

CLIMBING IN THE BREGAGLIA.¹

BY CLAUDE WILSON.

(Read before the Alpine Club, December 11, 1923.)

IT was in the year 1908 that Wicks, Bradby, and I 'discovered' the Bregaglia. We were not the first Englishmen to discover it, for Colonel Strutt knew it, and was well on with his 'Climber's Guide' at this date; and long before his day, or ours, Messrs. Ball, Tuckett, Freshfield, and Coolidge, and a few others of the heroic era, had been there and had left traces. They had ascended some of the highest points and had built cairns; and—they had written. Yet the district had made so little impression on them, or on the few who followed, that Mr. Coolidge wrote truly in 1908 that it was still one of the least visited and least known districts in the Alps.

It may perhaps be interesting to speculate as to how it was that a mountain group which made so instantaneous and so imperious an appeal to us had left the heroes comparatively unimpressed. That was the age when height counted above all things, and when snow counted far more than rock—an age, too, when really steep aiguilles seemed so obviously impossible as to be unthought of as practicable ascents. The heroes climbed some of the most massive summits and crossed the few obvious passes, and in doing so they must have obtained glimpses of fantastic rock spires and forbidding precipices to which they never gave a thought. I can well appreciate their attitude of mind, for towards the end of that era, in the latter 'seventies when, for the first time, I visited the Montanvers, it must be confessed that I looked at the Charmoz—and admired it—but that, until Mummery had actually made the ascent, it never occurred to me that it could be climbed. And this is the class of mountain formation that strikes me so forcibly in the Bregaglia, a group geologically built up of granite of unsurpassed quality, where stupendous precipices and dizzy pinnacles alternately greet the eye; and all embedded in a romantic framework as alluring as that surrounding the Dolomite spires, which, fantastic as they are,

¹ See map, *A.J.* xxiv. 392.

yet lack the supreme quality of rock-climbing only afforded by granite.

Since 1908 I have spent—sometimes with one companion, sometimes with another—the whole of four seasons and part of two more in this little group of mountains, only one of whose summits exceeds 11,000 ft. in height; and I have witnessed a great change in these years. No longer can it be said that the district is comparatively unknown, for since then three excellent climbing guide-books have appeared—one English, one Italian, and one Swiss—and, although the number of Englishmen who really know the district is still a mere handful, Italian and Swiss climbers swarm and fill the huts after the middle of July. Consequently, the region is to be specially recommended to those who can take their holiday early; for not only is that the season when, as elsewhere, the huts are likely to be found empty, but also when, in a good year, the approach to the rocks, guarded generally in August by ice, lies up slopes which, if steep, are at any rate usually covered with a layer of snow.

In attempting to give some impression of the general character of the group, and of the climbing it affords, I propose to begin at the S.E. corner, and proceed systematically round the chain, ending up at the Maloja at the N.E. angle. But the S., or Italian, side I shall pass over very briefly. It is better known to English climbers than are the northern spurs, and, while the climbing is perhaps as good, it is, I think, less characteristic. Here, on the Italian slope, there is but one centre—the romantically situated and ancient hostelry of Masinobagni, where, very soon, the time-honoured old barrack will be replaced by a modern hotel, now in process of erection on the opposite side of the stream.

From the bath-house itself there are plenty of climbs, of all shades of difficulty, to be made up and down in a day, and available very shortly after the cessation of bad weather. I think, too, there is a good deal yet to be tried in the way of new routes, and, of course, everyone will go up the Disgrazia.

The Ligoncio group has afforded us several delightful expeditions, and the Volta hut in the Val Ratti, surrounded by short but difficult climbs, is easily reached in a short day by an interesting pass. Besides this hut and the Cecilia at the S. foot of the Disgrazia, there are two huts on the S. side of the Bregaglia group proper, and within easy reach of the baths; and from each of these there is a season's climbing.

From the Allievi or Zocca hut—4 or 5 hours away—an

almost limitless area of rock-wall ridge and gully is available ; while from the Badile hut—3 hours from Masino, and *bewirtschaftet* after mid-July—most of the summits can be reached in from 2 to 4 hours. Our party has done perhaps a score of expeditions on this (the Italian) side, but, as already stated, it is not my present purpose to dwell upon ascents which are perhaps less characteristic of the best climbing in the group than are some of those from the Swiss side ; and I have, moreover, a better set of slides to illustrate the latter. Everyone will ascend the Badile itself, and most will go up and down by the ordinary and original S. route, which is quite difficult enough to be interesting, though the eastern and western arêtes will not be wholly neglected by those who seek adventure. The rest of the fine rock-climbs from Masino—the Torrones, the Zocca (S. routes), the Ferros, and the Camerozzo and Porcellizzo ridges—I must leave untouched ; and though, from all the six subsidiary valleys, passes—from the easiest to the most difficult—lead over the frontier to the Swiss side, let us suppose, as too often happens, that bad weather forces us away from Masino, and that we drive down the valley, catch the train to Colico at Ardenno, and thence, by Chiavenna, reach the Bregaglia valley and drive up it. Here, on our right, are the lonely and unfrequented peaks which separate us from the Val Codera. New work is to be done on these, not easy work either, from the Bregaglia side ; and though the Cima di Codera, when we made what we thought was the first ascent, proved to be a frost—for we found a cairn on the summit—it may yet be said that Colonel Strutt and Joseph Pollinger once spent a long day on it and yet failed to get anywhere near the top.

