explanations, which he poured forth to the keepers and officers at the King's camp, were the means of us getting through the lines with little worry or delay. He speaks French well, and seems thoroughly well acquainted with the Levanna peaks. We followed the King's hunting path before mentioned. The whole country was alive with parties of beaters, going up to take part in the hunt, and we kept company with some of these for part of the way. We learned from them that the Tresenta was to be the field of to-morrow's operations. The King's camp presented a busy and bustling scene. Numerous tents well floored with straw were pitched in addition to the permanent buildings of the chalet. A number of soldiers, officers, and keepers were already on the spot, and bands of porters were climbing up the steep ascent from Noasca, loaded with all kinds of provisions and articles, for the use of the King and his guests.

Thanks to Rolando's explanations, we got through after a short palaver. We then ascended steeply up to the little rocky pass, with built stone butts, leading over to the Noaschetta glen, and descending some hundreds of feet, arrived at the Bruna chalet.

It was a long low stone building, with no windows and but one small door. Rolando introduced us to the occupants. Over a fire of logs hung a great copper caldron full of curd. Stirring this was a huge, half-naked, and shaggy-haired Caliban, while on the floor crouched a woman and several children watching the operations. The 'Fug,' to use Ling's expressive phrase, was naturally horrible, and after as short a stay as politeness demanded we were glad to escape into the open air. We paid and dismissed Rolando with mutual expressions of goodwill, and after an *al fresco* meal turned in, under the shadow of a great rock, for forty winks, which I was lucky enough to obtain, though Ling was less fortunate.

In the afternoon numerous people began to arrive at the hut, and after another look at our mutual sleeping place—

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Drawn by E. T. Compton, from a Photograph by Harold Raeburn. Swan Electric Engraving Co. Ltd.

THE SOUTH FACE OF THE GRAN PARADISO, FROM ABOVE THE VALLONE DI NOASCHETTA.

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merely hay spread along one side of the floor—we resolved to 'seek higher things' and to camp out.

On expressing our intention, Caliban and Co.—unlimited apparently—who evidently considered us eccentric before, now thought us quite mad. In Italian, eked out with bad French, Caliban explained that up there we should be lonely and cold, while here we should have company and warmth. 'Plenty of both in Hades,' we might have retorted. We were obdurate, however, and after getting a load of firewood from our friend Caliban, for which we gave him a lira, to his surprise and delight, we set off up the glen.

We found a suitable boulder not far from the moraine of the glacier tongue—this tongue is called the Glacier de Goj—coming down from the Col di Gran Paradiso, and pitched camp here.

Though the night was not cold, as usual we could not sleep; so by 1.20 A.M. on the morning of August 9 we were under weigh, and crossing a stream, kept up over screes and boulders in the direction of the pass. There are considerable stretches of quite a good path here, interrupted by spaces where all traces have been swept away by avalanches of stones and boulders. Presently we struck the glacier, and walked up it partly on moraine, partly on ice. From 2.40 to 3.0 we stopped, as the ice was getting steeper, and the stones fewer, to put in some ice-nails. Shortly after restarting Ling discovered a splendid comet blazing in the eastern sky. It was the comet known as Daniel's, and we had a capital view of it, with its wide-spreading tail brighter than the Milky Way. Soon the rising flood of daylight, pouring over the rocky barrier of the Grand St. Pierre, submerged beneath its waves the lesser luminaries of the night, and the comet paled and vanished with the rest.

At 3.15 we were almost level with the Col di Gran Paradiso, then turning to the right we mounted the easy, bare Glacier di Noaschetta. This glacier extends right along below the great S. wall of the Gran Paradiso, and forms an easy highway, for a traverse between the Victor Emmanuel and Piantonetto huts.

The western boundary of the S. face of the Paradiso is formed by the Becca di Moncorvé.

From the Becca an arête falls very steeply towards the Col di Gran Paradiso, and we resolved to make our first effort in this direction.

Gaining the Noaschetta glacier at 3.30, we soon turned to our left towards the rocks of the Moncorvé arête, and halted

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at their foot for breakfast till 4.10. Then crossing the bergschrund, we climbed steep and very loose rocks to the arête, and followed it to a little col looking down to the Val Savaranche at 5.7. From then till 8.30 we had some hard climbing. The arête soon becomes exceedingly steep, and the rocks on the edge are, to look at, a miracle of equilibrium.

