REMINISCENCES

By ALDO BONACOSSA

In my brief speech at the last Alpine Club Dinner (1964) I mentioned George Finch as a student in Zürich. One day in 1909 while I was studying at the Polytechnicum in Munich, taking advantage of a night train I accepted the invitation of a friend to join him for the inauguration of the new Windgälle hut in the Maderanertal along the Gotthard line, where I had fresh memories of charming and often solitary new ascents. On that occasion I got acquainted with the élite of the mountaineers of Zürich, which was at that time certainly the best known and most active centre in Switzerland. Among others I recall Heller, Keller, Marcel Kurz and Miescher (who together with several others tried to climb a wall against avalanches behind the hut about 15 ft. high, and while the best succeeded, Miescher did not. So the following Sunday he took the trouble of taking the same three hours' journey from Zürich and four more hours of walking uphill in the heat with the only purpose of trying that wall again. With the result that he fell and broke his foot. Nevertheless he later on became a well known university professor). But the recognised number one mountaineer and most outstanding personality among them by far was George Finch. He was tall and wore his hair long and untamed, quite unlike most men in Switzerland who used to wear their hair cut very short, and never took off their hat, as we can see in old photographs of mountaineers and guides; this gave him an exotic touch. Moreover he came from the Antipodes, and as a result was nicknamed 'the Australian'. He was also known for having introduced the anorak to replace the usual heavy jacket, which in hot weather became rather a nuisance.

We started from the Windgälle hut on two ropes up an unclimbed wall of a small mountain nearby, the Furketlihorn. Intensely trained in the Kaisergebirge, but perhaps also with a little luck, I managed to get over the most difficult passage and from above kept watching Finch's strenuous efforts to work his way up. In that moment I certainly felt quite important, to have been a match for the famous Finch. It was there that I met Rudolf Staub for the first time and we soon arranged to make some small new ascents together the day after. Many years later when he was a university professor and famous geologist, and as such was spoken of in all Switzerland for having predicted that the 'moving mountain', the enormous landslide of Arbedo near Bellinzona, would

stop, thus avoiding the evacuation of that village, I met him again and he recalled with nostalgia those lovely days.

Towards 1910, working on the Swiss side of the Bernina range and at some details on the Italian side for the new guide-book *Monti d'Italia*, I came into contact with Major E. L. Strutt who was finishing his concise and precise guide-book *The Alps of the Bernina*, part II, comprising the range from the Muretto to the Bernina Pass, to give him some information about unpublished ascents. I met him in St. Moritz and there began our long friendship. Good-looking and tall, he used to wear a magnificent green Austrian felt hat which I think he kept all his life. Darkish green was his waistcoat, green were his knickerbockers, and of the same colour were his stockings with dangling tassels. He obviously smoked the classical pipe: he was, altogether, what in the eyes of us Italians appears to be the typical English gentleman. In 1911, the famous golden summer for mountaineering, we met again, at the most characteristic open air English Alpine Club, the narrow space in front of the Monte Rosa Hotel in Zermatt. It seemed a revival of the well-known illustration to Whymper's *Scrambles amongst the Alps*. Having been left behind by some acquaintances, among whom was the famous Valère A. Fynn, from a climb of the Zmuttgrat of the Matterhorn, only because the night before I had not taken part in a cocktail party (at that time I ignored the importance of such rites), I found a companion kindly provided by Strutt, who showed him to me there in the little square: taking the pipe out of his mouth he pointed it, without the slightest movement of his head, towards somebody standing behind him, meaning Professor Robert Liefmann of the University of Freiburg im Breisgau who, at thirty-seven, apart from Dyhrenfurth, was probably the youngest university professor and also very well known to mountaineers for his remarkable speed. With him I successfully climbed the Zmuttgrat two days later. There I first met the brothers Gugliermina and Francesco Ravelli, thus starting a long and affectionate friendship. The election of the two brothers to honorary membership of the Alpine Club in 1953 caused a sense of real gratitude among us Italians because the Guglierminas were really charming and modest men, well loved by everybody; they have left many traces of their activity, from the great new climbs on Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa to their magnificent book *Vette*.

The night before at the Schönbühl hut I had been witness of an amusing, or rather, painful episode. Sir Edward Davidson had arrived, noble and lofty of countenance; he stayed at the Riffelalp high above the commoners of Zermatt, in an ambiance of remarkable personalities such as Alice Roosevelt, the famous daughter of President Theodore. He was accompanied by Franz and, I think, Gabriel Lochmatter who had chosen a place on the sleeping board for the eminent mountaineer.

