On the Southern Slopes of the Bregaglia

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(*Plates* 48–50)

. . . The eye rests on one of those wonderful landscapes which tell the southward-bound traveller that he has reached his goal and is at last in Italy. The great barrier is crossed, and the North is all behind us. The face of the earth, nay the very nature of the air, has changed, colours have a new depth, shadows a new sharpness. The hills seem to stand back and leave room for the sunshine . . .

Douglas Freshfield, *Italian Alps*, 1875

The Italian valleys which pierce the southern slopes of the main range of the Bregaglia are still unspoilt and beautiful. Everywhere there is water: in the Val di Sasso Bisolo, cows graze peacefully among flower-filled water-meadows, with rocks and trees for shade. Nearby, in the Val di Mello, water rushes down from the mountains in great streams and torrents and a huge waterfall plunges down into a sparkling amethyst rock-pool.

The villages hum with life. In the morning the food shops overflow with housewives replenishing stocks for their large families. By midday the bars and cafés are full and in the evening the local people put on their best clothes and walk about the village, chatting in groups, for the traditional *passeggiata*. Higher up the valleys and in the more remote villages, the day starts early in the summer. People there are up and about by 6 o'clock or earlier while, higher still, the cowman leads a lonely life following his herds up the valley, as the snow recedes to reveal the fresh new grass beneath.

Even the mountains show a more human face on their southern sides and provide some compensation for those, like myself, who have reached that stage in life where we seek out, without shame, the easiest route up a mountain rather than the most difficult. Three great peaks rise above the southern slopes of the Bregaglia and have their 'normal' routes on the Italian side of the range: the Badile, the Cengalo and the great Disgrazia itself. Last summer I had the opportunity to climb them and also to explore some of the side-valleys off the Val Masino. A very old friend, Steve Jones, came along too to act as leader and guide.

I had arranged to meet Steve in Sondrio, a pleasant spacious town with the river running through it and several large open squares with solid buildings. There had been serious flooding in the area a few weeks earlier, and along the river banks there was much evidence of flood damage. All along the approach

roads, crops had been devastated and were covered with yellow sludge. The loss and suffering of the local people must have been very great. However, we put such thoughts behind us as we started on the long walk up the Val Porcellizzo to the Gianetti hut, involving a height gain of well over 1000m. It was very beautiful – first through forest and then more open boulder-filled meadows. At one point our way lay along the river where it widened to form large rock-pools. I went to sleep in the sun while Steve had a swim. He reached the hut at least an hour before I did. Coming straight out from England and doing a five-hour climb with a heavy rucksack to 8000ft or so made me realize how unfit I was compared with people like Steve who are climbing all the time.

The Gianetti hut is a large and good one with a nice guardian, a pleasant free-and-easy atmosphere and no tiresome rules. We were allowed to choose where we wanted to sleep and take our rucksacks upstairs, so that I was able to make up my mattress properly with plenty of blankets and get all my gear arranged for the morning. We left the hut early to climb the Badile (3308m). It was a glorious morning, the superb friction of the granite made climbing a joy and we reached the summit in the guidebook time of three hours. Mostly it was hard scrambling, with a few pitches which had to be properly belayed. From the top we watched people struggling up the great N ridge. Beyond them, the main artery of the Bregaglia snaked away towards St Moritz while, to the south, range upon range of mountains stretched towards the Apennines. We spent nearly two hours on the summit enjoying the sun and the view before making the descent, which was slightly more tricky and needed firm concentration, and returning to the Gianetti hut.

Next morning was cloudy and stormy, but after a leisurely breakfast it cleared a little and we set out, as planned, for the Cengalo (3367m). This was a very different route from yesterday's – longer, more serious, with mixed rock and snow. Again we achieved the guidebook time of 3½ hours to the summit. We could hardly believe that, on the first ascent, Douglas Freshfield and his party, *starting from the valley* at Bagni del Masino, had taken only 4 hours and 40 minutes. On the way down we discovered that the first couloir between the Badile and the Cengalo is much safer than the second one, recommended in some guidebooks, since the latter – when snow cover is thin or non-existent – is full of very loose rock. So we came down the first couloir without difficulty and, after a brew of tea at the hut, walked on down to the valley. We felt we deserved a treat after a long day, so we had a terrific supper at an albergo of pasta, steak, ice cream and coffee, washed down with a bottle of wine. *Meraviglioso!*

Next day we drove to the top of the Val di Sasso Bisolo and found an idyllic spot by the stream for our lunch picnic. The path to the Ponti hut zig-zags steeply up above the valley until it comes out on an open boulder-field. Now the magnificent Disgrazia came into view – a real large-scale mountain with ridges and arêtes and rock-faces and glaciers. *This* was what our two previous climbs had been working up to!

