THE TRAINING OF VAL D'AOSTA GUIDES

By A. K. RAWLINSON

In 1965 I had the privilege of attending as observer a course for prospective guides and porters of the Val d'Aosta in Italy. Such courses are organised every two years by the regional committee of guides and porters; the 1965 course was the eleventh in the series. Their purpose is partly instructional, partly a test: at the end of the course those who pass—by no means all do—receive their licence to practise as guides or porters.

Hitherto the custom has been to invite as observers two guides from other regions of Italy. This year the Committee decided for the first time to invite an observer from another country. Their invitation was directed to the Alpine Club, a compliment to the Club and to British mountaineering which we should appreciate. As the representative of the Club I received a warm welcome and generous hospitality. I was invited to join in all the activities of the course, and to sit in on all the deliberations of the instructors.

One object of the invitation was to make more widely known the qualifications, methods of training, and organisation of the Val d'Aosta guides. Hence this article. But it was also a gesture of friendship towards British mountaineers. The guides of the Val d'Aosta feel lively and historic links with the British, going back to the early days of Alpine mountaineering. They want to maintain and develop these links in the present generation.

To attend the course was, as might be expected, an experience of great interest. I learned a lot. I returned duly impressed, by the mastery of the instructors, by the good spirit of the pupils, by the care with which the course was designed and run, by the professional ideals which inspired all concerned. But my strongest and most important impression, which must come first in any report about it, was what fun it all was. To climb with these guides was tremendously enjoyable. From the first they made me feel at home and among friends. They were delightful companions both on and off the mountains. I hope to climb with them again.

Before I come to the course itself I must say something about the guides' profession to which it is the door. I base this on what my Italian friends told me. It applies, obviously, to the guides of the Val d'Aosta. How far it applies also to the guides of other regions of Italy, or of other

countries, I cannot say. No doubt there are similarities, and perhaps also differences.

The guides of Italy are organised by the Club Alpino Italiano through a national council. Below this are eight regional committees, each consisting of a president, who is a guide, four other guides nominated by the guides of the region, and four amateurs nominated by the appropriate section of the C.A.I. The president is chosen by the C.A.I. from a panel of three nominated by the guides. He holds office for three years but may be renominated. The Valdôtain committee is one of the eight regional committees. It covers the whole of the Val d'Aosta and its side valleys, including Courmayeur, Cogne, Valtournanche, Ayas and Gressoney. At the time of the course the president was Toni Gobbi of Courmayeur; he had held office since 1958, but has now relinquished it on being nominated national president of all the guides of Italy.

One function of this organisation is to regulate entry into the profession and training. The aim is to produce a body of guides probably fewer in number than in the past but of high qualifications, and with a strong professional spirit. In training there is increasing emphasis on theory, and on knowledge of world-wide aspects of mountaineering and its history. This was prominent in the syllabus for the course. Prominent too was the emphasis on the proper professional qualities of a guide, of which ability as a mountaineer is only one. When he takes a client, the pupils were told, a guide is the ambassador of his profession and of his country. It is not enough just to be a good climber, able to lead clients safely up and down the peaks. The prime duty of a guide is to help his clients enjoy the mountains. If the client does not enjoy the climb, the guide has failed, even if a difficult route has been accomplished. The measure of a good guide is not the number of difficult climbs he may do; this may make him a good mountaineer but not necessarily a good guide. The enjoyment and happiness of his clients is what counts.

It follows that long experience is an essential part of the education of a guide. He needs experience not only of the mountains but of clients. Theory and training courses, valuable and necessary though they are, cannot replace the true foundation of a guide's training which, today as always, is actual experience in the job, first as a porter, then as a guide, climbing with clients. It was emphasised that the course itself is only a beginning. The young guides must continue learning for many years. No one, I was told, can really be a good guide until he is about thirty-five, with ten or fifteen years behind him of fully professional activity. Hence one of the problems of the profession, that within a few years of attaining his professional zenith, a guide's physical powers begin to pass their peak.

For none of these guides is guiding a sole livelihood. They all have other activities, such as running a shop or hotel or other business, or ski-instructing, especially in the Valtournanche, where the ski school at the Testa Grigia is open virtually all the year. Guides' tariffs are fairly high, and engagements usually for short periods. The days are gone of engagements with a single client for weeks on end; the old system of payment at a fixed daily rate is no longer practised. Payment is normally according to the fixed tariff for each climb, neither more nor less. Almost all the recognised climbs are tariffed. For example, on Mont Blanc the Pillars of Frêney and the Pear are left for private negotiation but all the rest—the Sentinel, the Major, the Peuterey ridge—have their fixed tariff.

