

CHAPTER IX.

THE COTTIAN ALPS.



1. EXPLORATIONS ROUND THE FOOT OF MONTE VISO.
2. ASCENT OF MONTE VISO.



MONTE VISO, FROM THE NORTH.

1. EXPLORATIONS ROUND THE FOOT OF MONTE VISO.

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"Das Mögliche soll der Entschluss
 Beherzt sogleich beim Schopfe fassen."—*Faust*.

THERE is no town in Italy which commands so magnificent a panorama of the chain of Alps as Turin. The wide plain on which it stands, with its sea-like surface broken into undulations by ranges of low hills, crested with copses and sparkling villas, rolls many a league around, until it is suddenly interrupted by the mighty rampart which encircles it in a horse-shoe curve 250 miles in length. Many noble peaks rise at intervals along the ridge; northward are the dazzling snows of Monte Rosa and the Lyskamm, and in the S.W., where the great chain approaches nearer than elsewhere, it towers up into the rugged pinnacle of Monte Viso, the ancient Mons Vesulus, one of the most precipitous and striking mountains in Europe. The streets in Turin are straight, and cross each other at right angles; stand where you will, and look in any direction excepting eastward, and some portion of the Alps closes in the vista. In one of the quarters of the city half of the streets open out towards Monte Viso, so that it is almost constantly in view, and stands like a giant sentinel, sleepless, immortal, keeping guard over the kingdom at its feet.

It was about the date of the Christian era that the capital of the Taurini, the modern Turin, was made a

Roman colony under the name of *Augusta Taurinorum*. From that time the *Mons Vesulus* must have been familiar to the Romans; but it is not a little singular, considering the number of the military roads they had even then made across the Alps, that it should be the only peak of importance known to them by name, or at any rate of which the ancient name has been preserved. It is, indeed, stated by some modern writers that *Mons Silvius* was the Latin name of *Monte Rosa*, but I know of no classical authority for this assertion.

We first read of the *Mons Vesulus* in *Virgil*, who speaks of its pine-clad sides as the resort of the wild boar —

“ *Ac velut ille canum morsu de montibus altis
Actus aper, multos Vesulus quem pinifer annos
Defendit,*” . . . *Æn. x. 707.*

The next author by whom it is mentioned is *Pomponius Mela*, the first Roman geographer, who probably composed his work “*De Situ Orbis*” in the reign of the Emperor *Claudius*. He writes (*lib. ii. cap. 4 § 4*):—
“*Padus ab imis radicibus Vesuli montis exortus, parvis se primum e fontibus colligit.*” *Mela* is followed by *Pliny*, who repeats the statement that the *Viso* contains the sources of the *Po*, and adds that it is the highest mountain in the Alps:—“*Padus e gremio Vesuli montis celsissimum in cacumen Alpium elati, finibus Ligurum Vagiennorum, visendo fonte profluens.*” — *Historia Naturalis*, iii. 16, § 20.*

More than eighteen centuries have passed away; day by day men have watched it crimson flushed at sunrise, and in

* I am indebted to my friend Mr. F. E. Blackstone, of the British Museum, for referring to the original works for the passages from *Mela* and *Pliny*.

the evening seen it standing out with clear-cut profile against the western sky; quarters of cities and streets innumerable have been named after it; astronomers have determined its latitude and longitude; engineers have measured it at a distance; geographers have pretended to map it; even Englishmen have travelled round it; but up to within the last two years no attempt has been made to set foot upon its summit. I could, indeed, fill pages with quotations, in which every form of superlative which the word inaccessible is capable of receiving has been lavished upon this terrific peak, by writers who seem to have regarded its precipitous contour rather as an excuse for inaction than as a spur to enterprise.

