

THREE WEEKS IN THE WESTERN AND CENTRAL GRAIANS.

By F. BAKER-GABB.

IT is interesting, when looking through the volumes of the 'Alpine Journal,' to notice how some districts, discovered in very early times and announced with due pomp and circumstance by their explorers, have since tended gradually to disappear into an obscurity fitfully illuminated by an occasional new expedition or Alpine note.

Such a fate appeared to have attended the mountains of which I propose to write: they figure frequently in the earlier numbers of the Journal; then follows a long interval, during which only those who study the publications of the French and Italian Alpine Clubs have had their attention drawn to the claims of the district. Now the interesting papers contributed by Mr. Alfred Holmes,* Mr. J. J. Withers,† Mr. W. A. Briggs, ‡ and Mr. Longstaff§ have again thrown light upon these parts, and I am tempted to add my experiences of a short holiday taken there three years ago.

I first realised something of the extent of the region to be visited when looking through Chapter V. of the new edition of Ball, a book which, I may say, is quite indispensable for these parts, and excites more admiration at its completeness the more it is studied. In this I saw that three sections are required for the Western and Central Graians, while one suffices for the Grand Paradis district (Eastern Graians), a proportion which suggested numerous gaps in the red lines of travel requiring attention.

July 1900 found us on our way. The approaches were easy enough: the night train from Paris took my wife and myself, by the Mont Cenis route, to Chambéry, beyond which the line branches through Albertville to Moutiers Salins, its present terminus. An electric tramway takes you in half an hour to Brides les Bains, where there is time for luncheon before the arrival of the diligence, which, starting from Moutiers, can be joined at Brides, and arrives at Pralognan, a convenient first halting-place, in time for dinner. The Hôtel de la Grande Casse et du Petit Mont Blanc (it provides even in its title for expeditions large and small, for the climber and the water-drinker) is a charmingly situated hotel, standing at a height of about 4,672 ft., in the midst of

* *Alpine Journal*, vol. xx. p. 313.

† *ibid.* vol. xxi. p. 215.

† *ibid.* vol. xxi. p. 158.

§ *ibid.* vol. xxi. p. 377.

beautiful meadows, with pine-woods close at hand and beds of wild strawberries to afford suitable occupation for an off-day. The hotel is stone-built, it has cold water laid on to the bedrooms, a plentiful supply of really hot water upstairs, and other arrangements quite up to modern requirements. At the time of our arrival on July 7 there were but few visitors, but before we left on the 16th there were perhaps fifty, and many more expected: it is much visited as an after-cure by those who have been taking the baths at Brides, and their regular season appears to commence in the middle of July, though the hotel is open in June. On our arrival we were presented with a circular setting out the attractions of the place, the tariffs for guides and porters, and the numerous and varied modes of payment at the hotel. We selected the form of pension that appeared most inclusive, with very satisfactory results. Candles in the hotel and coffee out of it were our only extras—curious exceptions of small consequence, for which, no doubt, some subtle reason exists. We spent the first day after our arrival—a Sunday—in wondering how the framer of the circular could have ventured to assert that ‘*la température y est douce sans transition brusque,*’ and when evening came invaded the next room for more blankets; but the following morning proved warmer, or, perhaps, as the maid who discovered our robbery told us, ‘we had become less timid of the air.’ The sun shone, and we turned our thoughts to guides. Several proved to be available, and from what we saw and heard the guides at Pralognan are probably the best in this district, one of them, at all events, being evidently of repute in all the neighbouring places we visited.

