

A WINTER'S DAY AT COURMAYEUR<sup>1</sup>

BY CHARLES GOS

AT La Fouly the winter's day is darkening into night. Avalanches have fallen, it is hard to say where ; up by the La Neuvaz Glacier, I should say. Somewhere the thunder of their voices can be heard. It is like listening to the rise and fall of the battering surge far off along the coast. In these mysterious rumblings, this clash of battle as nature's forces meet, we see another likeness that betrays the common parentage of sea and mountain. To-morrow we cross the Col du Petit Ferret on skis. I cannot finish off some notes I need for a work I am just completing without once more seeing Courmayeur with its guides, its own particular setting and its old cemetery. My brother Emile comes with me, and we are to be joined by that fine old fellow Maurice Crettex of Champex, well known to English climbers, and often referred to as 'le vieux guide du Signal.' He has business of his own to see to, including some transaction concerning cow-bells which appears to be an extremely complicated affair ; he is delighted at the prospect of a meeting with those trusted friends of his, Henri and Adolphe Rey, Laurent Croux and the rest of them.

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Icy gusts were sweeping over the Col. In front of us lay the long white trough of the Italian Val Ferret with its mosaic of dark blue forests. The great walls of the Triolet, heavy with snow, rose above us. And near the foot of the Pré de Bar Glacier three chamois were feeding on a grassy mound bare of snow. They were there, in that immensity of silence, free and proud, as the soul of Solitude might be. . . . The wind came at us, the slopes flashed the sunlight in our eyes, the skis hissed, the valley bed rose to meet us. The roofs of the chalets at Lavachey barely showed above the surface. Then the snow swelled up where the Triolet and Frébouzie Glaciers came down. But the flat going after Pra Sec could not be wearisome with the Grandes Jorasses, the Rochefort and the Géant to keep our senses wide awake.

For any lover of wild nature it is sheer joy to have a hunter

<sup>1</sup> We are gratefully indebted for the translation from the French original to Mr. R. L. G. Irving.

with him on an expedition. Maurice Crettex, a mighty hunter before the Lord (possibly with a bit of Alexander Burgener thrown in !), at every sign of tracks we come to, bends over them his tall form and that hat of his with the magnificent plume of three cock's feathers. 'What's this, Maurice? A fox . . . And this? A badger . . . And this? A roebuck . . . And these here? Ptarmigan . . .' Light footprints that steal away into the forest depths, what mystery and poetry they add to these pictures in white! All at once, as we drew level with the chalets of Tronchey, a beaten track cuts across the valley, almost a trench. The mark of the small hoofs immediately betrays the vanished wanderers. Maurice stops dead, exclaiming with envy and admiration: 'Ah! les bougres de bêtes! les bougres de bêtes! un troupeau de chamois. . . .' His eye scans the slopes near the moraines of the Glacier de Tronchey, but not a single one of the 'bougres de bêtes' shows even the end of its nose. Just whiteness everywhere and the same silence over all. We set off once more. Maurice is rapt in silence, and no wonder; he is obsessed with the chamois. Then suddenly, as though he were putting his thoughts in the form of an epitaph in stone, he throws off his obsession with the words: 'Les chamois, c'est la plus jolie bête qui existe, c'est élégant, c'est gracieux, c'est fier, c'est fin comme de l'or!'

Soon our eyes were caught by the rampart of the Aiguilles de Péteret, crowned by the triangular pediment of Mont Blanc. The Dora, a black gleaming furrow, sang a gentle song between its rounded banks of snow. After the chamois of Pré de Bar, the first living creature that we met was a wolf-hound, in front of the *albergo* at Planpansier. A voice shouted 'Ardito!' . . . and Ardito growled as he withdrew. The second was a large cat at La Palud, and the third an old mule, who was sunning himself in peace before his stable as we came into Entrèves. And at last heads appeared at windows. Then a native in person and several more. From the village beneath its covering of snow there rose with the chimney-smoke the vague sounds of mountain folk at work. . . .