But as they did not mark it well enough, a young Genevan put his rucksack down right there. Being summoned by Sir Edward Davidson to take it away, he politely remarked that he had been the first to occupy that place. This roused the fury of Davidson, who turned to Franz and in perfect French shouted: 'Jetez ce sac dehors!'. At which the Genevan angrily insisted that he was in the right and that in any case we were in Switzerland and not in England. Poor Lochmatter, caught between two fires, did not know what to do. I tried to explain to the Genevan that the gentleman was a famous English mountaineer and a prominent lawyer of rather difficult character ('ça je le vois!') and got him a seat next to mine, so the argument did not go any further. Franz thanked me warmly, and when I once met him several years later up at the Aosta hut with the Vissers, he immediately remembered me.

It was Strutt who, in 1912, talked me into applying for Alpine Club membership, and it was he who sponsored my admission together with Dr. Claude Wilson whom I had first met at Bagni del Masino. After so many years I still recall vividly this dear, fine and extremely kind gentleman, with his soft voice and his particular complexion typical of so many Englishmen. My good old friend Christian Klucker, the famous guide of Fex, used to tell me about him, winking slily: Wilson was so *soigné* and so fond of comfort that he would much rather set out from the hotel before midnight to walk in the dark than sleep in a hut on a hard bench like us. Never was he seen with his hair rumpled or his clothes untidy, even during climbs.

I saw Strutt again a number of years after the First World War in his beloved Engadine when he was still suffering from his war injuries. His spirit still moved him towards the heights, so it was easy for me to persuade him to try the South-east ridge of the Corno di Campo, which was dear to my memory because it was up there that for the first and only time in my life I had seen the Brocken spectre, reflecting me with the young woman who was in my company and who eventually became my wife; this proves that the Brocken spectre can also be a sign of good luck and not only, as in Whymper's case on the Matterhorn, a sign of tragedy. In that Val Viola of Poschiavo, later renamed Valle di Campo, which rises beyond the Bernina Pass towards the Italian border, full of green meadows and woods and enriched by the jewel of Lake Saoseo, one of the most enchanting in the Alps, for a while we climbed along the ridge; but when the difficulties started and Strutt realised that he could not fully control his arm, another consequence of his war wounds, we avoided the worst part over the stony slopes on the northern side, returning to the ridge towards the summit. I wonder why, in the poor Swiss guide-book *Mittleres Engadin und Puschlav*, this Corno ridge, the difficult part of which we avoided, is recorded as having been climbed by us on that occasion, September 5, 1930. I came back on

September 6, 1931, with King Albert of the Belgians and my friend Dr. Walter Amstutz on a splendid day of intense blue sky, but with a violent wind and fresh snow on the rocks. At the key passage the piercing cold which affected the King's fingers (he was just recovering from nephritis) made us give up, to the great distress of our royal companion whose usual iron will would never let him turn back. He was in a bad mood for a couple of days and only the beautiful climb over the North-west ridge of Punta Santner above Siusi in the Dolomites made him forget his disappointment on the Corno di Campo.

Coming back to Strutt, one day in the Engadine we planned another excursion, this time without problems, the Pizzo Gallegione, 3,107 m., between Val Bregaglia and Val d'Avers. To my great delight Strutt brought along the charming and efficient mountaineer, Miss Ursula Corning. I have always liked ladies in the party because their presence, as long as there was no difficulty or risk, made the ascent even more pleasant by combining feminine grace with alpine beauty. We first went to the charming village of Soglio, where one really does not know whether to look ahead towards the beautiful ancient seat of the former lord of the valley or back towards the wild Bondasca with the imposing iron-like North ridge of Piz Badile and the Ago di Sciora which towers in the famous triptych of Segantini. Strutt, who had been on the Gallegione about thirty years before, took the lead. Leaving the village and realising that for 1,700 m. of climbing, as far as the pass, we had to follow a bare hillside on a cattle path, I stopped at the first heap of branches, took out two crooked sticks, slipped the useless ice-axe in behind my sack and started off. I shall never forget the surprised and almost scornful expression of my companion with his lips curling in unintentional mockery; he, an orthodox mountaineer, had set out with ice-axe in hand and rope slung over his shoulders. Our sultry and dull ascent was very monotonous because the beautiful view was behind our shoulders and we certainly could not walk up backwards. Reaching the pass, Strutt stated that the Gallegione was of no interest at all (and how well one could see it!); therefore we returned to Soglio and St. Moritz, I feeling slightly diminished in my friend's alpine estimation.