We engaged Auguste Amiez as guide, with Marcellen Amiez as porter, and started after lunch for the Refuge de la Vanoise, about 3 hours off, to sleep out for the Grande Casse, which is the highest peak at Pralognan (12,668 ft.), or, indeed, in the Western and Central Graians. We found a man in charge of the Refuge, who told us we were its first occupants for the year: he had just been busy airing all the effects in the sun; so with clean straw and dry blankets we were able to make ourselves very comfortable. A quantity of snow had fallen in the last few days, and lay in large patches on the way to and round the hut, so we anticipated some tiring work for our first ascent of the season. Next morning, July 10, starting early by lantern-light, we crossed the Lac Long, which was frozen hard, and reaching the right bank of the glacier ascended on snow. Higher up, some 3 hours from the hut, the slope steepened, and from that point the new-fallen

snow made the ascent laborious: the layer was thick enough to render step-cutting unnecessary, but the steps trampled in it broke away and let one down with annoying frequency. We climbed a narrow snow couloir among rocks, and by the snow above reached the ridge overlooking the Col de la Grande Casse. Here a magnificent view greeted us: nearly all the peaks in these parts are admirable view points; situated between the mountains of Dauphiné and the Mont Blanc range they command a grand prospect on all sides, and, after recognising old friends, there was on this day the added interest of seeing for the first time the new peaks whose better acquaintance we hoped to make before long. The ridge to the top was somewhat corniced, but gave little trouble except near the summit, where the slope on each side was very steep, and the ridge composed of unconsolidated freshly fallen snow. The actual highest point was little more than an overhanging snow-wreath, so, a few feet below it, we flattened out the ridge as a resting-place, and were content.

We did not rest long, however, for Amiez, rightly I think, was anxious to get down the slopes we had come up before the sun had time to loosen the new snow. Our descent was uneventful, and we were back in the hotel at Pralognan by a quarter to four, having started on the ascent from the hut at 2.15 A.M. Our times, excluding halts, were 6 hours' slow going from the hut to the top, and for the descent 2 hours from the top to the hut, and two hours and a quarter from the hut to the hotel. Next day the peak was ascended by Mr. Davy from the Col de la Grande Casse, an expedition which with so much new snow must have presented considerable difficulty.

We devoted the next couple of days to strolling about, our furthest walk being to the Col des Saulces, at the N. foot of the Petit Mont Blanc, on the way to which we found a wonderful variety of flowers. On July 13, with the same guides, we started up the valley of the Doron, running S. from Pralognan, to sleep at the Ritort chalets, some two hours and a half from the hotel, preparatory to an ascent of the Aiguille de Polset. Sleeping in chalets we found to be somewhat of a speciality of these parts; but, after a fair trial, we decided that it must be classed as an experience rather than a pleasure. However, on this occasion our quarters for the night were comfortable enough: we had a good supply of fresh hay in the corner of a landing for our bedchamber, with a private door of our own to the outside air, and were initiated into the process of Gruyères cheese making. Our

first conversational advances to the head cheese-maker were not altogether successful, and our delicately insinuated praise of the surroundings fell on unheeding ears; but presently this was explained; our cheese-maker was not a native. 'Had we travelled in the mountains much?' he asked. We replied suitably and modestly. 'Perhaps we had been as far as Switzerland?' We owned that we had, and I hastened to show my knowledge of the country by a glib mention of one or two Alpine centres. Still we had not touched the right chord. 'Had we ever been in Freiburg?' I was floored, but my wife came to the rescue with timely reminiscences of Château d'Oex and Rossinières, their pastures and their cows; and an intimacy was established which lasted till the cheese was made, and we retired to our hay. Our friend came from near Gruyères, he told us, but was engaged here for the season to superintend the cheese-making. The summer before he had been similarly employed at some chalets on the Col Ferret.

Our guides, I suppose, slept badly. We turned out of our hay submissively when they woke us, drank some coffee, ate without appetite, and started off, to find on a reference to the watch that it was just 12.30. However, there was a brilliant moon, which lasted till daylight, so our progress was easy and pleasant. Our way lay at first up the valley path, and then mounted gradually up and round the slopes on the W., leaving the Lac Blanc below us on our left hand. We mounted the Lac Blanc Glacier, a branch of the Glacier de Gébroulaz, covered with snow, which at this early hour was in perfect condition. Our guide told us, however, that the glacier varied considerably, and that later in the year some parts were often much crevassed and difficult.

