

that it will be systematically avoided until it becomes safe again, which may be a matter of days, or even of more than a week. Thus, if Ensmann had taken the old summer route, his porters would quite possibly have been involved on their way down by the groove ; or else some of the Austrians would have been caught on their way up. The only safe remedy is for skiers to keep widely separated whenever there is the least possibility of dangerous places being encountered ; and they should not rely on detecting each such place individually as it is approached, even on an orthodox route to a hut.

TWO LEGENDS OF MONT BLANC.

By T. GRAHAM BROWN.

I. *The alleged ascent of the old Brenva Route by Courmayeur guides in 1854.*

A RECENT number of *Alpinisme*¹ refers to the claim that Courmayeur guides ascended the old Brenva route in 1854 ; a fable which apparently is accepted *without further criticism* !

The story had its origin in Alexis Clusaz, an old Courmayeur guide, who told it to the Abbé Henry. Alexis Clusaz was still a porter in 1857 (which may explain his absence from Ramsay's party in 1855 : the information is from J. M. Chabod's *Führerbuch*) ; his enterprise is shown by the fact that he (together with Julien Grange and J. M. Perrod, both to be mentioned below) was a member of the party of five Courmayeur guides who repeated Whymper's ascent of the Grandes Jorasses (1865), two days after the first ascent, in order to learn the way ;² he became the first *guide-chef* at Courmayeur when the Bureau des Guides was established officially in 1868. Clusaz was apparently an honest and sincere man, and the Abbé, an historian of sincerity, accepted the story and embodied it in his short pamphlet.³ But Clusaz must have been an old man when he gave his account, and his memory must have been uncertain.

The Abbé Henry's pamphlet seems to be the sole authority for the story, and I have never been able to find any other reference to this alleged ascent in any of the places where one would naturally expect it to be mentioned—a general silence in itself sufficient to discredit the claim, even were there no other evidence against it. The party of guides on the alleged ascent consisted of Joseph Marie Chabod *dit* Turin, Alexandre Fenoillet *dit* Tutse, Joseph Marie Perrod *dit* Cacagnon, Gratien Bareux *dit* Saint Francei, Alexis Proment *dit* Gaccia, Joseph Marie Chabod *dit* Turisa (cousin to the

¹ *Alpinisme*, No. 37, p. 33.

² Whymper : *Scrambles*, footnote, p. 344, 1871.

³ L'Abbé Henry : *Les Premiers Guides de Courmayeur*, Aosta, 1908.

first), and Alexis Clusaz himself. The ascent is said to have been made on September 27 and 28, 1854; the Col de la Brenva is said to have been attained from a bivouac on the Brenva Glacier, although not the summit of Mont Blanc itself; but nothing is said of the route taken on the descent. The same identical party is stated also to have reached the top of the Corridor at the Col de la Brenva from the Col du Midi over Mont Blanc du Tacul and Mont Maudit on September 19 and 20, 1854—that is, eight days before the attempt under consideration and a year before Sir James Ramsay's virtual ascent of Mont Blanc by that route. These two claims stand or fall together.

That attempts were made by the Courmayeur guides to reach Mont Blanc on these dates from the Brenva Glacier and the Col du Midi need not be doubted. What is in question is the extent to which the two attempts were pushed. Had the Col de la Brenva (top of the Corridor) been reached on either attempt, and had a route from Courmayeur therefore been made to connect with the upper part of the Chamonix route, either attempt would deserve to be called successful.

It must be remembered that up to about the time of these two alleged ascents the Courmayeur 'guides' were little more than muleteers and almost entirely ignorant of glaciers. Their activities took them occasionally to the Cramont; but for the most part they circled Mont Blanc by the fashionable tour of low passes—Col du Ferret, Col de Balme, Col du Bonhomme, Col des Fours, Col de la Seigne, etc.—and the achievement of that tour was then the 'qualification' of a prospective Courmayeur 'guide.' The first Courmayeur guide known to have crossed the Col du Géant was Antoine Proment, who did so with J. D. Forbes in 1842, but Forbes mentions that the passage of the Col was known before his own crossing to one Courmayeur guide (not Proment), whom he does not name;⁴ in 1845, J. M. Chabod *dit* Turin made his first passage with W. R. Bulwer, Isidore Gadin being also in the party. 'Turin' made a second crossing in 1850, with Docker and Blackwell, Christian Bleuer being the leading guide. As showing the then slight experience on ice of the Courmayeur men, it is significant that Docker and Blackwell wrote in Bleuer's *Führerbuch* praising his leadership, 'while the local guides were often unable and unwilling to proceed.' Other crossings of the Col du Géant were also made by 'Turin' in 1851, 1852, 1853, and 1854 (twice). The local *chasseurs* must undoubtedly have had more experience of glacier work than the guides, but these *traverses* of the Col du Géant by Proment, Chabod, Gadin and perhaps only two other local guides (in the expeditions mentioned above) almost exhaust the glacier experiences of the Courmayeur guides up to 1854. From about 1852, however, the ascent to the Col du Géant with return to Courmayeur began to