On the Courmayeur road, near La Saxe, a solitary figure was pacing up and down. It turned round, saw us, waved an arm and came towards us. 'Cristo! Maurice! Henri, tonnerre! . . .' It was Henri Rey, the *guide-chef* of Courmayeur, who knew of our coming and was on the look out for us. Above the roofs, a patchwork of snow, rounded tiles and glistening slates, the old church tower of Courmayeur soared with its high grey walls. Henri led us through ice-filled lanes to police headquarters to have our passports dealt with; always a complicated matter that

needs much tact and must always be utterly wearisome whatever country one is in. We had, I may say, obtained permission to cross the Italian frontier at the Petit Ferret, which greatly eased the necessary formalities. All the same, our passports had to be sent off to Aosta.

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Chamonix in winter arrays herself in all the enticements of a popular resort; Courmayeur at that season, in more modest garb, with no attractions of a social or a sporting nature, retires humbly into the anonymous ranks of Alpine villages isolated by the snow. There a sort of shrunken life goes on from day to day, its silence and monotony ennobled by hard work, a sovereign law for all mountain folk alike. Wedged in as it is between the slopes of the Grande Testa, Monte della Saxe and the steep cliffs of Mont Chétif, Courmayeur gets but a hurried gilding from the sun during the long winter. The guides have laid aside their ice-axes, and the ropes hang in festoons from poles in the attic, between great pieces of dried meat, bacon, hams and sausages set aside for winter use. For months the peaks will be neglected, while all the time work in the chalets is in full swing. Cattle demand constant attention, a task particularly exacting in those many houses in Courmayeur where stable, kitchen and bedroom are the same, in fact, the only room. On one side the cows, on the other the family. The cows occupy their half, the family theirs. A just distribution! One corner is reserved for cooking, the other for the beds. In this way the cattle make a generous contribution to the comfort of the mountain peasant, to his very life. On the one hand, by providing a natural system of central heating the beasts maintain a pleasantly warm temperature in the home, and on the other, they keep it supplied with milk products of every kind, *fontina*, as is the pleasant name they use in Val d'Aosta. Then there is the wood. Felled and sawn up in the forests, it has to be brought down, cut up and stacked. The rustic sledges are brought out of the barns and it is the mule of the black velvet eye, the mule that is the trusted comrade in arms and comrade in work of the *Alpino* who has become again a peasant, who drags down the laden sledge over the snow-covered track from the *tramail* to the valley. Beside all this there are the inevitable house repairs: stones cut, planks sawn, beams nailed. Every man here has his den, with its bench where hammers beat and vices squeak. Evening comes soon. The family gathers round the lamp. The guide (whose beard has often been allowed to grow, for one must keep warm in winter) lights his pipe and opens the *Messenger Valdôtain* (published in French); the *Dernières Nouvelles* bring him news of the so-called



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, ADOLPHE REY, EMILE REY, HENRI PETIGAX LAURENT CROUX, CHARLES GOS.

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*Photo, E. Gos.]*

LAURENT CROUX  
*Doyen of Courmayeur Guides.*



*Photo Emile Gos*

EMILE REY'S CHALET AT LA SAXE.

more civilized world outside his valley. The wife and children are poring over the *Almanach Illustré* (now in its 27th issue), also published at Aosta, both in French and in the patois of the Val d'Aosta; and they gaze in wonder at the illustrations or read aloud the delightful witty prose of that excellent man the Abbé Henry, *curé* of Valpelline, also a son of Courmayeur. The fire crackles. You can hear the wind howling and whipping up the gusts of snow. The cows are lying down, chewing the cud. A lamb bleats in its sleep. The big bell of the church tolls out the hour of nine over the snowy roofs of Courmayeur as it settles to sleep.

All the big hotels in Courmayeur are shut in winter, which gives an air of melancholy to the snow-bound village. Here is the Royal, from which the young English professor, Francis Maitland Balfour, and his guide, Johann Petrus, of Eisten (one of Joseph Knubel's uncles), started on July 18, 1882, to meet their death on the Aiguille Blanche de Péteret,<sup>2</sup> then still unclimbed; C. D. Cunningham and Emile Rey were there watching them as they went off, anxiously and silently. Here is the Unione, from which the Villanova-Maquignaz-Castagneri party set off on August 17, 1890, to perish mysteriously somewhere on the southern slopes of Mont Blanc, the day after Guido Rey had shaken them by the hand at the Hôtel de Londres in Châtillon.<sup>3</sup> It was in this same street, on August 21, 1890, that Jean-Antoine Carrel, as he came down from Mont Blanc, was engaged by a young law student of Turin, Leone Sinigaglia, to climb the Matterhorn and to die there two or three days later.

