

MT. GRUETTA.

BY R. TODHUNTER.

IT seems desirable to state at the outset that the subject of this article is a mountain, and not a bridge or some kind of patent breakfast food. The necessity for this arises from the fact that Gruetta has consistently adopted somewhat questionable methods of concealing its real identity and nature. If we may suppose that it is the object of every self-respecting mountain to guard its secrets as long as possible from the profane herd of hobnailed climbers, Gruetta has certainly achieved a considerable measure of success. In the early 'sixties of last century, when every evening during the season the cannon of Chamonix announced some new victory, the peaks and passes on the S. side of the Mt. Blanc range must no doubt have felt the necessity of taking defensive measures against the invaders. The Col de Talèfre could do no better than 'make their lives a burden to them with schrunds'—obviously a futile measure against such exponents of the glacier theory as the late Mr. Whymper. Gruetta, more adroitly, took shelter under a bridge—the highest over the Doire in the Italian Val Ferret. The mountaineering classics of the time contain occasional references to the Gruetta bridge—by which, if he happened to find it, the mountaineer descending from the Triolet glacier might reach the Courmayeur road without wading through the river or crossing an interminable waste of stones—but none to the mountain to which the bridge gives direct access. The bridge idea, then, was undeniably good, but it was clearly nothing more than a temporary expedient. Sooner or later the unclimbed peak at the end of the Aiguille de Leschaud's eastern *contrefort*—from the Frébouzie glacier Gruetta appears to be little more than an outwork of its greater neighbour—and the gently inclined arête leading to it from the unnamed point 3631 were certain to attract the notice of some explorer whose restless wishes towered to new heights. Gruetta's great achievement was to recognise the inevitable, to invite conquest by its easy W. arête, and so to sacrifice its summit to what was more essential to its honour as a mountain—the preservation of its face. The inevitable happened in 1875, when M. Lionel Dèce ascended Gruetta from the Frébouzie glacier. On that occasion, however, the mountain took refuge in clouds

—which lifted only just sufficiently to enable the party to discover the summit—and probably little or nothing was visible of the precipitous crags which defend it on every side except the west. At any rate M. Décle returned with the impression that the expedition was not of much account, except for the glacier difficulties which it shares with the Aiguille de Leschaud.

By such expedients as these Gruetta contrived to avoid publicity for more than thirty years after M. Décle's ascent. Its great S. and S.E. arêtes rising to a height of over 6000 feet above the valley, and so conspicuous in the view from the Col Ferret, its precipitous slopes descending 3000 feet to the Triolet glacier in full view of the Triolet hut, no less than its glacier deeply hidden between its arêtes and hardly visible except from the little frequented hillside on the S.E. side of the Val Ferret above Feraché, seem, strangely enough, to have remained almost entirely unnoticed. And they might perhaps have kept their privacy until the long-projected road over the Col Ferret has become an accomplished fact, and La Vachey a tourist resort, if Dr. Claude Wilson had not, in an ill day for Gruetta, undertaken a systematic exploration of the subsidiary Italian ridges of the Mt. Blanc chain. Dr. Wilson's graphic account in 'Minor Rock Climbs from Courmayeur' of his two days on Gruetta gave away all that the mountain had so long concealed—the sporting quality of its glacier, the magnificence of its rock scenery, in short the real Gruetta. The ascent of the subsidiary peak to which Dr. Wilson gave the appropriate name of Mt. Rouge de Gruetta opened up what is probably the soundest and most interesting route to the summit of Gruetta itself, and the latter probably owes its escape on that occasion solely to the limitations of the Alpine day and to the impression which it had managed to create that it was or ought to be a Minor Rock climb from Courmayeur. The fact is that Gruetta can only be included in that category in the same sense as the Aiguille Noire de Peuteret. Although not so high as the Aiguille Noire by some 300 feet, it is farther from Courmayeur and a more difficult climb—unless ascended by the Frébouzie glacier and the W. arête, a route which may be dismissed from consideration except as an 'easy way down.'

My own acquaintance with Gruetta began in 1911, when the late H. O. Jones—solicitous that none of that admirable season for new expeditions should be expended on vain repetitions of previous ascents—suggested to me that while he was assisting to make mountaineering history on the Grandes



R. Todhunter, photo.

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MT. GRUETTA, FROM THE MONTS ROUGES DE TRIOLET.