From the head of the glacier we ascended to and passed the base of the snow-cone seen from Pralognan (3,430 m.), and following the snow-ridge between it and the highest point gained the summit (3,538 m. = 11,608 ft.) by a three minutes' scramble up easy rocks. The peak overlooks Modane, in the valley of the Arc, and on the other side of the valley are the Aiguilles d'Arves and the mountains of Dauphiné, so that it offers a magnificent prospect for those who wish to recall the pleasures of a past visit to Dauphiné, or for those who wish to see in anticipation something of the enjoyment that a future visit will give. We had reached the summit of our peak soon after half-past five, so that, even after a long period of rest, it was still quite early when we turned to descend, and the snow remained hard and firm. We walked

down leisurely, but when we came to the Ritort chalets, and found there was still ample time to reach Pralognan for lunch, mountain fare, shaken up in knapsacks, seemed unsuitable for our needs, and we returned down the valley to make amends for the dinner we had missed on the preceding night.

We had left the Ritort chalets for the ascent at 12.30, and reached Pralognan on our return at 11, of which time we had taken $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours walking for the ascent from the chalets to the summit and 4 hours for the descent from the summit to Pralognan.

The expedition is a very beautiful one, perfectly easy, and, by sleeping at the chalets, quite practicable for moderate walkers. For those who do not mind the additional walk up the valley it could be done without sleeping out; but in this case it would be well to start very early, as soft snow or finding the glacier crevassed would make a considerable difference in the time needed for the ascent.

Many good expeditions remained to be made from Pralognan: the Dôme de Chasseforêt, in the centre of the great icefields of the Glaciers de la Vanoise, the Grand Bec de Pralognan, and the Pointe de la Glière, a rock climb with which our guide tempted us, as well as more distant peaks. At this time, too, the rocky point N. of the Col de la Grande Casse—to be called, I believe, the Aiguille de Lepéna—remained unconquered, though it duly figured on the printed list of tariffs as *encore vierge*, with the significant entry in the prices, *à débattre*. It was, however, in the safe keeping of a French climber, who had made, we were told, several attempts upon it, and triumphed shortly after our departure. We heard, however, that there still remained another similar attraction, which would appear on the list next season, as a younger sister is permitted to make her *début* when the elder has been suitably married off. We had, however, to resist these varied inducements to a longer stay, for we desired to visit other parts of the district, and having driven up the valley on our arrival decided to make our exit by a pass and the Dent Parrachée.

On July 16 accordingly we started at 5 o'clock and walked with our guides over the Col d'Aussois, a pass which leaves the Doron valley at the Ritort chalets, where we had slept, for the Aiguille de Polset, and on the other side descends to Modane, though the Col de Chavière is the more direct and shorter pass to that place. We, however, after descending from the col, bore round the hill slopes to the E., and so in $1\frac{1}{2}$ hr. from the top of the col, or 6 hrs. from Pralognan,

reached the Fournache chalets, where we were to spend the night. The cattle had only come up a week before, but we found a very pleasant woman in charge, who was most pleased to do everything for our comfort, gave us very good quarters, and supplied us with fresh eggs, an unexpected luxury.

Next morning, July 17, we again started very early, at 12.20, by moonlight, made our way to the head of the valley and entered upon the couloir which leads up to the Col de l'Arpont on the S.W. ridge of the peak. Ball mentions guardedly that the col 'is attained with difficulty,' a discreet reference to the horrible slope of shifting shale that has to be ascended. By discreet movements you are able to mount a few feet, and then an unfortunate slip, followed by a hopeless struggle, lands you considerably below the point you started from. From the col the ascent lay over easy but very loose rocks, mixed with shale and stones, keeping always on the northern side of the ridge; near the top the way lies close to the ridge up a slope of what we found to be hard snow in which we cut steps to the top, avoiding the cornice which hung over the southern side. The peak afforded a grand view, though, indeed, in every description of these peaks this may be taken for granted; in looking through Ball we were at first amused to read of apparently each peak that it commanded a most marvellous panorama, or that the panorama was one of the most splendid in the Graians, or some similar phrase, but certainly the writer was justified.