Before he can become a guide, a man must be a porter. To qualify as a porter he must be not less than eighteen nor over thirty years of age, be of Italian nationality and have resided in a mountain district for at least three years, have a minimum educational standard, a clean civil record and a certain amount of climbing experience, and be passed physically fit by the official doctor. He must then attend, and pass, one of the biennial courses such as that which I attended.

A porter may accept engagements as assistant to a fully qualified guide, both as a third man on a rope with a guide and client, and leading a second rope following a rope led by a guide. A porter may take clients on his own on minor climbs, that is, up to but not more than Grade III and on peaks not exceeding 4,000 m.; an exception is made allowing porters to lead clients on a few very easy big peaks, like the Breithorn by the ordinary route. A porter's fee is two-thirds that of a guide.

To become a guide, a porter must be not less than twenty-five nor more than thirty-five years old, and have been a porter for at least three years. Then he must attend and pass another course, which means, since the courses are held only every other year, that in practice he must serve as a porter for at least four years. During this period he must show a good record of professional activity, as a porter with clients; simply to have done a lot of climbing with private friends is not enough.

The course lasts two and a half weeks. Those attending pay 25,000 lire (about £14) towards the expenses; the rest is met by the guides' committee and the government. The first week is instructional, partly lectures, partly practical. The rest consists of actual climbs, designed to illustrate and test the previous lessons, with the instructors watching the performance of the pupils, Finally there is a written test in map-reading, and for those who have reached an acceptable standard in the practical work, a viva voce examination on the theory. The same course serves both for prospective guides and for prospective porters; naturally

a higher standard is expected of the prospective guides. In 1965 there were thirty-three applicants for the course. Porters wishing to become guides numbered eleven. Of these, seven were admitted to the course; those refused were considered not to have shown sufficient professional activity as porters, or in other ways not to fulfil the qualifications already mentioned. Of the seven admitted to the course, six passed at the end. There were twenty-two applicants to become porters, of whom fourteen were admitted to the course and seven passed. It is open to those who fail to try another time, provided that they are still within the age limit.

The course was based at the Hotel Belvedere, at Verrand, just above Courmayeur. Kept by Luciano Proment, himself a retired guide, it has a lovely view and made an agreeable headquarters. The director of the course was Toni Gobbi; most distinguished and widely experienced of Courmayeur guides, deputy leader of the successful Gasherbrum expedition, whose shop is the meeting place for all climbers in Courmayeur, he needs no introduction. He has been instructor on many of these courses, and directed several. Four other guides acted as instructors, each in charge of one aspect of the training. The instructor for rock was Oliviero Frachey, of Champoluc; he also took the map-reading. The instructor for ice was Vicenzo Perruchon, of Cogne; for mixed climbing Camillo Pellissier, of Valtournanche; for rope techniques and rescue Franco Garda, of Aosta. All these are experienced and distinguished guides in their prime. They were an impressive team. Pellissier is perhaps the best known, notably for his part in the first ascent of Kanjut Sar, when he reached the summit alone. He has also been on expeditions to South America and to Greenland. Pupil of the great Luigi Carrel, to whom he frequently acted as porter in his youth, short, quick-moving and jolly, he would enliven any rope: 'le petit ours des montagnes,' someone called him. Garda, by contrast, is tall and massively built. He is not only a fine climber, but a special expert in rope manoeuvres, on which he gives seminars from time to time for his fellow guides; 'Garda et ses noeuds' was a catch phrase among them. As owner of a vineyard, he is also a valuable guide to the wine list. This was the third course on which he and Pellissier have instructed. They each received a commemorative ice-axe at the end. Garda and Frachey have been together to the Caucasus, and are planning to go again if permission can be obtained. Frachey is short and square, and gives an impression of certainty and strength behind his quiet and attentive charm. Although on this occasion he was the rock instructor, he also has a reputation as an ice-man, especially for the descent of ice. Perruchon was instructing on the course for the first time, but his *école de glace* was for me one of the most interesting and impressive days of the course, especially for his own demonstrations. I have never seen anyone cut steps so quickly

or with so little effort; he seemed not to cut them but to charm them, as if with a wand. He was no less masterly on crampons.

At the end of the course each instructor marks each pupil on his own subject. The director may vary an instructor's mark by not more than one in either direction. A mark of five or less in any subject fails. There are also marks for theoretical knowledge and for general aptitude and conduct. After the first ten days it was decided that certain candidates had no chance of passing. They were so informed, being given the opportunity to go home, though they were allowed to stay for the rest if they wished. At a conference on the last evening the instructors gave their marks and discussed the candidates thoroughly. There could be no doubt of the stringency of the whole test.

The first three days were devoted to lectures and classroom exercises. Subjects covered, then or in later lectures, included the duties and responsibilities of guides, statutes and regulations, equipment, meteorology, geography of mountain regions, the history of mountaineering, and map-reading and compass work. The last received special attention. The official doctor came to lecture on first aid.

