midst of what is perhaps the grandest scenery in the whole Himalaya ; and what we unfortunates who now have to stay at home want is a good description of those glorious mountains and not long and weary accounts of everything else except the one distinctive feature of the region.

I have spoken of exploring rather than climbing ; but there is, of course, climbing *ad lib.* to be done in that region. At Durbin Jangal there is—or was thirty-eight years ago—plenty of scrub for firewood and a fair amount of grass, and from the heights above it must be views of K_2 and the Gasherbrum peaks which must exceed in grandeur anything else in the Himalaya—and therefore in the world—except perhaps the view of Everest from close by it on the southern side which no one yet has seen.

Les Écrins and Mont Pelvoux.

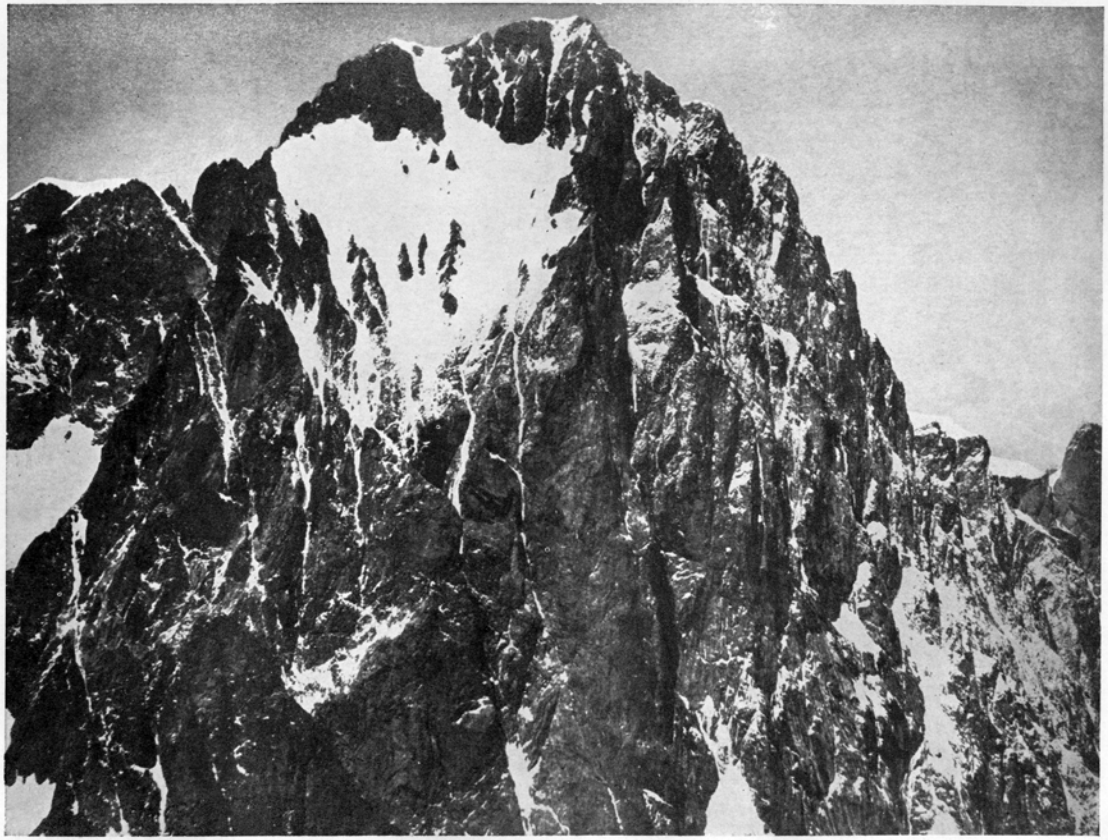
An unpublished letter from the late Miss Gertrude Bell.

[We offer our grateful thanks to Lady Bell and to Sir Ernest Benn for the privilege of being allowed to publish this letter, which does not appear in 'Letters of Gertrude Bell.'—*Editor, A.J.*]

La Grave,
Monday, Sept. 4, 1899.

DEAREST FATHER,—I have been looking forward for the last twenty-four hours to the moment when I should be able to pour into the ears of my family a full account of my adventures. My tour has been brought to a most successful conclusion, so now for the longest letter in the world ! The truth, the whole truth, and—well, perhaps a little more than the truth, shall we say ! I wrote to Elsa from La Bérarde on Thursday morning.