A brief preliminary description of the portion of the chain which culminates in the Viso will render the narrative part of this paper more easily understood. The peak itself is built somewhat in the form of a bayonet, by the union of three ridges of rock. Suppose these, in the first instance, to radiate from a common centre; turn one of them round until it is in the same straight line with one of the other two; and a rough conception of the architecture of the mountain may thus be obtained. This will be made plainer by a reference to the annexed diagram, where *o* is the summit, and *o A*, *o B*, *o C*, the three ridges which unite to form the peak. These are not equal in size and importance, but *o A* greatly preponderates, and may be considered as the main mass of the mountain, with *o B* and *o C* as supporting buttresses. The Viso, although very near the watershed, which separates Dauphiné from Piedmont, is not on the actual crest of the chain, but projects in front of it, like the advanced work of a fortification; the dividing ridge, which runs in a southerly direction as far as the point *c*, there taking a broad sweep to the westward, and leaving the mountain standing entirely upon Italian

Four great valleys have their origin in or near the spurs of Monte Viso. The ridge *B O C* is prolonged nearly in the same line northwards to *E* and southwards to *D*, and at these two points subordinate ranges are thrown out towards the *E.*, which enclose the valley of the Po, and separate it from the Val Pellice on the N. and the Val Vraita on the S. At Château Dauphin the latter valley forks, and the northern branch, with its numerous tributaries, occupy the western side of the ridge *B C*. The upper part of the Val di Po is also divided, but by hills of comparatively small elevation,—the river which flows along the southern arm bearing the name of Lenta. The Val Pellice, the Val di Po, and the Val Vraita, are Italian, and open into the plain of Piedmont at La Torre, Saluzzo, and Venasca. The remaining valley, the head of which occupies the angle *E C F*, is French, and is watered by the river Guil. It pursues a north-westerly direction from its origin to Abries, where it turns at right angles, and finally joins the valley of the Durance at Mont Dauphin. Above Abries it is called the Vallon de Viso, below it the Combe de Queyras. It will be observed that the valley of the Po is remarkably broad and square-headed: the Viso is consequently conspicuous in almost every part; in the other valleys, on the contrary, it is generally invisible, excepting from its actual base.

Monte Viso is usually considered as the terminal peak of the Cottian chain; the Val di Po being the most southerly valley in that division, and the Val Vraita belonging to the Maritime Alps. Notwithstanding its great height of upwards of 12,500 feet, it gives rise to no glaciers, partly on account of its low latitude ($44^{\circ} 39' 45''$), and partly because the higher portions of the mountain are too precipitous to retain the snow. There are, however, among the lofty ridges in the vicinity many beds of snow, which

are subject to great fluctuations in extent, according to the character of season and the time of year.

The best maps of the district are Bourcet's map of Dauphiné (1749—1754) for the French side, and for the Italian side the six-sheet Sardinian Survey, and sheets 57 and 63 of the large 91-sheet Government Map. There is also the "Carte Topographique militaire des Alpes" of Raymond (Paris, 1820), the Dauphiné sheet of which embraces both sides of the Viso. I am indebted to Professor Forbes for the loan of it, and I think a traveller would probably find it more useful than the others. All the maps are, however, more or less inaccurate and unsatisfactory.

I first visited the mountain in 1860, when I approached it on the French side. I had been spending some time in the neighbourhood of the Grand Pelvoux with the Rev. T. G. Bonney and Mr. J. C. Hawkshaw, the latter a young mountaineer of nineteen, one of the most energetic and skilful climbers I have ever had the pleasure of travelling with. Our only regular guide was Michel Croz of Chamounix, who before we entered Dauphiné had been with me in the Tarentaise. Our Pelvoux campaign, owing to the unrelenting cruelty of the weather, had been a series of disasters; but we hoped to retrieve our fortunes on the Viso, and it was not without deep thankfulness that we anticipated a speedy release from the inconceivable filth and vile food of Dauphiné.

Late on the evening of Saturday, the 19th of August, we drove down the main road from L'Abessé to Mont Dauphin, where the Guil joins the Durance, and rounding the fortress ascended the valley of the former river as far as Guillestre. This is a considerable town, and the principal inn, the Hôtel des Alpes, tolerable for Dauphiné, but dear. Being much in want of rest, and the following day being

Sunday, we determined to pass the next night at Abries, a drive of from five to six hours, for which we engaged a carriage on very reasonable terms.

At 9.30 on the morning of the 19th we quitted Guillestre by the road which ascends the Combe de Queyras, passing, at starting, an interesting church with a handsome porch of three arches, supported by very slender pillars resting on lions. The columns are constructed of a mottled red marble, occurring in some abundance in the vicinity. Just outside the town the road mounts rapidly, and commands a superb view of the range of the Pelvoux, which we saw with tantalising clearness. The sky was cloudless, and the brilliancy of the day made us fondly imagine that at last the weather had changed for the better, and would enable us to achieve success.