There followed four days of practical instruction: two days at the Palestra or practice rocks, at the foot of Mont Chétif, one for rock climbing technique, one for rope manoeuvres and rescue, including holding and recovering 'le client au vol'; one day on the Pré de Bar glacier for *école de glace*; one day on the small peaks near the Torino hut for mixed climbing. On all these days attention was concentrated on the practical problems of conducting clients, and on climbing elegantly, with plenty of reserve obviously in hand, so as to give the client confidence.

A few technical points may be of interest. The approved method of roping was round the chest, using a bowline on a bight with one loop over the shoulder. A double rope was used for rock climbing of any difficulty. Belaying was almost always on pitons. On rock many karabiners were carried, and used for runners on pitons at any difficult step. Everyone used twelve-point Grivel crampons. Axes were all very short, and always had a wrist-sling. Step-cutting was done one-handed. For ice, screw-pitons were strongly recommended; the best are thought to be a hollow tube with a screw-thread round the outside, but these are extremely expensive and the simple screw is thought quite adequate, as long as it is not too thin. For lifting a man from a crevasse a pulley system was taught, using three karabiners and two slings; by this method one man can pull out another, even if the fallen man is unconscious. It can also be used for rescue from under an overhang. For a man to escape from a crevasse without help from above, save for the holding of the rope, the use was recommended not of the traditional Prusik knot but of two newer knots, the noeud Marchand

or the noeud Valdôtain. These have the same purpose as the prusik, but slide more easily. The Valdôtain was invented by Garda himself. It is a simple alternative to the Prusik. The Marchand was invented in France. It incorporates a karabiner, which makes a useful handhold. Another technique demonstrated was that of lowering a man on a single rope, with a brake consisting of a karabiner with a second karabiner, channel piton or hammer-handle across it.

After this first week the course moved on to actual climbs. The object was not to do the routes of special difficulty, but classic courses such as a young guide may find himself called upon to do with clients. Unfortunately, in 1965 this part of the programme was almost completely frustrated by the weather. The mountains were in poor condition, with much soft snow, and at the crucial period in early July a series of storms spoiled even the modified programme which had been intended. A special disappointment was the loss of the Matterhorn. To mark the centenary year it had been planned to take the whole course up the original 1865 route of Jean–Antoine Carrel, by the Galerie Carrel; but a storm which left three inches of snow at La Riondet was decisive. Other climbs for which parties went up but which were frustrated included the South face of the Géant, the via Salluard on the Pointe Adolphe Rey, Midi-Plan traverse, Petit Capucin (via Gervasutti), Pyramide du Tacul, Castor. Hopes of the North face of the Tour Ronde, the Kuffner route on Mont Maudit, or the South ridge of the Aiguille Noire were never more than talk. Extra lectures and more visits to the Palestra filled the unwanted leisure..

The only climbs which were possible were small ones snatched between storms, usually in excessively snowy conditions. They included most of the Rochefort ridge in a snowstorm, the South ridge of the Tour Ronde, the Aiguille Croux in a hailstorm, the Breithorn by the Roccia Nera, and the Klein Matterhorn by the complete North-west ridge. For the climbs the course split into small groups, each with one or two instructors. One of the pupils would be put in charge of each group; he was the guide for the day. One or two of the others would be designated porters. The rest, and the instructor, were the clients. The guide for the day had to find the way and generally direct the ascent. The instructor would usually stay at the back offering only occasional comments.

For the observer this was climbing of great luxury. The pupils carried the food and did all the hard work like cutting steps. The main duty of the observer was to exercise choice between wine, tea or coca cola from the flasks frequently proffered to cheer him on. Perhaps the climax was the Klein Matterhorn. I had the honour of doing this roped between Pellissier and Perruchon, with eight porters in support. I wonder if a single amateur has ever been so formidably guided on the

Klein Matterhorn since the first ascent by de Saussure and seven guides in 1792.

On the last day, after the viva voce examination, for which the chief guide of Lecco, Felice Butt, came as an additional observer, the course concluded with a memorable lunch, attended by representatives of the Regional Government, of the C.A.I., and of the various local guides committees. At the end of the meal each of those who had passed was formally handed by one of the seniors his badge and his book authorising him to practise as guide or porter. The six who became guides were: Walter Grivel (Courmayeur), Luigi Herin (Valtournanche), Fausto Maquignaz (Valtournanche), Albino Pellissier (Valtournanche), Matteo Pession (Valtournanche), Brenno Rial (Gressoney).

Afterwards there were speeches, the wine flowed, Professor Berthet, President of the C.A.I., Aosta, led the company in song, and even the observer found himself on his feet to make a speech in French.