Enormous loose blocks appear to adhere to the arête, and seem as though a touch was all that was required to send them crashing down either to the Moncorvé glacier on the one hand, or to the Noaschetta glacier on the other. The only way to make progress was by dodging to one side of the arête or the other, where sundry overhanging slabby chimneys were discovered, which enabled us to slowly gain ground. These places reminded us of the mountaineer who 'did not mind when the rocks were merely steep,' but who 'could not stand that infernal dangling.'

The 'dangling' here was done frequently by our 'too too solid' sacks. As long as the angle permits of the rucksack behaving in its usual affectionate and clinging manner, all is well. When one's back is turned so much earthward that the sack wildly swings in air, with the strain almost at right angles to the cervical vertebræ, the climbing becomes decidedly tiresome.

The weather also by now was becoming rather doubtful. During the night it had never been cold, and the dawn, though a lovely one, was not altogether healthy-looking. Now, clouds were gathering in the direction of the Charforon and Tresenta. From the slopes of the latter an occasional rifle crack showed that the King's party were afoot.

At 8.7, at the height of 12,300 ft., just 1,000 ft. below the summit of the Gran Paradiso and 381 ft. below the top of the Becca, we abandoned this route. Descending for several hundred feet, we traversed off to left—E.—to a broad scree and dirt-covered ledge. Narrowing as we traversed E., and in places almost dying out, but never quite, this ledge led us right across the whole face to the edge of the couloir of the Col de l'Abeille route, at about one-third of its height above the glacier. No serious difficulties were encountered, though at one or two places it looked as if the ledge had completely fallen off the face.

At one point the route crossed a steep ice couloir. Earlier, this might have afforded a direct access to the final ridge. Now, it was too lively with falling stones for us to think of trying it, and it was crossed with as great expedition as possible.

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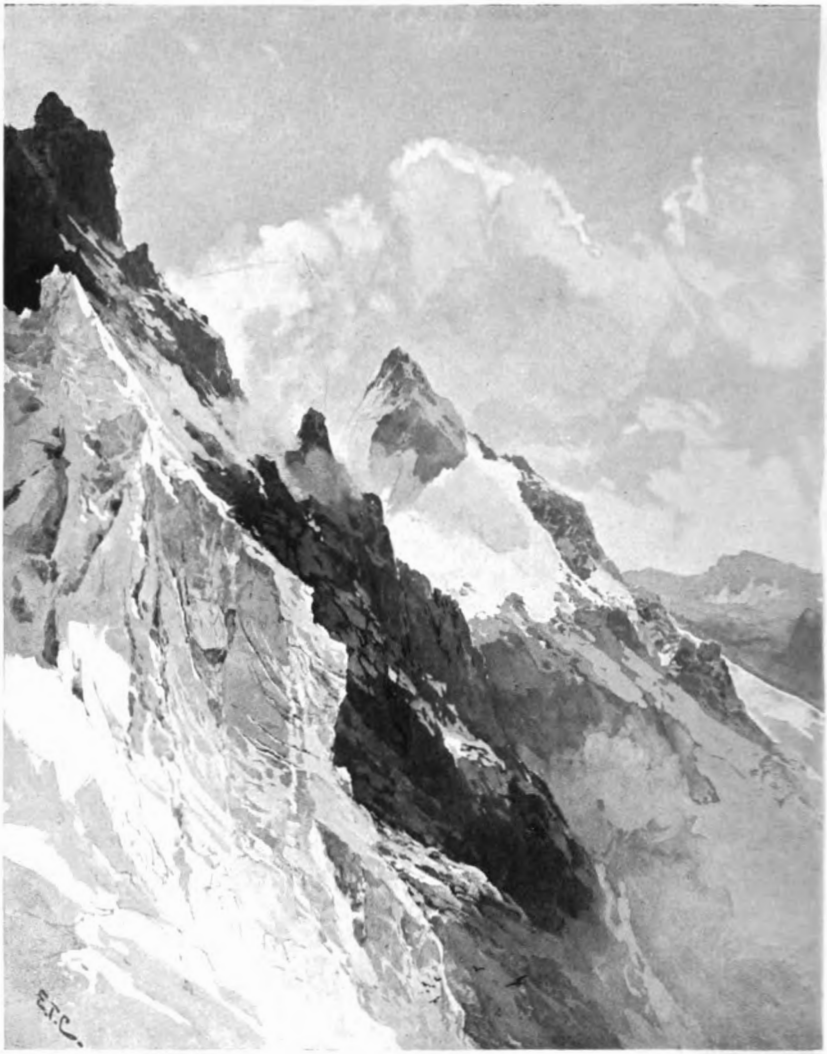

Drawn by E. T. Compton, from a Photograph by Harold Raeburn. *Swan Electric Engraving Co.*

THE SÉRACS OF THE COLLE DELL' APE LOOKING TOWARDS THE BECCA DI NOASCHETTA.