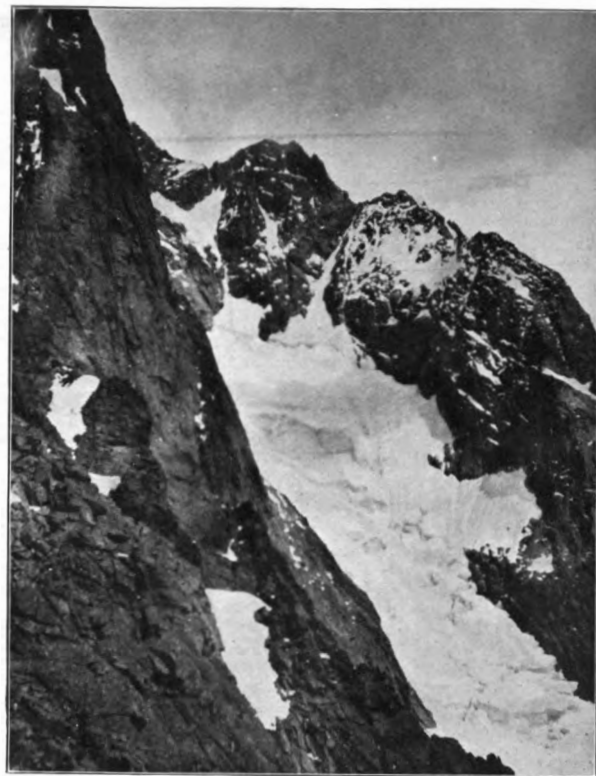
Jorasses I should go and 'clear up Gruetta' with Henri Brocherel. My own knowledge of the mountain was restricted to what could be learned from a diligent study of Dr. Wilson's paper, and Brocherel's did not go much beyond the bridge. Although, therefore, conscience suggested a doubt whether it was quite decent to take advantage of the information on pp. 13 and 14 of Dr. Wilson's paper and to disregard altogether the sound doctrine on p. 4, common sense pointed out that the day that had not been long enough for his untiring party would probably be a great deal too short for me. Besides, it was a year in which almost any excuse for sleeping out seemed good enough. So we engaged a porter, escaped—by driving up the Val Ferret—part of the penalty that we ought to have paid for an afternoon start, and attacked the grass and rock slopes leading to the Gruetta glen. Like most of the lower slopes on this side of the Mt. Blanc range, the approach to the Gruetta glen is extremely steep, and if a start is made from La Vachey or Courmayeur in the early morning the preliminary scramble up to the glacier—in the absence of anything like a track—must be reckoned with as a serious item in the day's work. From subsequent experience it seems that the best line to take is well on the left—starting from near the foot of a dry gully. On this first expedition we kept to the right, and by the time we reached the glacier we appreciated fully the advantage of not having the 2000 feet from the bridge to the glacier before us in the morning. Having selected a suitable *gîte*—it seemed an ideal place at the time, but the glamour of 1911 must have been over it, for I failed to discover the spot in the following year—Brocherel and I went up to the moraine to survey the situation. From our view-point Dr. Wilson's two routes and the general conformation of the mountain—its two great *arêtes* and the couloir descending to the glacier from a small snow slope below the col between Gruetta itself and Mt. Rouge—were clearly seen. A long and apparently unbroken *vire*, traversing the wall of the S. *arête* at a height of about 800 feet above the glacier and leading into a gully which descends from the last notch in the *arête*, was more remarkable than attractive, and the *arête* itself, if accessible, was so studded with gendarmes that the chances of climbing or turning them all seemed at least doubtful. We decided without much hesitation in favour of Dr. Wilson's first route—by the glacier and the couloir. Starting at 5.15 on the morning of August 12, we found the glacier a good deal longer and—at any rate under 1911 conditions—more difficult than it looks.

One tremendous crevasse forced us right over to the left before we managed to cross on a leaf of ice, and it was nearly eight o'clock before we reached the bergschrund just opposite the foot of the Mt. Rouge rocks. Our route lay to the left, but was only reached by crossing the bergschrund on the right and traversing round glacier-worn rocks. At the head of the snow-slope above the bergschrund a new difficulty faced us. The couloir here narrows into a chimney, which was separated in 1911 by a wide gap from our position at the highest point of the snow-slope. The rocks for some 12 feet above the floor of the gap afforded few holds, and a strenuous effort on Brocherel's part, aided by such support as could be given with an axe from below, was necessary before a landing could be effected in the chimney. Twenty or thirty feet higher the angle eased off, and a short scramble up the rocks at the right of the small snowfield brought us at 10.15 to the col overlooking the Triolet glacier. On our right was the arête descending from Mt. Rouge, but we did not give it a thought, as we certainly ought to have done, as a possible line of retreat. Our whole attention was divided between the practicability of climbing the shattered and apparently dangerous arête leading to the summit of Gruetta, and the probability that a retreat by the couloir, if eventually necessary, might be cut off, or at any rate rendered undesirable, as the day advanced, by falling stones. Between the two and a third breakfast we made a prolonged halt. The arête itself was far from attractive, and the steep slope on the Triolet side was apparently impracticable. There remained only the great wall overhanging the Gruetta glacier. It was eleven o'clock before the valour of ignorance so far prevailed over professional discretion as to admit of our having a look at this possible route, and then all doubts as to the outcome of the climb suddenly vanished. From a little below the col a gently rising traverse, interrupted by only one serious obstacle, could be followed into a steep but obviously practicable gully leading to a point high up on the arête. It was possible to walk—if not with one's hands in one's pockets, at any rate without serious difficulty—along the face of the tremendous wall that supports Gruetta's S.E. arête. From the top of the gully the arête itself afforded good going for 40 or 50 feet, and then, at exactly the right moment, a second but shorter and more delicate traverse led into a second couloir by which we reached the summit of the mountain in $1\frac{1}{4}$ hours from the col. Over the descent I would draw a veil if it were not desirable to hold up to infamy the