I spent a peaceful afternoon reading Whymper's terrible account of the first ascension of the Écrins and left about 5 for the Refuge du Carrelet in order to try them myself. We turned up a valley to the right and followed up the stream for an hour and a quarter. The valley was narrow and desolate beyond words, your view headed off in all directions by glaciers. All the valleys on this side of the mountains are wild, narrow and inhospitable, bare of verdure and uninhabited. The Refuge



Phot. Alfred Holmes.

LES ÉCRINS, S. FACE,
from Pic Coolidge.

stands most picturesquely against a great rock at the junction of two torrents, a wood of rather stumpy fir trees climbing up behind it. It's just like the Châtelleret, but more enclosed by rock and wood. Its great fault is that it stands far too low down.

When I arrived I found Prince Louis of Orléans sitting on a stone watching for me. He had come over the Brèche that day and had heard in La Bérarde of my moves. He looks absurdly young, but he is old enough to be an officer in the Austrian army. He spoke English rather badly, French and German very well, but his native language I discovered is Portuguese. He's nothing of an Alpinist, though he has been at it 4 seasons. He had with him Faure and his son and an English servant, who climbed very well, smoking a pipe all the time! We sat on a stone and talked while Faure cooked his soup, and when it was ready he invited me to dine with him, which, as there was only one saucepan and I should have had to wait some time, I promptly did. *Und wie!* I was hungry. While we were dining my two Germans arrived and proceeded to cut and eat an excellent dinner outside. We sat on rocks and all talked the while, and all exchanged addresses that we might subsequently exchange photographs, for we all had cameras with us. As for the night, *vide passim*, except that I slept soundly and was much annoyed when at midnight the guides began to get up. We drank chocolate and a little before 1 we were all off, my caravan leading. The night was quite clear, but the way up the gorge very dark. We kept our lanterns till about 4, when we got on to the glacier. It was a very long way up through the wood—the Refuge ought to be at the top of it—and then long *éboulis* and névés.

The guides went awfully slowly and stopped to rest several times, which was boring. We roped on the glacier, it was precious cold with a wind. Presently the peaks on the opposite side of the valley turned scarlet, but we got no sun until we came on to a snow col between the Écrins and a peak called the Fifre—the Col des Avalanches it is called. An extraordinarily steep slope of ice, which has only been done once, leads down on to the Glacier Noir, and looking over it we saw a sea of soft white cloud beneath us, with the sun walking straight across. We turned to the left, crossed a little schrund and got on to the rock, where we sat down, shaded from the sun but not from the wind, and had a hearty meal. You observe that I have recovered a mountain appetite! It was here that I made the sad discovery that my excellent bottle of fresh lemonade had

been left behind at the Refuge! The good Germans gave me some of theirs.

It was awfully cold, we didn't linger to digest, but skirts off, and straight up the rock, Mathon still leading. When we were about 10 minutes up Marnis dropped his axe. It fortunately stuck on the edge of the schrund and Prince Louis's porter went down to fetch it. It was a most disagreeable ten minutes. I doubled up and sat on my hands and my feet and froze at discretion. However, the rock soon warmed us. It was very pleasant going, very steep but good rock, not as difficult as the Meije. There was a wire rope on the only bad place, and even that we could easily have passed without any extra help. In an hour or so we turned a corner and got into the sun, which was great bliss. We were far ahead, so we sat down on a little ledge on which Mathon had once passed a night of mist and *verglas* and waited for the others.

Opposite to us, so near that one felt one might throw a stone across, towered the Pelvoux, the Pic sans Nom and the Aile-froide. We started off again, Prince Louis in front, and had a very agreeable couple of hours over ice slopes, awfully steep down, broken by small rocky arêtes. The only drawback was that these were extremely rotten and one had to go with immense precaution, both for oneself and for the others. At one moment, as I stepped on to a rock, away it came and in an instant I was on my back on the ice; it wasn't at all alarming, because my rope was quite tight, but I cut my finger, and poor Mathon, who was holding hard on to a sharp rock, which broke under his hand, cut himself rather badly. Germany to the rescue as usual. Dr. Paulcke produced a bandage for him and sticking-plaster for me, and we went gaily on. Many photographs were taken at this period. They will be not a little comic. We next came to some long couloirs of bad rock, and this was rather tedious, for the Orléans caravan sent down clouds of stones, so that we had to let them get to the top of each couloir before we started. Then we five went on together. It was very cold waiting. These rocks finally brought us to the summit at 10 o'clock.