The scenery of the Combe above Guillestre is very striking, and we enjoyed our drive exceedingly. The road winds for some distance along the river-side at the bottom of a gorge, walled in by steep and red-tinted cliffs, then suddenly mounts on the right, so as to cut off an angle. On gaining the eminence we looked down upon the wider valley beyond, in the very centre of which, perched upon a lofty isolated crag, stands the highly picturesque fortress of Château Queyras. We rested a quarter of an hour in a queer little inn in the village near the foot of the fort, where we were supplied with far better food than we expected, and then resumed our journey. Above Queyras the scenery changes and becomes very tame, the valley being wide and flat, and the road so bad that it was only occasionally that the horse could be pushed into a trot. We reached Abries at 3.30 P.M., and drove into an open square in the middle of the village, which was occupied by groups of people dressed in their Sunday attire, with some of whom the Curé and his

clerical brethren were indulging in a game at bowls. The principal inn, l'Étoile, *chez* Richard, stands on the east of the square, and its outside had rather a promising appearance. On entering, we found the two eating-rooms on the ground floor filled with drunken peasants, sitting in groups of twos and threes, simultaneously screeching at one another in an incomprehensible *patois* of the most harsh and barbarous description, with an accompaniment of frantic gesticulations. After dining in the midst of this tumult, we retained the services of one Joseph Peyras as extra guide, and instructed Michel to see to the packing of two days' provisions, to be conveyed on muleback to the highest châteaux. These arrangements completed, our host conducted us to our chambers, solemnly pledging himself that we should start at 4.30 in the morning.

The style of our bed-rooms will be better understood if I first describe the method generally pursued in Dauphiné for getting rid of offal. After any meal, the plates are scraped in the eating-room and the broken victuals thrown upon the floor. The dogs of the neighbourhood then investigate the débris and devour what they can of it, leaving the bones behind. As brooms are entirely unknown, a geological formation of offensive character is soon accumulated. We had become so accustomed to this, that the state of the *salle* we had dined in did not disturb us; but when we went upstairs we found, to our horror, that the same process had from time immemorial been going on all over the house. The floors of our bed-rooms were covered with a layer of bones and dirt several inches thick, and all the accessories were in perfectly harmonious keeping. Three weeks' experience had tolerably hardened me against the attacks of more than one species of nocturnal enemy, of which I am convinced Dauphiné was the original centre of dispersion; but my companions were more sensitive:

they passed a highly animated night, and entertained me on the morrow with a history of their sufferings, the details of which I will not inflict upon my readers. The sum we were charged for our board and lodging was not much less than it would have been at the first hotel in Turin.

Notwithstanding the promise of an early start, it was 6.30 A.M. on the 20th before we got away from Abries. As the char road goes some distance farther up the valley, Richard had harnessed his mule to a covered cart, and he persuaded us to get inside. At Abries the main valley bends at right angles, and extends in a south-easterly direction to the foot of the Viso, the line of the Combe de Queyras being continued above the village by the Val Prévaire, at the head of which there are passes into the Vaudois valleys of Germanasca and Pellice. The cart jolted so abominably that we were soon afoot again. On reaching La Monta, where a second route into the Val Pellice by the Col de la Croix diverges to the left, it could go no further; so the provisions and knapsacks were taken out and packed upon the mules' backs, we in the mean time walking on before. The valley above Abries had hitherto been uninteresting; but a fine rocky peak now appeared in front. We pronounced it to be the Viso, and were immediately at work with our sketch-books, feeling some contempt for it all the time, as it appeared very easy. While thus busily engaged the remainder of the party came up, and our local guide, Peyras, told us, to our disgust, that we were altogether mistaken. At 9.20 A.M. we reached the highest châteaux in the valley, the Bergerie de la Ruine, situated on the left bank of the Guil, at the foot of a path leading by the Col de la Ruine into the Val Vrait. The name has probably been given from a great fall of rocks which has taken place in the vicinity, to which several enormous