Returning to the col we descended a few rocks and then snow to the Glacier de la Dent Parrachée, which we followed down without difficulty to its foot, and leaving it on its left bank reached the chalets of Les Trois Granges. The descent into the valley beneath was steep and hot in the full blaze of a morning sun, and we were pleased when we found ourselves seated in the Hôtel du Lion d'Or at Thermignon with a jug of beer and lemonade before us. The little hotel proved very comfortable, and the hostess most attentive: we were regaled with trout brought from the Lac du Mont Cenis, and kept in a reservoir for use, and garden strawberries from a riverside garden of which the owners were justly proud. Rumours of peaceful wars were in the air, mule batteries were passing on their summer progress over the neighbouring passes; but neither here nor elsewhere in our tour did we find any restrictions upon our movements or our photography—attentions which we escaped, no doubt, by remaining on one side of the frontier.

Next morning the diligence from Modane took us to the Chalet Hôtel at Bonneval-sur-Arc, a well-planned and well-placed centre within easy reach of numberless climbs adapted for those who, without attempting great things, enjoy occasional freedom from professional aid. We, however, were bound for Val d'Isère, and stayed at Bonneval for one day only, which I spent in an ascent of the Central Levanna (3,640 m. = 11,943 ft.) in the company of Culet, one of the two guides of the place. We walked up the valley to the Glacier de la Source de l'Arc, and then mounted the slopes of the Ouille de Pariote, on the right bank of the glacier, so as to reach its upper slopes at a high level. Crossing these on snow we reached the S.W. rocky face and mounted it without any difficulty, principally over boulders and stones, to the final rocks which form the summit. The top is quite satisfactory: it provides good resting-places, and would be uncomfortable to fall from. On our descent we were joined by six Italian labourers on their way over the Col Girard, armed with scythes to assist in the hay harvest in the Arc valley. We had left Bonneval at 2.30 and returned at 3 o'clock, having taken in actual walking about $5\frac{1}{2}$ hours for the ascent and $3\frac{1}{4}$ hours for the descent.

Next day, July 20, with Culet to carry our things, we walked over the Col d'Iseran by a good mule path to the Hôtel Moris, Val d'Isère. This presented another type. At Pralognan we had been in mountain luxury, at Bonneval in mountain simplicity, and here at first sight we feared we had reached mountain uncertainty. The house is curiously built and rambling, full of dark corners, with unexpected steps to trip you up; and from the back you can walk into your bedroom without visiting the lower floor—a constructional convenience well adapted for an unostentatious return from an expedition. We had allotted to us a spacious bedroom, which, with a kind of ante-room attached to it, occupied the greater part of one floor; but our surprise came when the dinner arrived. This proved excellent, and the cooking and provisions for climbing we were given throughout our stay were all that could be wished. It has, I think, never happened to me elsewhere to have my cold meat and butter protected from the heat of a rucksack by cooling leaves.

The morning after our arrival my wife and I started about half-past three for the Pointe de la Galise (3,945 m. = 10,975 ft.). The path up the valley follows the Isère through the gorge of Malpasset towards its source to the C.A.F. hut at Prarion. Going thence up the right bank

of the Niolet torrent, we reached the Glacier de la Galise, and leaving the route of the Col de la Galise, which crosses over the range to Ceresole, climbed the rocky wall bounding the glacier to the N., and then by easy snow-slopes reached the summit. Unfortunately it had begun to rain, so we saw little and soon turned to descend again. We sheltered several times on our way back to the hotel, which we reached a little before 1 o'clock, having taken 5 hours 20 min. walking for the ascent and $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours for the descent. The expedition is a very pleasant one, and the summit should command a grand view on a clear day.* Our next peak was the Pointe de la Sana (3,450 m.=11,319 ft.); but here again we were somewhat robbed of the expected view by a shifting mist, which afforded us only transient glimpses of the beautiful snows of the Grande Motte opposite. From Val d'Isère there is no need, as Ball appears to suggest, to go round by the Col de la Rocheure to make the ascent of the peak. From the chalets of le Manchet we went up the left bank of the Charvet torrent, and so straight to the Glacier de la Barme de l'Ours, the position of which does not appear to be correctly shown on the French map. We mounted moraine and the glacier without difficulty to the col between la Barme de l'Ours and the Pointe de la Sana, and reached the summit by its easy E. ridge in $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours from the hotel, the descent taking us $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours.