We were the first to get away next morning, but were soon passed by a party of fast-moving men. After boulder-hopping to the moraine, we followed a long track on a raised ridge of shale to the edge of the glacier. The sky behind the rock-masses surrounding us was passing through all the changing colours that



48. *Piz Badile (3308m) and Piz Cengalo (3370m).* (p 136)



49. *Monte Disgrazia (3678m).* (p 136)

presage the dawn; finally the tips of the crags turned golden and the sun lit up the glacier above us. Here we put on our crampons and started on the long slog up to the col. Two parties behind were slowly gaining on us. Recognizing that my competitive instinct was not yet quite dead, I made a special effort to keep moving steadily upwards and to take no rests. At 9am we stood on the col, with me panting like a landed whale, and stared with awe down the precipice on the other side.

Meanwhile, the parties which had been following us up the glacier were trying to reach the ridge more directly, via a snowy couloir, and were dislodging a lot of loose stones. I watched a rock the size of a football go leaping and crashing on its way down to the glacier. Rather than risk climbing beneath this barrage, Steve decided to go straight up the ridge. This involved many interesting moves, interspersed with hard scrambling, and I was now able to benefit from Steve's expert leading and wide experience. Several times we were able to forge ahead of people younger and stronger than myself, either because of Steve's immaculate route-finding (though he had never been on the mountain before), or because we left others behind making complicated and unnecessary belays, where moving together or a few cut steps would have answered the problem more quickly and efficiently. At last we arrived below the classic snow ridge leading up to the summit. Steep, narrow and sparkling, it soared towards the sky. There remained 'the bronze horse', a tooth of rock which you have to get past as best you can – in my case, inelegantly, *à cheval*. A few more yards of scrambling and we were on the top.

The summit of the Disgrazia (3648m) is somewhat marred by a metal structure like a climbing-frame from a child's play-ground, but the views all around us were wide-ranging and majestic. To the north, the immense Corda Molla ridge swept down from the summit. To the east, beyond a couple of inaccessible-looking towers of enormous domed rock, I recognized the Bernina and its satellites, the Piz Roseg and the Palü. To the west, we could pick out the Badile and the Cengalo, as well as the Passo di Mello (2992m) where we intended to bivouac that night. Beyond these, the familiar Zermatt peaks stood out with great clarity.

Having climbed down to the col, we then paused to decide what to do. Both of us were disinclined to return to the Ponti hut; it was only 3pm and we felt like tackling something more exciting. At the same time, our original idea of climbing down to the Passo di Mello by first scaling the Monte Pioda (3431m) seemed less attractive, now that that rock pile was actually towering above us. Instead, we continued to the edge of the glacier and traversed round to the Bocchetta Roma (2898m) which overlooks the Val di Mello. From here we hoped to pick up the Sentiero Roma running down into the next valley, after which a short climb should bring us to the bivouac hut. Steve had estimated that we would need an extra three hours to complete all this, but we could now see that it would take far longer. From here we could have returned quite easily to the Ponti hut; but I persuaded Steve to continue. What we did not realize was that the Sentiero Roma is less a footpath, more an obstacle course, with steep rocky descents protected only by swinging pieces of wire, icy snow-slopes at hazardous angles and, at best, enormous never-ending boulder-fields. All this

was taking time and we were getting extremely tired – at least, I was. Finally, on an icy traverse, I slipped. With his quick reactions, Steve held firm and stopped me slipping further; but then he tried to pull me back up by the rope like a sack of potatoes. 'For Christ's sake, Steve,' I called up, 'let me stand on my feet!' and I finished the traverse by cutting steps for myself. This was the only time during the whole week when voices were raised between us!