The Écrins is shaped like a spoon which has been cut off halfway down the bowl; we had come up the edge of the spoon on the west and incurved side. The top is a most satisfactory top, sharp and so thin that you can't think how it stands at all. The day was clearer than on the Meije; we saw the Matterhorn, the Dent Blanche, a whole line of great peaks. We stayed for about an hour and a quarter, ate an enormous



Phot. V. Sella.

LES ÉCRINS, N. FACE
from Grande Ruine.

lunch, took photographs and slept—at least I did for quite 20 minutes. Then we went off over the top of the spoon and down the other side, which is completely covered with snow leading down on to the great Glacier Blanc, which is the largest I have seen in Dauphiné. The Germans led and had to make the steps down a very long and almost precipitous slope of ice. Fortunately it was pretty thickly coated with snow, in excellent condition, so that there was not much ice cutting to do. Even so we waited three-quarters of an hour or more to give them a start, and I slept peacefully the while.

It took us a good half-hour to get down the first slope (—when I say slope !) of snow, backwards straight down. My left hand, which I had to put into the step above me, speedily lost all sensation, which was rather a comfort, as the feelings it had before enjoyed were not pleasant ; but when I came to the bottom I found that three of my fingers were frost-bitten. There are still enormous sore blisters on them. The wind blew merrily and the snow swept round in clouds—it was intolerably cold. However, at last it ended in a great big enormous schrund, and I thought I never should let myself down round the corner of it, but I did after all. I was now in rags, so I put on my skirt for decency—at least Mathon did, for I couldn't feel at all with my fingers (you know this is all quite true !). We went on down endless slopes of ice with a thin coating of snow on them, jumped down two little schrunds (one of which Prince Louis descended on his back, for his porter jumped without giving fair warning). I heard the English servant call out, ' I've 'old of the rope, sir,' in exactly the same voice as he would have said that his shaving water was ready (it sounded so funny) ; and at last, at last we were down on the Glacier Blanc.