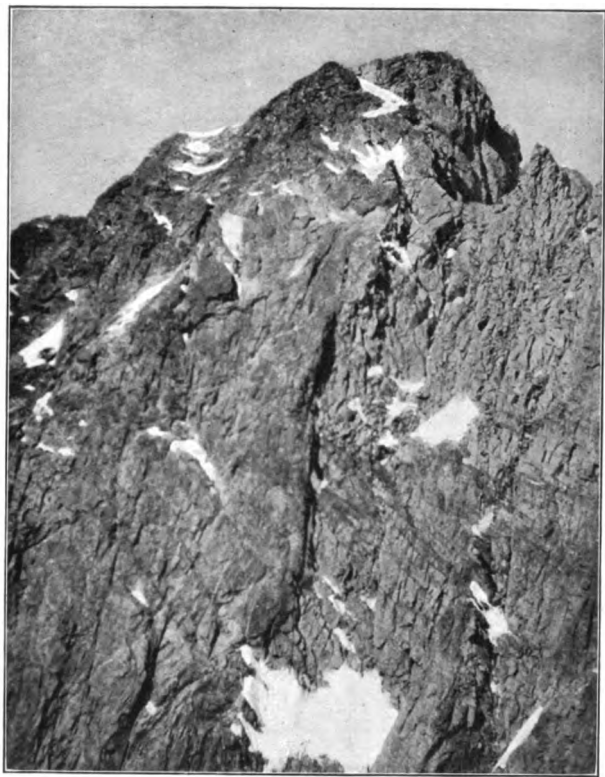
R. Todhunter, photo.

MT. GRUETTA, FROM THE SOUTH.



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THE S.E. FACE OF GRUETTA,
from Mt. Rouge.



R. Todhunter, photo.

GRUETTA GLACIER AND MT. ROUGE,
from the S. arête of Mt. Gruetta.



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ON THE ARÊTE OF MT. ROUGE.

lower part of the rock rib that divides the Frébouzie glacier. Brocherel had not visited this part of the glacier, but was clear that there was a way off the rib. So we descended on the extreme left of the glacier, turned the bergschrund with some trouble by Gruetta's rocks, crossed the glacier to the rock rib, and descended to its lowest point—only to find ourselves cut off by a vertical wall of perhaps 200 feet from the Col des Hirondelles route. In vain we hunted for a way off low and high—but not quite high enough, for the one route off is far above the point where we had traversed on to the rib. There was nothing for it but to return to the E. branch of the glacier, and the most vigorous cutting of the irreducible minimum of steps by Brocherel's powerful arm only just took us clear of the ice as light failed. We reached La Vachey at 9 and Courmayeur at 11. It had cost us eight hours to descend to La Vachey from Gruetta by the easy way!

This expedition, although interesting and successful in its way, left room for a good many afterthoughts. There was the unclimbed S. arête, which might after all be the best route, and there was the attractive possibility, suggested to me by Dr. Wilson, of linking up his route up Mt. Rouge with my own up Gruetta. As the latter included a couloir which might not be available in a less eligible season than 1911, a combination of the two routes would almost certainly be an improvement. And finally there was our very unsatisfactory experience of the easy way down. So in 1912 I went up to La Vachey with H. M. F. Dodd. But in that melancholy season avalanches fell continually down the couloirs at the head of the glacier, and we did nothing on Gruetta beyond ascertaining practically the difficulty of getting on to the S. arête from the small W. branch of the Gruetta glacier.