Before having ever met R. W. Lloyd personally, I not only knew him for his reputation as a mountaineer but also for having seen many, many reproductions of alpine prints from his famous collection. I was very glad to meet him also because of an amusing story about him, related by the gigantic Pierre Blanc of Bonneval-sur-Arc, better known as 'le Pape', with his characteristic nose resembling the beak of a bird of prey. He was there, I think with Strutt, when Lloyd arrived and asked: 'What have you done so far?' 'The North-west wall of the Albaron.' 'Ah', answered Lloyd with an indifferent voice, 'petite paroi'. At which 'le Pape' furiously replied, 'Oui, petite paroi, mille mètres à

pic!' This outburst we jokingly used thenceforth whenever a climb was not to be underestimated.

Pierre Blanc, together with his famous father Blanc le Greffier, had a sinister reputation in the Italian valleys contiguous to his own. One day near the Col du Carro, where the watershed is formed by a plateau of big stone slabs and where the border is not clearly marked, they had caught two surprised Italian carabinieri who were enjoying their lunch in peace. After having disarmed them they took them down triumphantly to Bonneval, pointing them out to everybody with cruel jokes for which the Blancs were unsurpassable. The next day the two carabinieri, full of shame and expecting goodness knows what punishment, were taken back to the border. Perhaps in the families of these two poor chaps the ill-feeling towards France rankled right through to 1940.

The Blanc family, apart from Auguste who used to be a taxi driver in Paris during the winter and who, by his fatal fall from the Dolent in 1911, helped to establish that the summit of the mountain was not, as everybody had thought, the meeting point of France, Italy, and Switzerland but only of the latter two, sometimes crossed over to Italy to hunt in the royal reserves of Val di Rhèmes and Val Savaranche even during daytime as if it were their own, whether it was the shooting season or not. The terrified guardians used to retire prudently as soon as they saw the goatish beard of le Greffier, allowing them to carry away all the chamois or bouquetins they liked, even the young ones, whose flesh is more tender.

'Le Pape' one day was staying at the Terme di Valdieri in the heart of the Alpes Maritimes with Charles Meade. The authority of that place was Monsieur le Chevalier Victor Spitalieri de Cessole, who was descended from an old family of Piemonte-Nice, and who for us Italians still was 'il Cavaliere Vittorio Spitalieri di Cessole'. While he was talking to Meade about ascents from that spot, Blanc interrupted to ask about a certain couloir of the Lourousa; at which the chevalier stated with a condescending air: 'Ça, jeune homme, c'est une grande course seulement pour des guides de premier ordre'. Next morning almost in the dark 'le Pape' was already furiously cutting steps up that couloir cursing like hell and speeding more and more Meade's pace, who was anyway a fast climber. In short, before midday when people met in the square of the spa to drink their mineral water, Meade and Blanc freshly shaved and combed were politely asked by de Cessole which excursion they had made that morning, and 'le Pape' replied with a grin: 'Petite promenade pour des guides quelconques, vôtre couloir de Lourousa'.

I had first met Meade immediately after the First World War at Ceresole Reale in Piemonte. He came from a several days' trip across the internal passes of the Graians. He was with his wife who carried

a small rucksack. When I saw her at dinner that evening, very elegant in a smart dress, I kept wondering how on earth she could carry it about over such high mountains and keep it in good shape in her small sack. A really nice couple, these Meades. Years after, one evening in October, entering a modest hut on the Gran Sasso d'Italia in the Abruzzi, my surprise was great to see Meade and Pierre Blanc, seated near their host the Marquess of Origo, an intimate friend of Gabriele d'Annunzio. But this time 'le Pape' was not at all in a joking mood. Was it because he was too near to the real Pope?