Courmayeur, Chamonix, Zermatt and Grindelwald are the cross-roads of the Alps, where all famous climbers, guides and tourists, from Saussure to Claude Wilson, equipped for battle on the heights, have met or passed each other.

Henri Rey took us to the Albergo Roma, one of the few hotels, if not the only one, open at this season. In the café there, a white-haired man was reading his paper, with a glass in front of him; it was Laurent Croux, whose name is given to a point on the Aiguille Verte—the guide of the Duke of the Abruzzi and of G. W. Young in more than one famous ascent (with Josef Knubel). We shook each other warmly by the hand.

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Next morning Henri Rey opened for us the small Alpine museum called 'Musée du Duc des Abruzzes,' which is also used as the *Bureau des Guides*. The house was once the Hall of the Commune, and is opposite the church, on one side of the Place. Here is the War Memorial; here also the tablet in honour of the guide

<sup>2</sup> *A. J.* 11. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Guido Rey, *The Matterhorn*, ch. vi. (beginning).

César Ollier, who died during the Duke of the Abruzzi's expedition to the North Pole (Ollier's sledge and his dog are reproduced in bronze at the foot of a cross), and the bust of the famous guide Joseph Petigax. A moving testimony in that narrow setting: his native land ennobled by the death in battle of the soldier mountaineer, and its beauty exalted by these famous guides, conquerors of savage peaks and victims to the call of duty.

It was perishingly cold in the museum, but none of us thought of complaining, so deeply were we moved by these alpine relics. With this smell of bygone days and of rooms long closed, one seemed to breathe some other subtler scent, some fragrance of glory emanating from these noble memorials in the deep impressive silence, amid the whispers of the past, something from the very depths of the soul of Courmayeur and of Italian climbing in its heroic age which seemed to hover in this sanctuary of the hills.

From the museum we passed on to the hamlet of La Saxe, the special homeland of the Reys. I was anxious to see the chalet of Emile Rey; 'le Prince des Guides,' they called him. It was from this chalet at La Saxe that he had started, never to return. Built half of wood, half of stone, plastered, with two outside balconies, the house is a good example of rustic Piedmontese architecture, with a mixture of the Valais type of chalet. When the search party brought back Rey's body on August 26, 1895, from the foot of the Aiguille du Géant, it was placed in the chalet near by, to avoid the ascent of the ten steps that lead up to the entrance. This latter chalet is where his son Adolphe now lives; the family chalet, after being taken over for a time by the eldest son, Henri, is at present occupied by the grandson, Emile, a young guide worthy of his family. Henri himself lives in the house adjoining it.

Our pilgrimage ended at the old cemetery. Henri took us to his father's grave. In form, the gravestone suggests the Aiguille du Géant; an axe and rope are hung over one corner; some of the wreaths of 1895 are still there; on them you can read names that are famous in Alpine history—Miss Richardson, Paul Güssfeldt, C. D. Cunningham—all of whom had climbed with this great guide. On the stone is this admirable epitaph:

IN MEMORIA DI EMILIO REY  
GUIDA ITALIANA VALENTISSIMA  
AMATO DEI SUOI ALPINISTI  
IN LUNGA SERIA D'IMPRESE  
MAESTRO LORO  
DI ARDIMENTI DI PRUDENZA  
FATALMENTE CADUTO AL DENTE DEL GIGANTE  
IL 24 AGOSTO 1895

Winter spread its peace over this place of rest, and brought home the sadness of human destiny. Kugy had asked me to visit on his behalf the grave of his beloved guide and friend, Joseph Croux, but this grave was still under the snow and we could not find the stone slab. Kugy had also wished me to pay his respects and give his kind remembrances to Joseph Croux's widow, but, alas! some months ago this brave companion of the best of guides had joined her husband in the grave. In a corner of the cemetery, however, we halted, deeply moved, before the grave where lie H. O. Jones, his young wife, and their guide Julius Truffer of St. Nicholas, who fell on Mont Rouge de Péteret.<sup>4</sup> Under the snow, more graves of well-known climbers, and close to the entrance, on the left, graves of long ago, with their stones overlaid with the patina of time, and eaten into by sun and storm, I picked out this epitaph :