⁴ Forbes: *Travels through the Alps*, p. 218, Edinburgh, 1843.

be a popular tourist expedition. No glaciers need be touched on that expedition, and the undoubtedly slight experience of ice work amongst the Courmayeur guides in itself makes it difficult—nay impossible—to believe that they were able to accomplish the ascent from the Brenva Glacier to the Col de la Brenva in 1854. It is related that Jean Antoine Carrel himself possessed no ice axe previous to 1862. But the rich harvest then enjoyed in Chamonix, and perhaps also the manner in which the Courmayeur guides were looked down upon there when they passed through with the mules on their round tours, certainly gave rise to the ambition to make a rival route to Mont Blanc from Courmayeur. The Brenva Glacier seems to offer the most direct route. An alternative is by the Col du Géant and the Col du Midi—the route prospected by Hill in 1786 with Chamonix guides and a Courmayeur *chasseur* (probably Jordanay *dit* Patience),⁵ and perhaps still a living tradition at Courmayeur in 1854.

If the relative inexperience of the Courmayeur men makes it almost impossible to believe that their attempt by the Brenva Glacier could have been successful, the absolute silence concerning the attempt proves its failure. Carrel,⁶ writing in 1855 but before Ramsay's virtual ascent by the Col du Midi route, does not mention either of the alleged 1854 attempts and seems to have regarded an ascent from the Col du Géant as problematical. Had the Col de la Brenva been reached by either route he must have heard about it, and would have written in a very different manner. King⁷ was in Courmayeur after the events of 1855, and mentions both Ramsay's expedition by the Col du Midi and the guideless attempt of Hudson and Kennedy—but says no word about any previous attempt to reach Mont Blanc by the Col du Midi route or the Brenva Glacier. Of particular significance is a curious document dictated by Julien Grange *dit* Laberge about 1876 or 1877.⁸ Grange had started his work as a guide in 1856 (he made his first passage of the Col du Géant in 1857), and must have heard all about the 1854 attempts at the time. His document gives an account of the various attempts to find a route to Mont Blanc from Courmayeur, but contains no reference to those under consideration here. In 1865 Grange was taken by Moore to the Brenva bivouac on the occasion of the famous first ascent of the old Brenva route, but, through no fault of his own, was not taken on the climb itself. Grange's description of this expedition is significant: '*En 1863* [*sic*, really 1865] *dans le but de découvrir un autre passage* [Grange has just described Head's first successful complete ascent by the Col du Midi] *du côté de la Brenva, je m'offris non comme guide, mais seulement comme porteur pour avoir l'occasion de découvrir un autre passage pour arriver sur le Mont*

⁵ H. F. Montagnier: *A.J.* 34, 371.

⁶ G. Carrel: *Les Alpes Pennines*, p. 17, Aosta, 1855.

⁷ S. W. King: *The Italian Valleys, etc.*, pp. 94, 95, London, 1858.

⁸ *Augusta Praetoria*, 5, No. 8, p. 172, 1923.

Blanc. . . . It is clear that Grange at least knew nothing of a previous ascent by the Brenva Glacier; yet he had been so interested in the problem that he had himself made more than one exploration of the Brenva Glacier before 1865.⁹ It is clear from internal evidence in Mondini's classic article on the Italian flanks of Mont Blanc¹⁰ that the author gathered much personal information about the history of the various routes, but he makes no mention of the alleged ascents in 1854, and the tradition concerning them (if it ever existed) must have been lost before his time.