blocks of talcose schist lying in the middle of the valley below the châteaux doubtless owe their position. A few years ago there were some rude stone cabins nearer to the Viso, but they are now in ruins. We unloaded the mule, paid and dismissed Richard, seated ourselves upon the grass for breakfast, and discussed our plans with Peyras. This worthy had at first informed us that he had made the ascent of the Viso and knew the way up, but it appeared on cross-examination that he was speaking of a col; and when we explained to him that our object was to get upon the top of the peak, he regarded us as downright madmen. We supposed the col he spoke of to be the Col Viso described in Murray, and stated to command a superb view of the plain of Piedmont. We resolved to mount the col and examine the terrain, and attack the peak on the morrow. We were, however, in no hurry to be off, until the tenant of the châteaux brought us on to our legs at once by telling us, that unless we reached the col by noon we should see nothing, for the mountain would be certainly clouded,—a prediction which seemed strange, as the weather at the time was perfect.

We started at 10.30 A.M., and recrossing the Guil followed the ascending path, which now mounted rapidly, diverging from the gorge through which the river rolled below us on the right. We soon gained the comparatively level track above, and in a moment stood face to face with a scene of the wildest and most striking character. Immediately in front of us is the Viso at last, that is, the north-western flank of the great ridge $\sigma \Delta$, seamed with deep ravines and snow-filled couloirs, and crowned by a line of square-topped towers and turrets, of which the two most remarkable occupy the extremities of the summit ridge. The one on the left is the highest peak, that on the right is an immense cubical block known as the

Petit Viso. Bounding the valley on our left, and connected with the Viso, a long and lofty ridge, with its crest cut into a thousand jags, separates us from the valley of the Po. The savage wildness of the mountain view is still more striking from the gentle beauty of the foreground. Up to the very foot of the crags roll undulating sweeps of uncut mountain pasture, even now so bright with blossom that in the early summer they must have been a paradise of flowers. *Anemone narcissiflora* in profuse bloom, thick as buttercups in an English meadow, whitens the hillside; the blue spikes of the rare *Campanula spicata*, and the yellow heads of *Senecio Doronicum* are detected among the waving grass; while high above it the beautiful *Delphinium elatum*, a far more elegant and stately plant than our common garden larkspur, lifts its long and slender panicle of flowers.

A rough general idea of the Viso, as seen from the French side, may be gathered from the frontispiece to this paper, which has been reduced from a plate in Tayleur's Dauphiné, and corrected from sketches by Mr. Bonney and Mr. Hawkshaw. The face in view was extremely precipitous,—in fact the mountain looked like a second Matterhorn on a somewhat smaller scale, and I think we all entertained serious doubts as to the possibility of climbing it. One method only seemed to offer the smallest chance of success, and that was by cutting steps up the very steep snow-slope on the left, and so gaining the foot of the final peak. Some gently inclined beds of snow appeared to lead up to the base of the steep slope, and just on the right of the former, according to Peyras, lay the Col de Viso we were making for. On my asking him if that were not the position of the Col de Vallante, he replied that the two names referred to the same pass. We determined accordingly to push on as fast as possible

to the col, to ascend thence to the point where we proposed to commence step-cutting on the morrow, and thoroughly reconnoitre the ground that lay between it and the summit.

Just on the point of noon, an ugly mass of brouillard sailed up from Italy, and perched itself in the gap above the Col de Vallante. It increased with alarming rapidity, and in a few minutes enveloped the whole mountain in an impenetrable cloud. We pushed on for the col, hoping that it would disperse, climbed up upon the right of a great pile of broken rocks, and put our feet upon the snow and our heads into the mist nearly at the same moment. A few steps in advance and we stood upon a ridge, with the Val Vallante below us, and all but about ten feet of it perfectly invisible. It was now 1 o'clock, and we loitered about in hope of seeing something more than the very dim outlines of the different members of the party. At 1.20 P.M. I observed the barometer; and a comparison with Turin gives an altitude of 9365 feet. Ten minutes more pass away with no prospect of a break; we are shivering with cold, and the condensing moisture is decidedly unpleasant; so we turn our faces in the supposed direction of the summit of the Viso and begin to mount the snow. After a climb of half an hour, a gust of wind dashes through the clouds, and we get a glimpse of our position. Just in front is a rugged peak, on the crest of the ridge dividing us from the valley of the Po, and a little to the right of it is the steep snow-slope we are anxious to examine. But they are sundered from one another by a fearful rift, perhaps 1000 feet deep, upon the brink of which we are standing, and of which we cannot see to the bottom, as it is filled with cloud. The walls of the chasm being nearly vertical, a descent into it is not attempted: Michel and Hawkshaw go forward to

scale the peak in front, Bonney stays to observe the barometer, and I climb some rocks close at hand. It is interesting to note the height to which vegetation ascends in the vicinity of the Viso. The barometer observation gives an altitude of 9998 feet, and the crag I mounted was about a hundred feet higher. On its summit *Pyrethrum alpinum*, *Saxifraga exarata*, and *Armeria alpina*, were growing abundantly, and a closer inspection would probably have disclosed several other species.