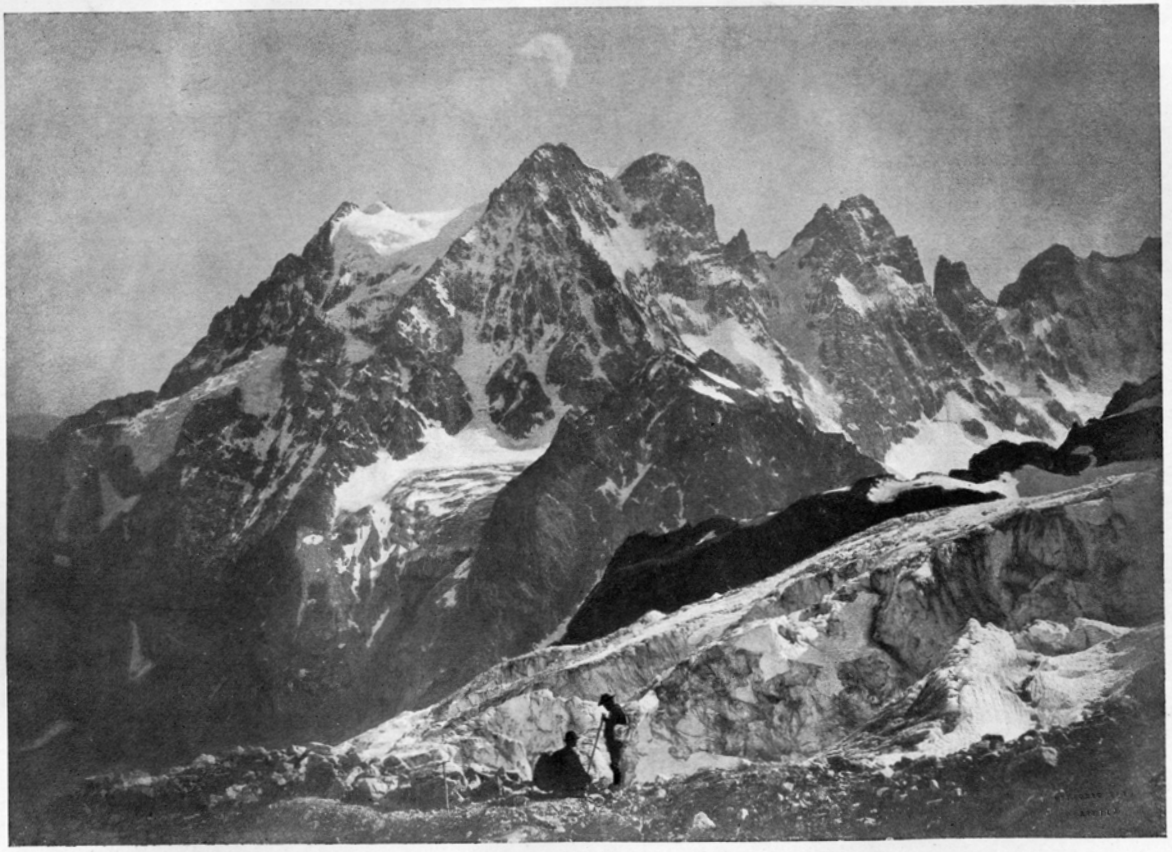
I didn't distinguish myself during that descent. I fell quite flat on my back twice. I'm a dreadful duffer at ice (but rather good at rock by this time !). We found the Germans sitting in the delicious sun, on their knapsacks, waiting for us, and we sat down too in the middle of the glacier and ate up all the rest of the provisions with extreme cheerfulness (but my fingers were painful and rubbing them in the snow torture) and waved our hands to the Orléans party, who came down far behind us and passed over the Col des Écrins at the head of the glacier, making for La Bérarde. We, however, turned to the right down the great glacier between the Écrins and its *contre-forts* and all those peaks and cols of which one sees the other side from the Refuge de l'Alpe.

An hour or so brought us to enormous séracs, where we unroped and tracked down rock and loose stones to the Refuge Tuckett, which is a disgusting little hole. A little lower down Mathon lost the way, and while he looked for it we sat and observed the scenery. (It was quite 5 o'clock by this time.) There is an extraordinary Alpine view here ; I'll try and make you understand. The two glaciers come together at the Pré de Madame Carle, a little oasis of stumpy trees and patches of grass on which stands the Refuge Cézanne, and one is all show and the other is all stones, the fact being that the line of peaks, Pelvoux, etc., and that side of the Écrins are so steep that there is no place for the snow to accumulate. Mathon found the way and we almost wished he hadn't, it was such a beast—an endless rock, very very steep, there is an enormous drop between the Refuge Tuckett and the Refuge Cézanne.

It was dusk when we got to the bottom ; we marched bravely on through the growing dark over *éboulis* and the rockiest of paths, and my fingers hurt like—no, blazes, I was going to say, but freezes would be better ; and I had hurt my foot on a rock, too, and I can't think why it wasn't more disgusting than it was. We got in at 8, having lighted our lanterns again half an hour before, and I never saw anything more delightful than the open door of the inn. The good Hippolyte Rodier had arrived and advised them of our coming to such purpose that twelve *couverts* had been spread for us ! The shortest of toilettes and then the largest of dinners. We were extremely merry, for we felt we had a real good day's mountaineering behind us ; but it was too long—19 hours, one gets so sick of it. I wasn't badly tired at all, no aches except my fingers, an enormous appetite, and how I slept ! But it's too long all the same. I like the Meije better too ; it's more interesting. Next morning I was perfectly brisk and down to breakfast at 9.30, which I thought a good performance. My Germans were down before me, bless them !

Ailefroide is lovely ; it stands on the tiniest bit of green at the junction of two valleys. The inn (which is much less good than La Bérarde, but not very bad), a church and one or two hovels make up the whole place. There are patches of firs in the fields and climbing up the hillsides. We had a thunderstorm at twelve, but at two it cleared and I decided to go on, Ailefroide not being a place to make a long stay in. The Germans also decided to go.

I started at 3.15 up the other valley, which leads down to Ailefroide—very very steep and narrow and very beautiful.



Phot. V. Sella.