The most curious silence of all is that of A. W. Moore—and it is damning.¹¹ H. B. George, R. J. S. Macdonald, A. W. Moore, F. Morshead, and R. M. Stephenson came together at Courmayeur, with Christian Almer, Melchior Anderegg and Peter Perren in 1863 in order to make a route to Mont Blanc by the Brenva Glacier. H. B. George explored the Brenva Glacier with Almer, who was thereafter not sanguine about the success of the proposed attempt; Anderegg and Perren were dead against it, but without close examination. The Courmayeur folk were agog with excitement that a new route was to be attempted, because two failures to reach the actual summit of Mont Blanc from the Col du Midi had shown that route to be over-long for practical purposes; they even prepared a flag in celebration of success. The attempt, however, was abandoned, to the bitter disappointment of the village. Moore had '*the great mortification of seeing the Italian flag, which had been prepared for us to plant on the summit, rolled up and put away; it was a great mistake so much having been said about our proposed attempt, before anything definite was settled.*'¹²

Now, if the inhabitants of the village were in this frame of mind, it is inconceivable that they would not have told Moore that the route was in fact practicable, had they known that it had actually been achieved in 1854, as they *must* have known were that really the case. Had Moore been told, it is unbelievable that he would not have mentioned it in his private journal or in his writings, if only to explain why he nevertheless regarded (in 1863) the proposed route as impracticable. Had Melchior Anderegg and Christian Almer known, it is impossible that they would have turned away from a route already *ascended* by the Courmayeur guides, whom the Oberlanders affected to despise. For the sake of their own prestige, Anderegg, Almer, and Perren *could not* by any possibility have declared against the route and abandoned the attempt (which had been talked about so openly in Courmayeur) had they even a suspicion that the Courmayeur guides had already achieved the route, or had nearly done so.

⁹ A. W. Moore: *A.J.* 2, 373.

¹⁰ F. Mondini: *Boll. C.A.I.*, No. 35, p. 171, 1902.

¹¹ A. W. Moore: *MS. Journal* for 1863; *A.J.* 2, 370; *The Alps in 1864*, p. 347, London, 1867.

¹² A. W. Moore: *MS. Journal*, p. 159, 1863.

A final silence is as damning as Moore's. If we accept the truth of the legend, the most likely route for a relatively inexperienced party to take from the Brenva Glacier is directly up the S.E. flank of the Col de la Brenva itself. If, with luck, that had gone—how did the party return? At the Col they would reach the Chamonix route, and the natural descent would be to Chamonix, because there would be a well-marked track remaining from the Chamonix ascents of September 11, 12, 15, 18, 20, 22, and 24.¹³ If, however, a cavalcade of seven Courmayeur guides had crossed to Chamonix, the news could not have been suppressed; we may be certain that the arrival of the Courmayeur men in the village would not be a secret one! The feat would naturally excite jealousy amongst the Chamonix guides, but their reaction would take the form of explaining it away, never that of complete suppression of all reference to the expedition. The achievement of the Col de la Brenva (or the claim) must therefore immediately have become common knowledge, had it occurred in fact, and had the descent been made to Chamonix. But there is no contemporary reference to it. It might, however, be argued that the Courmayeur guides descended from the Col over Mont Maudit and by the Col du Midi. There is, however, evidence that this was not the case, but the possibility brings us to the reputed virtual ascent of the Col du Midi route in 1854, which also has a bearing on the alleged Brenva route ascent.

II. *The alleged ascent of the Col du Midi Route in 1854.*

Sir James Ramsay's account of his virtual ascent in the following year was written at the time, although it was not published until nearly sixty years later.¹⁴ Grange¹⁵ calls this the *first* attempt upon the Col du Midi route, although there is internal evidence in Ramsay's paper that a previous one had been made—probably the alleged virtual ascent of 1854. When Ramsay and Jex-Blake¹⁶ reached Courmayeur in 1855 they found the local guides in the act of preparing on their own account for an attempt on the Col du Midi route, under the leadership of Joseph Marie Chabod *dit* Turin. This fact alone casts very grave doubt upon the claim that the *same* guides had reached the top of the Corridor from the Col du Midi in the preceding year. Had they done so, all parts of the complete route from the Col du Midi to the actual summit would then be known, and the guides would await the appearance of a fat-pursed traveller in order to make with him the first complete ascent. That the Courmayeur guides were on the point of setting out by themselves *without* a traveller shows clearly that the way was not completely known when Ramsay and Jex-Blake arrived in Courmayeur in 1855.