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The tongue of ice that comes down from the Col de l'Abeille (the Glacier de l'Abeille) hangs its final ice cliffs and beautiful séracs somewhat threateningly over the lower part of the Col de l'Abeille route. By keeping on the rocks of the W. bank, quite easy where we struck them, all danger from this source can be avoided. We ascended the W. bank of the couloir some way and then traversed back to W.—a good many patches of ice here caused some delay—and still keeping to the E. reached the final arête at the third tower S. of the summit. Probably we followed partly the same route as that followed by the Italian party, in the first ascent from the Noaschetta glacier.*

At several places on the 'band' there were tracks of a chamois, and we also arrived on the arête, by a neat little ledge bearing numerous traces of use by these animals. The weather was close and warm, and the snow leading up to the final peak extremely soft and fatiguing, so we kept over the rock towers on the ridge to the top, which was reached at 2.15. The weather was now too threatening to allow of the intended descent by the N. ridge and the Piccolo Paradiso. As we finished lunch, the electric disturbances suggested as speedy a retreat down the easy glacier to the Victor Emmanuel hut as convenient. The rocks were 'singing' loudly, as were also the ice-axes, and even our hats. Our hairs rose up 'like quills upon the fretful porcupine,' and the breath felt almost solid, as it issued from our lungs in thick visible vapour. It was evidently time we were off the ridge.

We were some little way from the cairn. Ling had gone down a snow slope leading off the ridge, here composed of ice and snow. I was just leaving it, and about 20 ft. above him, when a blinding flash blazed in our eyes. At the same time a shriek, like the rending of an acre of silk in a giant's hands, was heard, and simultaneously I received a violent blow on the top of the head, causing me to stagger on to my knees. The electricity evidently ran along the wet rope, for Ling also received a shock, though much slighter. I was dazed for the moment, and could only gaze stupidly at my hat, to see where the hole was. I recovered in a few seconds, and for the next five minutes we were trying our best, in spite of the heavy going in the soft snow, to beat the record down the Gran Paradiso.

The electric storm burst with extraordinary rapidity and great fury, accompanied by heavy hail. Looking back at the

* See *Climber's Guide to Cogne*, p. 102.

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jagged arête, we could see flash after flash darting in and out of the piles of frost- and lightning-riven rock which forms the towers on the arête. Nothing further occurred to us except that ten minutes later, as I put my ice-axe under my right arm, in order to gather in a dropped loop of the rope, I received a sharp shock on the under side of the arm. Lower down, where one passes along a narrow ice arête between two branches of the glacier, the axes again became so noisy that we left them sticking in the snow, while we retired down the slope a little way, till their 'song' ceased. It was curious to note that the electric current seemed to pass in gushes. Gradually the phenomena would begin, increase in intensity, then die away to recommence again.

The storm was also very local. Only on the Paradiso and only on the summit did the thundercloud lie. The peak is of course like Mont Blanc, the highest for many miles around. We reached the hut in a little over an hour and a half, and stopped there for afternoon tea before walking down to Pont. This, by the way, is a capital little hotel, very clean and comfortable. Next day, with a young porter, Élisée Dayné, we crossed to Val de Rhêmes. The weather again threatened storm, so we gave up the intended traverse of the Cime de l'Ouille, and took the Col de l'Entrelor instead. As the whole party were passing along a ridge leading to the col, we all received a decided but harmless shock. The lightning—a thunderstorm now raging—seemed this time some way off. We, however, deemed it prudent to deposit the axes, and retire below the ridge till their singing and that of the rocks ceased.*

From Val de Rhêmes we traversed the Bec de l'Invergnan by the E. ridge, this time in fine weather. A few days later we traversed Mont Blanc by the Rocher route from Courmayeur; but though we crossed on August 15, the day of the great storm, the lightning, of which there was a great deal, this time kept away from us. It, with the bitter wind and driving snow, hastened our pace from the top considerably, however, and landed us in Chamonix, instead of the Midi Cabane, in 4¼ hrs. from the summit.

* For notes on the effects of lightning, see *A. J.* vol.vii. p. 191.

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