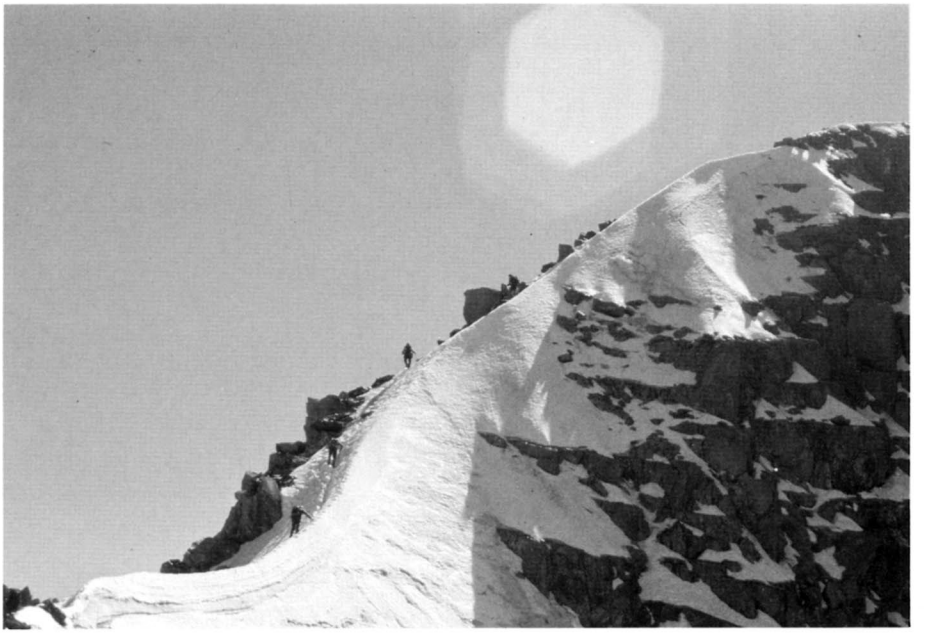
We had another conference at the point where we should have turned uphill for the bivouac hut on the pass. We could just see it, a tiny doll's house, high – very high – above us. I knew that to climb up there would take me at least two hours, and we were likely to run out of light before that, so there was nothing for it but to plunge down the Val di Mello and try to get as low as possible before bivouacking in the open. Soon it was nearly dark and we were facing the unattractive prospect of a cold and uncomfortable night under a rock. We passed a herd of cows which loomed up, stolidly impassive, in the gathering darkness. Then suddenly we heard a dog barking and by the light of our head-torches we saw a primitive stone hut with an elderly man standing, a shadowy figure, in the doorway. He indicated that we were welcome to stay there for the night and of course we accepted thankfully. The old man now set about lighting a fire inside the hut; the smoke curled up and disappeared through holes in the roof. The path to the village, he said, was *pericoloso*. When he asked us how we came to be so high up the mountain at this late hour, we could give no adequate explanation, especially as the conversation had to be conducted in my inadequate Italian.

The hut was even more basic than those I had seen in Nepal. In one corner was a mattress on the floor with a few rough blankets. There was a large copper cheese-maker and a huge cheese maturing in a press. A petrol lamp had run out of fuel, but by now the fire was burning merrily with a pan of water heating over it. Steve made a wonderful brew of tea, a life-saver, and the old man offered us some home-made wine. Neither of us felt very hungry – just infinitely thirsty – and we ate no more than a couple of cheese rolls before settling down for the night. The old man spread some sheets of plastic on the ground and sacrificed one of his larger blankets. I must have been fast asleep in seconds. Later in the night, the dog came in and lay down near the embers of the fire.

At first light we all got up and made some more tea. The elderly man was 65 years old, he told us, and had no family at all. Once a week he went down to the village for supplies and to sell his cheese. He had 21 cows up the mountain, and would shortly have to go and milk them; he showed us how to put up a rudimentary barrier across the door to keep animals out. It was hard to know how best to express our gratitude for his hospitality.

After the old man had gone, we collected our things together, washed up the mugs and spoons in the stream and set out into the early morning mist. I caught a last glimpse of the dog who was large, old and shaggy, climbing slowly up the rocks, unsteadily, on stiff rheumaticky legs.

Now, with plenty of time, we made our way down the Val di Mello. At first the path was rough but soon it passed through a village of old stone houses, after which it improved. Sometimes the path crossed a fast-moving torrent, by way of a bridge of logs lashed together, or ran along the side of a clear emerald



50. *The snow arête just below the summit of Monte Disgrazia (3678m).* (p 136)



51. *Frontier Ridge from below the Pic d'Arres (1983), Maladeta Massif beyond.* *(p 142)*

stream. Looking back up the mountain everything appeared indistinct and mysterious but, in the lower valley, camp-sites were coming to life and Italian family parties were setting out for a day in the mountains. We could feel the heat rising – it was going to be another warm day.