¹³ Stephen d'Arve: *Les Fastes du Mont Blanc*, p. 328, Genève, 1876.

¹⁴ J. H. Ramsay: *A.J.* 28, 261; see also *A.J.* 8, appendix, p. 14.

¹⁵ *Augusta Praetoria*, 5, No. 8, p. 176, 1923.

¹⁶ *A.J.* 24, 6.

They were invited by the Courmayeur guides to take part in the adventure, but bad weather delayed the attempt, so that Jex-Blake had to return home, Ramsay being able to wait on. The party consisted of Ramsay himself with 'Turin,' three other Courmayeur guides, a *chasseur*, and the local baker. The whole tone of Ramsay's account shows that the route was a *new* one to be discovered, and *not* one which had already been traversed: '*the discovery of this "North-West passage" had long been a subject of deep interest at Courmayeur*'; no porters were taken, because '*the guides were unwilling to reveal the path, in case we should succeed*.' Setting out they reached the Col du Géant and then descended to below La Vierge, and crossed the Glacier du Géant towards the Col du Gros Rognon and the Col du Midi. This route itself shows that previous explorations or examinations had been made, because the natural direct line would be by the Col Maudit (not to be confused with the Col du Mont Maudit, to which it would lead). The base of the Aig. du Midi was reached, where, '*as anticipated, we found an exposed patch of ground, a little plateau, clear of snow*' on which to bivouac. This description definitely shows that *some* members of the party must have reached that place on a previous occasion; but it is improbable that any previous bivouac had been made there (as would have been necessary for a previous virtual ascent), because Ramsay does not mention one and, on the contrary, says that he helped the guides, '*who were collecting stones to make a wall as a shelter . . .*,' so that it is unlikely that any shelter had been built on the Col du Midi before, as must have been the case had a previous party bivouacked at the place.

The party continued at a little after 05.00 next morning, but one of the *guides* refused to go any further shortly after the ascent towards Mont Blanc du Tacul was commenced. Three of the four *guides* ultimately gave up the attempt at different places below the Mur de la Côte, their names being Alexandre Fenoillet dit Tutse, Joseph Marie Chabod dit Turisa (cousin to 'Turin'), and Alexis Proment.¹⁷ It is significant that these three, of whom the present deserter was one, formed part of the personnel of the alleged virtual ascents both by the Brenva Glacier and this route itself in 1854! The present party crossed the shoulder of Mont Blanc du Tacul and reached the depression beyond, from which the flank of Mont Maudit rises. Ramsay's description is significant: '*We descended into the hollow that separated us from the Mont Maudit, the chief obstacle in our route, a hill which had never yet been ascended to its summit*.' Ramsay really means that the Col du Mont Maudit had not yet been reached, and the absence of any similiar claim for novelty in the case of the shoulder of Mont Blanc du Tacul which Ramsay had just crossed strongly suggests that the latter was reached from the Col du Midi in the attempt of 1854, the attempt ending there (or on the slope

¹⁷ Official statement published in the *Feuille d'Aoste*, August 1855, and reprinted in the Abbé Henry's *pamphlet*, p. 12.

below the Col du Mont Maudit, as Ramsay's wording might suggest) and no bivouac being made during it, at any rate above the Col du Géant. If, therefore, the Brenva route *were* achieved in 1854, the party must have descended to Chamonix.