Around 1912 I frequently used to go to the Aletschhorn group in September, which normally guarantees excellent weather, starting from the charming little hotel at the Riederfurka from where one can get a complete view of the Grosser Aletschgletscher. One day I saw a group of people seated around a stone table having a picnic. Among them was the famous banker Sir Ernest Cassell, proprietor of the magnificent villa up there, with a beautiful young lady and a handsome very distinguished-looking young man. The young lady later became vice-reine of India as wife of that young man, the future Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten. Many years later, when he was First Sea Lord I had the honour to meet him. I was visiting England for the Centenary celebrations of the Alpine Club, the occasion on which, with great kindness to me and my country, the Club elected me Vice-President.

The Riederfurka out of season was almost exclusively frequented by British mountaineers looking for quiet solitude. One day, having picked up the name of an old gentleman, Aston Binns, I asked him if by chance he knew the Valpellina above Aosta. He nodded, but said he had been there several years before. I insisted: did he remember a certain Abbé Bovet? 'Certainly', he said, 'I stayed with him, since this was the only possible accommodation in the valley. But how did you guess?' This Abbé Pantaleone Bovet was parish priest in the poor and remote village of Bionaz at 1,600 m. A great hunter, he shared with other hunters the habit of telling fanciful stories.

Once, after a long day's walk, he was descending the big glacier of Tsa de Tsan when all of a sudden his dog, tired too, disappeared into a crevasse. After having eagerly but unsuccessfully searched for him he finally decided to continue his way down, broken-hearted at having lost his loyal companion. But great was his surprise when arriving at the mouth of the glacier he heard miserable howls and yelps and there stood his dog, wet to the bone but joyfully wagging his tail, even after such a run under the ice. 'Est ce que c'était le même chien?' Aston Binns had then asked. As I brought this story back to the gentleman's memory after so many years he almost seemed moved by the recollection.

One day on the platform in front of the Forno hut above Maloja I

had noticed three mountaineers whom I had never seen before. Two were tall and well dressed, the third a little less. I was told by the Hüttenwart that one was called Amery. When I heard that name I went straight up to the tallest and most imposing and introduced myself. A big laugh came from the smallest of the three who said: 'I am Leo Amery, and you have just been talking to Joseph Pollinger who is much more important here in the mountains than I am'. So, besides having met Pollinger who for so many years had been the leading guide of my friend Strutt, I came to know Amery. It is unnecessary to explain to the English who he was. So modest and still so great. While Strutt and several others protested against the fascist prohibition to cross the Alpine border except by a very few authorised passes, Amery, having crossed by mistake the border near Moncenisio with his guides and having been halted by some shots, even excused the Italian militiamen by saying that they only obeyed orders. After the war, meeting him and his wife on Lago Maggiore, I deeply admired the courage and dignity with which they bore their great grief.

In 1939 I once took Maria José, the Crown Princess of Italy who was to become our queen for a month, up Castor, and on the summit made her climb the small culminating cone of snow to pose for some photographs. At that very moment we were joined by Alfred Zürcher with Joseph Knubel who, seeing that splendid figure standing like a statue against the sky, admiringly exclaimed: 'Jessas, Jessas, she is like the Madonna!' Years later little Knubel still told me enthusiastically: 'It really was an apparition, I almost fell on my knees'.

In the First World War my sister was head nurse of the field hospital 'Città di Milano' at Quisca on the Isonzo front. Being not far from there myself, I could visit her and she one day told me about an English ambulance driven by an intrepid nurse with a British Red Cross major by her side. He always smoked a pipe, and fearlessly went about in the heaviest bombardments to collect the wounded, first on the Bainsizza and then on the tragic San Gabriele. Later on my sister learnt that the major was Geoffrey Winthrop Young and she must have assisted her chief surgeon, Professor Baldo Rossi, when he amputated the leg of one of the most formidable mountaineers and most stoical patients. I had the honour of publishing an In Memoriam notice of Young in the *Rivista Mensile* of the Club Alpino Italiano.

I would like to close these fragmentary reminiscences with a few words on Dr. Somervell who has always been extremely kind to me, even overlooking the fact that I had preceded him by a week only in the first ascent of the South-west ridge of the Becca di Monciair in the Gran Paradiso group. This episode he wittily recalled in *A.J.* *34*. 28–45.

Last but not least, let me mention Sir Arnold Lunn whom we had

nicknamed 'the Pope' of British skiing; he ranged all through Europe and particularly in the north, waging a long war to introduce new rules for the slalom. Our affectionate friendship dates back to the first Winter Olympic Games of St. Moritz in 1928 when he needed supporters and among them perhaps remembers me.