Once again, in 1918, I returned to La Vachey, and this time with the invaluable asset of Josef Knubel's company. It was characteristic of Gruetta that it began by outwitting Knubel. Could we climb the S. arête? I suggested, as we looked at Gruetta from the road below La Vachey. Knubel's scornful rejection of the idea that there could be any question about our climbing any arête of a second-class peak nobody had ever heard of made me feel that after all I had been magnifying a mole-hill into a mountain. Uncertain weather prevented us from starting in the morning until nearly 6, but clearly that was immaterial for a minor expedition of this kind. So from the end of the moraine below the Frébouzie glacier we scrambled up to a snow-patch between the two

branches of the S. arête. From here we climbed more or less difficult rocks to the point 3225, just beyond the junction of the two branches. Before us the arête rose for perhaps 800 feet in a broad and excessively steep buttress, seamed by a long snow-couloir, and beyond this (as we knew from our previous inspection) was the ridge studded with gendarmes constituting the arête proper. But it was already 10.45, and at the point where we stood further direct progress was completely barred by a deep gap from which couloirs descended steeply to the Frébouzie and Gruetta glaciers. We recognised sorrowfully that the only way to climb the S. arête would be to start early by the Frébouzie couloir and to have the day in hand for contingencies. In the interests of exploration we returned by the E. branch of the arête, and Knubel made things even with the mountain to a certain extent by hitting off the only place—as it seemed as one looked back—where it was possible to descend from the arête to the Gruetta glen.

We ought, perhaps, to have returned to the S. arête, but our only available day in a stay of mixed weather was hypothesized to the interesting problem suggested by Dr. Wilson. Starting from La Vachey at 3 A.M., and rejecting by a casting-vote a proposal that we should wait for daylight before attacking the steep rock and grass slopes leading to the Gruetta glen, we reached the foot of the glacier at 5.30. The glacier was in much better condition than in 1911, and, following Dr. Wilson's second route without any special difficulty, we were at the head of the right-hand couloir and the foot of Mt. Rouge de Gruetta's eastern buttress by 8.15. This buttress is one of the most entertaining things on the whole mountain. At the very start it offers for solution an awkward problem in a formidable little overhanging chimney, which, however, can probably be turned on the right; and then, higher up, there is the remarkable situation described by Dr. Wilson in his account of the climb. An hour, including time expended on photographic attempts which were not very successful, owing to the steepness of the rocks, took us to the top of Mt. Rouge and to the short link which was the main object of our expedition. This went well enough—a short overhanging section of the arête being turned on the left face—and at 9.45 we joined my 1911 route on the col between Mt. Rouge and Gruetta. It was satisfactory to find that my recollection had not overrated the merits of the climb from the col to the summit. The lower part of the gully leading back to the arête required care, and took longer than in 1911, on account of ice, but the whole

route was thoroughly sound, and the delicacy of the traverses won Knubel's warm approval. There remained the descent by the easy way, but this time—thanks to my previous misfortunes and to careful inspection from La Vachey—we made no mistake. Following the W. arête a good deal further than in 1911, we avoided the bergschrund and took to the rock rib at its highest point, descended the rib for some little distance, and then reached the middle portion of the Frébouzie glacier by easy rocks on the right. A couple of sitting glissades took us off the glacier in two hours from the summit.

By this route the traverse of Gruetta makes a delightful day and provides agreeably varied entertainment—a two hours' test of temper and lungs on the steep scramble up to Gruetta glacier, three hours on the glacier and couloir, three of excellent climbing on good rocks, and finally an easy way down. The rocks, owing to the steepness of Gruetta's walls, give the snow very little chance to lie, so that the climb is one that could probably be taken when other things are impracticable.

THE N.W. PEAK OF LES BANS BY THE N.W. ARÊTE AND THE
GRANDE CASSE.

By E. G. WELLS.

WE—our party consisted of Messrs. E. V. Slater, P. Scoones, myself, and Daniel Zurbruggen of Saas Grund—had settled down at La Bérarde with the fixed intention of attacking the Meije and the Écrins. But preconceived plans in the mountains are almost as uncertain of fulfilment as they are on the battlefield, and after several days of storm and rain the two great peaks seemed as distant as Paris and London are to the Germans to-day. We filled up two days by crossing the Brèche de la Maye and returning by the Col des Cavales, but from the condition of the latter it was evident that the rocks of the Meije would not be ready for some days, and, the writer having no more time, it was decided that the party should try their luck on a rather less lofty summit. The southern group of Dauphiné peaks had looked very inviting from the Cavales pass, all sparkling with a fresh coat of snow, and on reaching the hotel we found another party also tired of inaction, and so it was agreed that all should start on the morrow—August 16, 1913—for Les Bans. It is a long and rather dreary