This was on July 23, and the following day—July 24—we devoted to a lovely sub-Alpine walk. Starting quite early, we walked through the forest of the Combe de la Thouvrière to the beautiful upland pastures of Grand Pra, from which we crossed the Col de Fresse, and so reached the path leading to the Col de la Leisse. Hence, in order to get a better view of the Grande Motte, we mounted to the Glacier de la Grande Motte, on the N.E. of the peak, and crossed it to its highest point, where it begins to fall towards the Val de Peisey. A ridge of shale furnished a convenient resting place from which we enjoyed the most magnificent view in all directions, the day being perfectly clear. Mont Blanc—which we had already seen finely from the Grand Pra—Mont Pourri, the Grande Motte itself, and the steep slopes of the Grande Casse stretching up from the narrow cut of the Col de la Grande Casse beneath it. Returning after a long period of rest and enjoyment to the path of the Col de la Leisse, we followed it downwards to the Lac de Tignes, and returned to Val d'Isère

* One of the finest in the Western Alps.—ED. *Alpine Journal*.

over the Pas de la Thouvrière. From near the top of the pass, looking over the Granges des Marais, on the opposite side of the valley, there is the most beautiful view of Mont Blanc possible to imagine. We saw it in a perfect light, with the afternoon sun shining full upon the central mass of the mountain; the rest of the range was hidden from view, leaving no trace of the steps by which so majestic a height is attained; and the monarch stood out alone against a clear sky, seeming almost to belong to another world. From the pass itself the rest of the range towards the Col de Miage is seen, but the view, though more extensive, is less impressive. Our whole round had taken us, including numerous and lengthy halts, about 12 hours' easy walking, and most enjoyable throughout. In the evening we sat down nine to dinner, all English—an event, I should imagine, without precedent in the annals of the Val d'Isère.

On the 26th I started with a guide—Frederick Rond, of Fornet, a village near—to make the ascent of the Tsanteleina, a beautiful peak which by the route from the S. now usually followed is easy of access. We reached the upper portion of the glacier by the west extremity of the band of rocks separating it from the lower portion, a route which seems more direct than climbing them at the E. end, as Ball recommends, mounted snow-slopes, some step-cutting being needed near the top, and so reached the very easy rocks of the summit (11,831 ft.) in $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours' walking from the hotel. The day was beautifully clear and the view most extensive. A descent of $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours completed a most delightful expedition. Next day many troops arrived, with mules, guns, and a band. The officers stayed at the hotel for some days, but the resources of the hotel proved quite equal to the occasion, and we benefited by the band.

On the 28th I started for the Aiguille de la Grande Sassièrè, accompanied by Mr. Hugh Smith, who consented to forego for one day the study of historical authorities where-with to confound examiners in order to taste the new experience of a mountain expedition. The point is the highest in the Central Graians (3,756 m. = 12,323 ft.), and would be more properly ascended from Tignes were it not that the accommodation in that village remains as primitive as when it was described by the early teachers of our art. The walk, however, of $1\frac{1}{4}$ hour down the road from Val d'Isère to the point where you branch off counts for little, for the day is not a long one. With Frederick Rond as guide, we took something under 6 hours for the ascent and $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours for the

descent, our route being along the W. buttress. The ascent is longer and less interesting than that of the Tsanteleina.