The steepish ascent to the Col du Mont Maudit beat two more guides, one of whom was 'Turin.' But 'Turin' came on again later, and the crest of the col, which Ramsay calls '*the top of Mont Maudit*,' was reached by Ramsay with 'Turin' and *perhaps* Fenoillet of the guides, Pierre Joseph Mochet *dit* Gross (the *chasseur*) and Joseph Marie Perrod *dit* Cacagnon (the village baker). It may, however, be regarded as doubtful if Fenoillet reached the crest of the Col du Mont Maudit, whence he would have gone on to the Col de la Brenva easily. The official statement, previously mentioned, was written to confound Chamonix criticism, and mentions as evidence the meeting with a Chamonix party at the head of the corridor. With every inducement to give all the possible evidence, the statement merely says: '*Le guide Chabod dit Turin aurait même parlé à un guide de Chamonix.*' The baker and the *chasseur* might be neglected in this connection, but had another *guide* been there he too would have spoken with the Chamonix guides, and the fact would almost certainly have been mentioned. At that date there was, of course, little difference in the languages spoken by the guides on either side of the chain. Fenoillet *certainly* failed before the Mur de la Côte; all things considered, it is *probable* that he failed on the slope up to the Col du Mont Maudit. Only one of the *guides* managed to reach the top of the Mur de la Côte, and that was 'Turin,' who is named in the official statement as having been in the 'successful' party with Ramsay—the others being the *chasseur* and the baker, for which two alone Ramsay expressed any admiration.¹⁸ 'Turin,' however, had now shot his bolt, and insisted upon retreat, although the hour was only 14.00. They therefore turned back, '*having surmounted the obstacles which had hitherto been thought insuperable.*' Ramsay's mutilated certificate to 'Turin' is significant: '*The plan of [the route ?] we followed was, I believe, entirely his. He led ['much,' or 'most' ?] of the way & over many difficulties, especially of [the ?] Mt. Blanc du Tacul. However at the mur . . .* [Ramsay then deleted the last four words and continued.] *He showed himself a bold & practical mountaineer, especially for a [man of ?] his age & considering the frightful accident which [befell ?] him three year [sic] since.*'¹⁹

As regards this expedition itself, there can be no doubt that it must have been preceded by another attempt, probably that of September 20, 1854. The previous exploration cannot have reached further than the shoulder of Mont Blanc du Tacul (or perhaps the slope below the Col du Mont Maudit), and Ramsay probably refers

¹⁸ *A.J.* 8, appendix, p. 12.

¹⁹ In Chabod's *Führerbuch*, preserved in the Courmayeur museum, one edge of the certificate has been cut and the restorations here are conjectural.

to it where he writes of his own as 'a fresh attempt on the hoary monarch of mountains from the Italian side.'²⁰ Count Vinciano was probably wrong in claiming for Ramsay's expedition that the route had not previously been explored,²¹ and the account in the *Feuille d'Aoste* for August 9, 1855,²² is probably correct. The Courmayeur guides of the party '*qui quelque temps méditaient une ascension sur le Mont Blanc et espéraient trouver de notre côté un passage pour y parvenir, viennent enfin de le trouver et d'effectuer une première ascension*'—as the attainment of the Chamonix route at the head of the Corridor from the Col du Midi might be claimed to be. Taking all these things into consideration, there is ample and direct evidence that the Courmayeur guides did *not* reach the top of the Corridor from the Col du Midi in 1854. The lesser of the two claims made by Alexis Clusaz must therefore be dismissed.

But to return now to the bearing of this upon the alleged ascent of the old Brenva route in 1854, it is significant that the *chasseur* was the only member of Ramsay's party (except Ramsay himself) who was *not* in that alleged ascent. Of Ramsay's four actual guides, two were certainly and another was probably beaten before the Col du Mont Maudit was reached; the fourth, old 'Turin,' was nearly beaten by the slope to that col, and finally gave up the attempt at the top of the Mur de la Côte, being the only *guide* to reach so far. The claim that these four men reached the Col de la Brenva from the Brenva Glacier on September 27–28, 1854, is FANTASTIC. An exploration of the glacier was probably made on that date, but the ascent of the old Brenva route, or of the S.E. couloir of the Col de la Brenva, is very much more difficult than that of the flank of Mont Maudit which gave the same men so much trouble, and the *greater* claim for a Brenva ascent in 1854 must definitely be dismissed.

THE DISASTER ON THE MATTERHORN OF AUGUST, 1934.¹

(Translated.)

'TO THOSE SPLENDID MEN, THE GUIDES OF VALTOURNANCHE.'

I FOUND myself last summer at Lo Riondé (2900 m.), at the foot of the Matterhorn, at the time of the terrible accidents of August 13, 14 and 16 [1934]. The following account is but the transcript of my notes, taken day by day on the spot. The part

²⁰ *A.J.* 28, 261.

²¹ S. W. King: *Italian Valleys, etc.*, p. 132, London, 1858.

²² Reprinted in the Abbé Henry's *pamphlet*, p. 10.

¹ [From *La Montagne*, 1935, pp. 247–51, by courtesy of the Editor and M. Monod-Herzen. The narrative is published for its lessons, and also at the expressed desire of our lamented members, the late Signori Guido Rey and Giovanni Bobba.—*Editor*.]