JAMES AUBREY GARTH MARSHALL  
BORN AT HEADINGLEY NEAR LEEDS IN ENGLAND  
ON THE ELEVENTH OF JUNE 1841  
JOHANN FISCHER  
BORN AT ZAUN NEAR MEIRINGEN IN SWITZERLAND  
ON THE TWELFTH OF JANUARY 1834  
AT MIDNIGHT ON AUGUST 31 1874 FELL TOGETHER  
INTO A CREVASSE IN THE BROUILLARD GLACIER AND  
THEIR BODIES NOW LIE ON EITHER  
SIDE OF THIS CROSS

Ulrich Almer, eldest son of the famous Christian Almer, Marshall's second guide in this attempt on Mont Blanc by the Brouillard face, had likewise fallen into that fatal crevasse; though badly hurt, he worked his way out, and dragged himself as best he could to Courmayeur, where he gave the alarm. He is still living at Grindelwald, his native village.

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In the afternoon we made our way over to Henri Grivel's forge at Dollone. If Courmayeur has its families of famous guides, it has also a line of famous smiths, the Grivel dynasty. Without Grivel, Courmayeur would be as incomplete as Zermatt is now without Marie Biner,<sup>5</sup> the hairdresser. The road descends towards the Dora Baltea. In its narrow bed the torrent roars between its snowy banks, among ice-coated boulders. After crossing the bridge, you leave on your left the huge building of the *Bagni Ferruginosi*, in the old, friendly style of the Riffelhaus, and turn right along a track dug in the snow, which ends in a group of three houses : this is the forge.

<sup>4</sup> A. J. 26. 454.

<sup>5</sup> A. J. 46. 217.

Like one of Wagner's heroes, amid smoke and blazing fires, in his gloomy cave, where huge, primitive, water-driven hammers like some Roman or Carthaginian ram struck great rhythmless blows, breaking the iron and twisting the steel, in clouds of blackish dust and sulphurous fumes, in the din of hammers as they crashed on the ringing anvils, the figure of Henri Grivel appeared, his face shiny and blotched, his sleeves rolled up to his enormous biceps, his chest bare, a short, broad figure with a powerful torso, the muscles of an athlete, hands and arms all smeared with black. In that fantastic setting of heaped cinders, mounds of coke, the coughing of gigantic bellows, that bristling array of Eckenstein crampons awaiting their finish, those black outlines of ice-axes, pitons, and hammer-axes to be, he was an impressive and magnificent apparition. Leslie Stephen might perhaps have added: 'sublime as a fallen archangel! . . .'. On every side was a hedge of horrid prickly things, a crop of bristling spearheads, summoning even now a vision of green ice slopes and snowy walls, of *rappels* down vertical faces, of peaks soaring into the infinite blue of space. And when the young Grivels stood round their father, smiths also, and already guides of repute, this Hades of theirs became indeed a scene from mythology.

As we returned to Courmayeur, I pushed open the gate of the new cemetery. There, too, are graves of men who have died on the mountains, and among them those of the two young Englishmen, Hoyland and Ward, who were killed near the Col du Fresnay a few years ago.<sup>6</sup> Smythe and I had been on the point of going to look for them on the Chamonix side—they were known to have bivouacked at Montenvers—when we got news of their having crossed the Col du Géant. Smythe and Adolphe Rey recovered the bodies. They now lie side by side, their destinies tragically unfulfilled.

It was time to hurry. The hour was late and we had arranged to meet the guides at the café of the Albergo Roma to have a chat about old times. It was a shock to find ourselves, the hosts, the last to arrive! When we came into the big room of the café there were fifteen of them in a group round a long table. They got up as one man to greet us. Every one of those firm and kindly hands was outstretched. Every one of those honest faces, accustomed to the wide horizons of the Alps, all bearing the stigmata of tense hours lived on the heights, lit up with a smile of welcome. Fifteen of them were there, all the great guides, the last of a generation that has already passed its best, and with them a few of the rising stars. The Reys were there, Henri,

<sup>6</sup> A. J. 46. 415 sqq.