PELVOUX AND PIC SANS NOM.
Séracs of Glacier Blanc in foreground.

We presently turned straight up the hillside to our right and at 6.30 reached the Refuge Lemercier after a long pull up. It lies almost at the foot of the glaciers of the Pelvoux. I found there two young French officers—I had heard at the inn that they had gone up. One—he was rather nice—came out to meet me and presented himself in great form ; the other was extremely grumpy. He retired at once to bed, I think he had a chill. The Refuge is a good one with a sleeping-room and a cooking-room. Mathon made my soup, and the nice officer talked to me while I supped. It was after dark when the Germans arrived and I talked to them while they supped and then went to bed—on a mattress !—and slept most soundly till three.

This was Sunday morning. The two Frenchmen were off half an hour before us, they went a different way and we never saw them again. They hadn't reached the top when we were there, for there were no traces in the snow. I expect they are still in some couloir. This was a day of illness. Dr. Paulcke had had fever all night ; he started out to make the ascent looking like a rag and turned back after ten minutes. So Lohmüller joined my caravan. There was a most wonderful sunrise on a sea of cloud, all the peaks quite clear. We crossed the tail of the glacier, some stones and some névés, and when we got to the foot of the arête Mathon broke down. We begged him to stop there, but he insisted on coming half-way up and then gave way altogether. So Lohmüller, Marnis and I went on to the top, one and a half hours of arête, quite easy but bad rock, half an hour of very good easy glacier. The whole ascent from the hut was only four and a quarter hours and the descent about two and a half. We came down a tremendous pace, Lohmüller leading and I flying after amidst showers of stones. However, no one was hurt. The rope was pretty much anyhow, mostly between my feet, I think. We found Mathon better and we all returned to the hut together, with good glissades down the névés. Dr. Paulcke was also better. It was perfectly delicious at the Refuge ; we produced all our provisions and had lunch in common, and then I lay on the rocks and slept for an hour. We left at two and I got in at seven, but the Germans stopped by the way and cooked their own dinner out of doors. They came in while I was having mine and we chatted on till nearly nine, when I went to bed. I haven't seen them to-day, for they were not up when I left this morning, and I think they meant to sleep at Le Monêtier.

This day, *nämlich*, has been one of the nicest I had had.

We left Ailefroide at five; the valley got wider and more pleasing as we went down, and it was perfectly charming walking by the edge of the river over grass and through woods. After an hour or so we turned up and over a heavenly little grassy col—the Col des Chaudins. We got to the top at 8.30 and looked all across the Guisane valley, the Galibier opposite and Le Monêtier at our feet. The way down lay all through pine woods, too nice for words, and when I arrived at ten M. Izoard received me with open arms. I went down to the Établissement des Bains and had a delicious hot bath—all the people were much excited at seeing me again. Then I had the most excellent lunch—you remember how good everything is there—and left by the diligence at 11.45, getting here at three. Rather a nice old French couple were lunching and coming on here. I have been sitting with them after dinner outside. Two caravans have done the Meije to-day. One consisted of two young Germans without a guide. They sat opposite to me at dinner and told me all their adventures.

Now I must tell you that M. Izoard let the wife of our purse friend know that I was there and she came to thank me for the 100 francs and send messages to you. Izoard then took me to her house to see her children—four of them, two boys and two girls. The youngest boy is a delicate little soul and since babyhood his one idea has been to become a priest. But they can't pay for his instruction. They want two hundred francs to carry them through the next three years; then, Izoard says, they can manage. The little boy stood by with big shining eyes while Izoard told me this tale and the mother, who is a good speechless sort of peasant woman, looking awfully old and worn, wrung her hands and asked if you would help. I talked the matter over with Izoard afterwards and said I would tell you about it. He says they are very decent people and that the money would not be thrown away. The boy has a fixed idea and besides he is too delicate to work in the fields. They are terribly poor—they just keep alive with the hardest work. I arranged with Izoard that if you liked to do anything for them, the money should pass through his hands. It would be rather funny if the end of the purse adventure were to be that you should have added another priest to the world!

I think I'll now finish these few remarks. Goodbye, beloved family.

Ever your affectionate daughter,

GERTRUDE.



Phot. V. Sella.

MONT PELVOUX, N.W. OR GLACIER NOIR FACE.