Hawkshaw and Michel having returned from their investigation and reported further progress impracticable, and the mist having closed in again rather thicker than before, we descended to the col with the determination to cross it on the following morning, and work up the bottom of the ravine, which we judged must extend from the head of the Val de Vallante to the valley of the Po, and entirely cut off the Viso from France. Descending on the northern side, we were soon below the cloud again, and, having plenty of time on our hands, scrambled among the pile of rocky fragments, and brought our hammers into play. Many of the blocks are mica schist, but here, as on all other sides of the Viso, rocks rich in magnesia seem to predominate. Fragments of serpentine, chlorite, and talc slate were quickly transferred to our pockets, together with specimens of an olive-green fibrous mineral, somewhat resembling asbestos, which we found in large quantities. On our return to La Ruine we had occasional glimpses of the Viso through openings in the clouds, and once caught sight of a herd of eight chamois upon a patch of snow not far below the summit.

We regained the chalet early in the evening, and found it one of the most agreeable mountain resting-places we had ever stayed at. It was tenanted by an oldish man named Jacques Roche, whose wife lived there with him,

which rather surprised us, as the charms of feminine society are a very unusual addition to the pleasures of an Alpine bivouac. The worthy couple were most civil and obliging, and did all in their power to make us comfortable. If I were again to visit the Viso from the side of France I should lay in my provisions at Guillestre, and make an early start from that place, dine, and perhaps change horses at Queyras, and push on the same day to La Ruine, thus avoiding the filth and high charges of Abries.

Our supper was delayed until a late hour, in consequence of the goats not coming home until long after the usual time. Until their arrival we could get no milk, and they were quite indifferent to the vociferations of Roche, who rushed out every ten minutes and apostrophised them as brigands. In the mean time our plans for the morrow were warmly debated, and we discussed what we should do if, as seemed highly probable, the bad weather should continue.

Above La Ruine there are three passes across the eastern barrier of the Guil valley into Italy. The first of these is the Col de Seylières, leading into the Val Pellice. Next to this is the Col de Traversette, which is the usual route taken to the lakes at the head of the Po, and thence to Crissolo. Through the ridge below this col is an ancient tunnel called the Traversette, the history of which will be found in Murray. Still farther on, and nearer to the Viso, is a higher col immediately above the sources of the Po. This is called in Bourcet's map the Col de Coulaon, and in sheet 57 of the 91-sheet Sardinian Survey it bears the singular title of the "Passo del Color del Porco." The Val Pellice being the nearest way to Turin, we determined to make our passage into Italy by the Col de Seylières; and the goats having at last arrived, we supped, and retired to rest in the corner of a most commodious hay-loft, where we

should doubtless have slept soundly but for the unceasing music of the goat-bells.

We were up betimes on the morning of the 21st, but the state of the weather was decidedly unsatisfactory, there being a good deal of cloud in the direction of the Viso. We delayed a couple of hours, hoping it would disperse, but as it showed no inclination to do so, we packed up our knapsacks, and quitted the bergerie at 6.45. On arriving at the upper pastures, the mountain was completely shrouded; we consequently bore up to the left, and at 8.45 were standing upon the Col de Seylières, and looking down into Italy.

The arm of the Val Pellice, which is connected with the col, is nearly parallel to the Vallon de Viso, descending directly to the N., and turning eastward some miles down near the village of Villa Nova. There is therefore no distant view, and indeed we could see little more than some long and steep snow-slopes immediately beneath us. At 9 I observed the barometer, and a comparison with a simultaneous reading at Turin gives an altitude of 9247 feet. The rocks in the immediate vicinity, which are composed of mica schist, were by no means deficient in vegetation. Within a few yards in extent I gathered *Petrocallis pyrenaica*, *Thlaspi rotundifolium*, *Saxifraga bryoides* and *Aizoon*, *Aronicum Doronicum*, *Artemisia glacialis*, and a *Campanula* about two inches high, which I cannot distinguish from the common harebell of our English hedges, — a tolerably full list for so great an elevation.