Adolphe and Emile ; Laurent Croux, brother of Joseph, Cyprien Savoye, Berthollier, Bareux, and Petigax, son of Joseph ; Bron,<sup>7</sup> Glarey, Chenoz, Salluard, and 'notre vieux guide du Signal de Champex,' Maurice Crettex ; nor must I forget Cyprien Rey, one of the two surviving members of the search party who picked up poor Emile Rey on the Géant.<sup>8</sup> His presence naturally turned the conversation towards events of the past. With the recall of Rey's name, other great names of former times came up : Jean-Antoine Carrel, Christian Almer, Melchior Anderegg, old Alois Pollinger, Peter Knubel, Jean-Joseph Maquignaz, the Abbé Gorret ; Kennedy, Whymper, Mummery, Güssfeldt, Miss Richardson, Sir Edward Davidson, Captain Farrar, the Sellas, Guido Rey ; and others of our own time, not forgetting the beloved Franz Lochmatter, his brother Josef, Josef Knubel, Josef Pollinger and more of them.

I really believe that between them these modest mountaineers, talking in the charming French of Val d'Aosta, which is their mother tongue as well as Italian, in their natural ease and wit resembling the pick of the St. Niklaus guides, had bagged every mountain in both hemispheres, including the ice barriers of the North Pole. Mountaineering in Italy, and mountaineering in general, owes much to the Duke of the Abruzzi. By his love of high mountains, by his passion for expeditions to the furthest parts of the earth, always with his Courmayeur guides around him, he has widened the horizon of these stout-hearted men, refined their natures and added something noble to their characters. You should hear the respect, the touching courtesy with which they speak of 'Son Altesse Royale,' the unchanging formula in which the Duke's memory is recalled. In the Alpine museum in Courmayeur there are some excellent photographs of 'Son Altesse Royale,' surrounded by his guides, and an admirable portrait which vividly brings out the fine breeding and the innate nobility of soul of this great sailor-mountaineer. But I know no more moving picture<sup>9</sup> than that of His Royal Highness, hat in hand, offering his condolences to the widow of his guide Petigax. The grief-stricken and wondering expression of this peasant woman, as she faces the bowed figure of the Duke, the feeling shown in the Prince's face, make a true picture of human compassion for the stricken. How well one can understand the deference and the warmth of feeling of these guides towards their 'Altesse Royale,' who with such splendid enthusiasm has upheld, with their help, the fine Alpine traditions of the House of Savoy.

<sup>7</sup> See p. 319.

<sup>8</sup> The leader of this search party was the guide Joseph Gadin, who led the Abbé Achille Ratti (His Holiness Pope Pius XI.) on his chief ascents.

<sup>9</sup> *Il Duca degli Abruzzi*, illustration opp. p. 253.

The conversation grew more animated and took a less austere turn. The name of old Alois Pollinger cropped up again. A man may be a great guide and at the same time a humorist. The conqueror of the Viereselgrat was a perfect example of these qualities, both invaluable on high mountains. I myself produced one or two racy anecdotes which I had from Pollinger himself. Then each of them followed with one of their own. Cyprien Savoye, one of the beloved Julius Kugy's guides, told us among other tales of the terrible night they spent near the top of the Grand Combin at 4,300 metres, in a storm.<sup>10</sup> There were four of them and they all thought their last hour had come, when it occurred to Savoye to put in practice the lesson he had learned at the North Pole, on the expedition led by 'Son Altesse Royale.' They dug a deep hole in the snow, got into it, closed it from within, made a small aperture in the roof with an ice-axe to let the air in, and then spent a wonderful night, not a bit cold, singing, laughing, and smoking their pipes. Above their cave the storm was howling. Then, shortly before dawn, they put an eye to the hole in the ceiling and saw the stars. . . . I remember Kugy actually describing it to me in Trieste, a few years ago. But Cyprien Savoye was in his best form and in full swing. Another time on the Col du Grand Ferret a wrestling match took place between Dr. Kugy and his guides. The party were on their way back from a strenuous campaign in the Valais. As they reached the col and saw their native valley spread out below them, sacks were laid down and jackets discarded. After a good refreshing nap in the sun, Kugy, like the Comte de Gruyère challenging his own men-at-arms to combat, issued his challenge to his guides. The guides accept it. The men take hold. But with one after another Kugy makes their shoulders touch the ground. Savoye alone remains. He has been quietly studying the dodges and tactics employed by his *monsieur* and has drawn some practical conclusions. Dr. Kugy is a Hercules and Savoye slight and short. It is Goliath and David facing one another. But David, even without his sling, and despite his slender build and short stature, triumphed over the giant. . . . Once he got Kugy over, Savoye threw himself across him, pressing with all his might on his chest and arms, in order to paralyse his movements. And little by little the broad shoulders of Dr. Kugy came in contact with the grey mica-spangled earth of the Col du Grand Ferret.