Our time for departure had come, and our boxes were packed and despatched down the valley, while we, with Rond, crossed the Col de la Tourne (8,071 ft.) to sleep at the Plagne chalets in the Val de Peisey for an ascent of the Mont Pourri from the S.E. Our guide told us that the Club hut where the night is spent for the northern routes has fallen down; in any case it would be a lengthy matter to get to it from Val d'Isère. Throughout our stay we had been extremely favoured by the weather. Of rain there had been a fair quantity, but, with a consideration for the requirements of the climber which is sometimes lacking, it had fallen as a rule of an evening only—usually in heavy thunderstorms, commencing at four or five o'clock. With this peculiarity in view, we started in good time for the chalets, a walk of about 4½ hours, and so had the afternoon before us to view the accommodation. Our afternoon was enlivened by watching the boy of the chalets clear out a stable, which he accomplished quite in the Herculean method by diverting a considerable stream through it. This was interesting enough until our repose was broken by the sudden realisation of the fact that the stream, altered in character by the work it had been called upon to perform, was heading for the door of our living, eating, and sleeping department, which lay below the level of the yard. The boy seemed to regard with entire equanimity the prospect of spending the night in a kind of lake dwelling surrounded by liquid manure, so we had to call to our rescue all we had forgotten of laws of motion of liquid bodies, and finally saved the situation; but practical engineering in carpet slippers, perched on precarious stepping-stones, presents many difficulties. The proprietor insisted on giving up his bed to us for the night, and this proved better than appearances suggested, though it was bitterly cold, and he, the guide, the boy, and the dog, who slept together on the floor, must have passed an uncomfortable time.

Rond and I started off next morning by lantern-light, and had an interesting climb up the Mont Pourri. On the top ridge we encountered the full force of a strong and bitterly cold north wind, and as steps had to be cut all the way we had a hard fight to get to the top. Mont Blanc was superb on the ascent, but it was too cold to make any halt on the summit of our peak (8,788 m. = 12,428 ft.), and we turned at once to descend, without even going down to the cairn, which is a few feet below the highest point on the ridge

leading to the Dôme de la Sache. The top part took us $1\frac{1}{2}$ hour up and down, and it was a relief to get once more below the ridge and be sheltered from the wind. The rest of the descent was made in warm sunshine, and we regained the chalets in 3 hours 20 min. from the top, the ascent having taken us 5 hours. Hence Rond returned to Val d'Isère, while my wife and I walked down the valley to Bourg St. Maurice, for which Ball allots four hours; an allowance we considerably exceeded. The Hotel des Voyageurs is labelled by Ball as 'not good,' but we found it very comfortable and moderate, and our experience was confirmed by others. Next morning we took the 11 o'clock diligence to Moutiers, caught the 2.47 train, and arrived at Chambéry in time for dinner at the Grand Hotel de France.

Be it said, in conclusion, that anyone who thinks of visiting these parts will be sure of finding good accommodation at Pralognan, Bonneval, and Val d'Isère, the principal centres on the French side of the chain. He will find plenty of expeditions to be made, most of them short, and all commanding extensive panoramic views. The ascents are scarcely to be recommended from a purely climbing point of view, for, with the exception of the Grande Casse and the Mont Pourri, those we made were, as we found them, distinctly simple, and the majority of the peaks appeared by the ordinary route to present similar characteristics. But if this is considered a defect, there are modes of rectifying it. The people are pleasant, access to the district is easy, it forms a convenient half-way house between the great peaks of Dauphiné on the one hand and of Courmayeur on the other, and those who may elect to spend a part at least of their holidays in the Central and Western Graians will, I think, have no reason to regret their choice.

THE EASTERN PEAK OF THE PLATTENHÖRNER.

BY THE EDITOR.

WHILST Tempest Anderson and I were waiting a day or two at the Torrent Alp before François and Sylvain Pession joined us last August some time was spent in photography. I had succeeded in persuading Anderson that it was absolutely necessary for him to devote to the photography of alpine flowers some of that skill which he has so successfully bestowed upon snow-peaks and volcanoes. But when he was good enough to fall in with my suggestion my task began to