We started upon our downward course at 9.30, having previously made a re-distribution of the various articles of baggage, by which our only remaining bottle of wine was assigned to Hawkshaw's pocket. The snow was in delightful order for glissading, and we dashed down it with

shouts of delight, greatly to the astonishment of Peyras, who had never seen anything of the sort before, and, not having a spiked pole, was very clumsy in his movements. Many of the slopes originated high up on the side of the valley to our left, and we in our descending course hit them one by one somewhere near the middle. This, however, would not do for Hawkshaw, whose appetite for the amusement was insatiable, and who persisted in climbing up to the top of every one of the slopes before beginning to *glisser*. He had just reached the summit of one of the highest, and was about to descend, when he tripped up, and commenced his slide on his back head foremost. Suddenly the precious bottle darted out of his pocket, and came dancing down the snow, executing a series of the most graceful somersets. A shriek of horror at once issued from the lips of the other members of the party: I made a rapid flank movement, and happily captured the truant in its wild career, while Hawkshaw, having speedily righted himself, completed his slide in a more dignified position.

Having traversed some extensive tracts of red snow, and passed rocks covered with rhododendron bushes in a blaze of crimson blossom, we arrived at 10.45 at the highest pastures, and lay down on the grass by the side of the crystal stream to take our mid-day meal.

The spot was so attractive that it was 12.15 before we resumed our journey, and began to descend through exquisite valley scenery, which, had it but a snowy background, would rival that of the Val Anzasca or the Val de Lys. Our path first leads us along a plot of mountain pasture fringing the river-side, and then by sharp zigzags down a steep gorge, walled in by noble crags and strewn with vast fragments of rock, among which the torrent foams and tumbles; a little farther, and the valley bends eastward, and we look for many a mile along it, from the

vine-trellised houses of Bobbio at our feet to where, in the distance, it opens out into the plain of Piedmont. Below Bobbio the bounding ranges recede and leave broad strips of fertile land on either side the river, and we walk by many glorious walnuts, and through pleasant chestnut groves, until we come in sight of La Torre, the most important town of the Vaudois valleys. I have preserved no note of the time at which we reached this very picturesque place, but I think it must have been about 4. Having paid and dismissed Peyras, we dined, and took a carriage to Pignerol, arriving just in time to catch the last train to Turin, where we found at the Hotel de l'Europe a very different kind of lodging from that we had enjoyed the previous night at the bergerie of La Ruine.

I stayed several days at Turin in order to make amends for former discomfort, and for the first and last time in my life was heartily glad at getting out of the Alps. I had been travelling among them for three weeks, and had only had four fine days : I had slept nearly every night either in a châlet or in a filthy inn, and had scarcely tasted the whole time what could be fairly called a dinner. My two friends went to Zermatt by way of the St. Théodule, taking Michel with them, while I spent the remainder of my holiday at Verona and Venice.

On my arrival at Turin, I found a letter from my friend Mr. Ball, with whom I had had some conversation in the early part of the year respecting the best route to the summit of the Viso. Mr. Ball wrote from Novara on the 30th of July, and informed me that he had been travelling a few days previously in the immediate neighbourhood of that mountain, and that although continued clouds kept him entirely in the dark for the first two days, a fortunate break on the morning of the third day revealed the true way to the top. Mr. Ball ascended the valley of the Po

to Crissolo, went into France by the Traversette, and out again by the Vallante to Château Dauphin. The path from the latter col passes close to the extremity of the ridge $\sigma \Delta$ (see diagram); and on turning this point Mr. Ball obtained what he terms an entirely new view of the mountain, viz. the south-eastern face of that ridge. Along this face, which is far less precipitous than any other part of the Viso, he conceived that the summit might be reached, especially as there was a quantity of snow upon it, which would greatly facilitate the ascent.

Unhappily, I did not receive this letter in time to enable me to turn the information to account in 1860, but I carefully treasured Mr. Ball's advice, and reserved the Viso for the crowning expedition of the subsequent year's campaign.