In the afternoon I left Steve washing his clothes in the river and drove down to Sondrio, where I was impressed all over again by the instinctive kindness one constantly meets in Italy. First, the bank changed my travellers' cheques at 3.17pm when they were supposed to close at 3.15pm. Would that ever happen in Switzerland or, indeed, in England? Then the man in the hardware shop took immense trouble to find a bulb suitable for my head-torch (by removing one from something else). Finally, the man in the photo-shop removed the jammed film from my camera in his dark-room and returned it to me, without charge, in a sealed cassette.

That evening we had another excellent meal and a bottle of wine; the latter seemed to enable us to talk of many things which we don't normally mention. We had, of course, already held a post-mortem on yesterday's adventure – or débâcle (whichever way you look at it) – and we now progressed to lots of other things like friends, commitments, freedom, happiness and the good life. Next morning I saw Steve off, with promises to try to arrange another week in Italy next year. Then I went down to the village and bought some petrol for the old man's lamp.

At about mid-day I set out for the Omio hut. I took it very gently, not having really decided whether or not to go all the way. But the sun filtering through the beechwoods kept persuading me to go a little further, to see what lay on the far side of the forest. The path led through real rock-climbing country, past great cliffs with obvious lines up them and nobody on any of them. By this time a cup of tea was an enticing prospect and I pressed on to the hut (three hours up and two down) which is magnificently sited in a great cirque of rock peaks and is another staging post on the Sentiero Roma.

In the evening I treated myself to a thermal bath at the Bagni del Masino. These baths date from the 13th century and the water comes up through a spring from deep in the earth at a constant temperature of 38°C. It is supposed to be excellent for rheumatism and skin diseases. The baths are like small swimming-pools; a timer is set for 20 minutes and, for full benefit, you must stay in the water until the time is up. The old woman was quite cross with me for emerging five minutes early! After the bath I felt renewed and energetic. The building in which the baths are housed used to be the old albergo and dates from the 15th century. Only one room is still as it was before the war – the walls covered with beautiful carved wood-panelling and the ceiling with hand-painted wallpaper. During the war the albergo had been used as a prison camp and the rest of the panelling was chopped up for firewood. No one knew how this one room had escaped.

On my last day I left early for the long walk back up the lovely Val di Mello to deliver the petrol to the old man. The morning was warm and misty, but the upper reaches of the valley looked remote, lofty and inaccessible. However, I carried a compass in my pocket and took a bearing on the general direction in which the hut ought to be. Beyond the turn-off to the Allievi hut the

way became wilder and the path less distinct. At one point I lost it altogether, but continued on my compass bearing until I picked it up again. After about three hours I suddenly saw the old man high above me, coming down with the dog and carrying a huge basket on his back. We both waved and he looked pleased and astonished to see me. I gave him the petrol for the lamp and asked for permission to take a couple of photos of himself and the dog. He asked me to send him copies and I wrote down his address in a village down in the valley. He only spent three or four months of the year in mountain huts, he said; at the beginning of October the cows would come down to the valley and he would go home.

By now we were approaching one of his lower huts and the old man unlocked the door and invited me to look inside. Rows and rows of enormous cheeses, like loaves of bread in a huge oven, were stacked on shelves which ran the whole length of the hut. He went round prodding them and eventually selected one from which he cut me a massive slice as a present. He also poured me a glass of his strong home-made wine. The excellent cheese was similar to gruyère, but of lighter texture. The wine, though delicious, gave me a small throbbing headache above my right eyebrow! I gave the old man what few provisions I had with me – a fruit loaf, some apples, a bar of chocolate. He produced some pictures of himself as a young man, a soldier in the war, with black hair and moustache and dark inquisitive eyes. Born here in the Valtellina, for most of the war he had been a prisoner of the British, but obviously that fact no longer rankled. In 1951 he had started his herd of cows; the dog was 15 years old. We wished each other '*Arrivederci*!' '*Buona fortuna*!' and I watched the old man and the dog disappear into the mist up the mountain.

On the way back down the valley it started to rain and there was a violent thunderstorm, but I found shelter under an enormous leaning rock. Another rock lay at an angle to it and deflected the water dripping off the larger one. Here I waited, in great comfort, for the storm to pass and gave thanks to the fates for allowing me, over the past few days, such generous measures of good luck, ranging from superb weather to instant shelter. Now the weather had broken and my holiday was over, but I had absorbed a rich store of memories to take home with me from the beautiful southern slopes of the Bregaglia.