Savoye had a huge success. We all clapped and roared with laughter. Straightway a postcard was signed and addressed to Kugy, who, in his answer a week later, told me that the *Ringfest*,

<sup>10</sup> *Alpine Pilgrimage*, p. 307.

this wrestling match on the Grand Ferret, was a cherished memory.

Then followed the account of an amusing episode on the first ascent of the Grépon from the Mer de Glace. It was Adolphe Rey who told it, and he had it from Henri Brocherel himself, who was second guide in the Young-Jones-Todhunter party. Josef Knubel was leading, when, in the last crack, the one which is named after him and comes out directly on the summit, the silence of the vast perpendicular walls was suddenly broken by loud and frantic objurgations. . . . Knubel, high up in the chimney, was engaged in a desperate struggle, and, suddenly stopped in his vertical gliding movement by the absolute smoothness of the walls, was angrily shouting: 'Hieses! Hieses! (Jesus!) Herr Gott! Charrette! . . . y a plus de prises! . . .' Young chose this moment to hand him up the axes to help him out.<sup>11</sup> We had a proper laugh, and plenty of gay comments to offer. And there were further tales. One anecdote led on to another. Above the glasses, in which quivered the wine of Val d'Aosta, 'la première et la plus antique terre du Royaume d'Italie,' golden as the granite cliffs of Mont Blanc, the faces wore a happy, childlike look. Across the frontiers their thoughts were with their friends in Chamonix, in St. Niklaus, in Valtournanche, and many a place besides. And the picture of *la haute montagne*, in tragic or in smiling mood, with her everlasting beauty and the radiant ideal to which she calls us men, slowly took shape in the low, smoke-filled room.

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Next day we put on our skis once more. A grey sky, and a suggestion of snow in the air, a sort of music unheard. We were bound for the Elena hut at Pré de Bar and the Col du Ban d'Array. As we passed through Courmayeur, we heard singing. We listened in astonishment. Far away at first, the melody increased in volume as we advanced. It was two or three girls singing in a chalet. We halted for a moment. And this is what these clear voices carried to us:

O vallée, à mon cœur si chère,  
O Courmayeur, charmant séjour,  
Tu devais donc à ma paupière  
Tu devais disparaître un jour.  
C'est en perdant ce que l'on aime  
Qu'on en reconnaît tout le prix  
Et qu'on croit se quitter soi-même  
Hélas! en quittant ses amis.

<sup>11</sup> A. J. 26. 262.

Our halt in the snow had become pure joy. From across the noisy rushing of the Dora Baltea the mighty blows of hammers on the anvil vibrated through the air. A few flakes of snow tumbled down on us out of the sky, at wide intervals, like weary butterflies. It was time to be off. We glided up the road. And behind us the song had begun again :

Adieu, ciel pur et sans nuages,  
 Adieu, vallons délicieux,  
 Adieu, Mont-Blanc, adieu, villages,  
 Adieu, peuple au cœur généreux !  
 Adieu, temple, adieu, sanctuaire,  
 Et vous tous, que j'ai tant chéris,  
 Trop heureux si j'ai su vous plaire,  
 Trop heureux d'avoir des amis.

Softly, as a flower fades, as a star goes out when the night mists glide across it, the melody died away. Then it ceased, completely muffled by the snow, now falling silently.