Driving up the valley from Chiavenna these heights are mostly hidden by the towering lower slopes, but we soon get a characteristic vision of the Bregaglia mountains proper in the remarkable tower at the foot of the N. (unclimbed) ridge of Vanni, and known as the Dente del Lupo. This strange isolated rock, about 250 ft. in height, has been climbed, I believe, only once, and then only by means of throwing a rope over the top. We once attacked it, on an off day, but ignominiously failed.

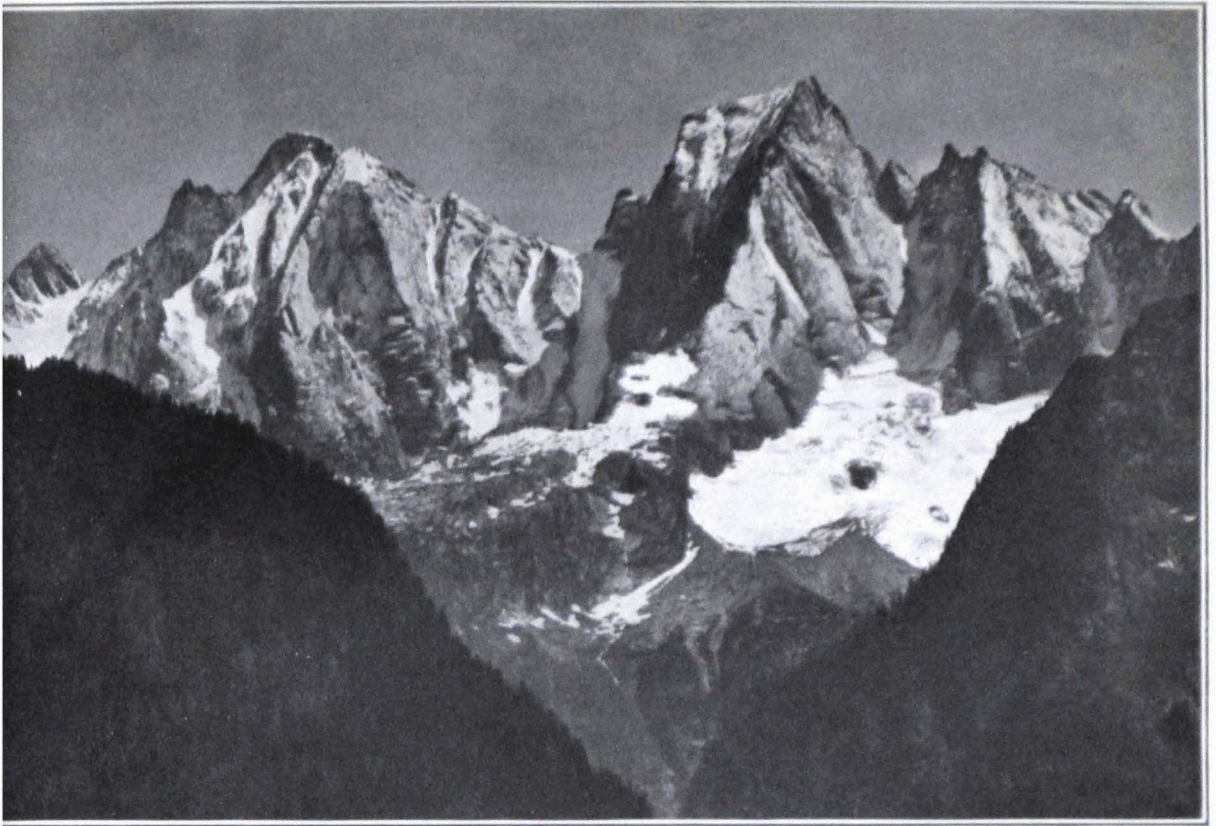
Proceeding up the valley, we come to the frontier at Castasegna, where much time is wasted over the red tape of the *douane*, and a few miles farther on alight at Promontogno, having shortly before reaching the village got a first view of the Badile and of the beautiful Sciora group, and whence an

afternoon walk to Soglio will provide us with a panoramic view of the range of surpassing beauty.

Next day we walk up the Bondasca Valley to the Sciora hut, and find ourselves surrounded by a *cirque* of granite peaks of wondrous grandeur. The precipices of the Badile and of Cengalo, on the left bank of the glacier, and of the Sciora summits on the right bank, vary from 2000 to 4000 ft. in height, and are so sheer that in only a few places would an attempt to scale them seem remotely possible. Nevertheless, though not without serious danger from stone-fall, they have been scaled at some of the least impossible-looking points; and in the past summer (1923) Walter Risch has made a route up the N. face of the Badile, of which the N. arête was climbed some years ago by an Italian party, who had previously fixed a rope at the crux by descending from the summit. The only climb our party has made from this hut is that of the Sciora di Fuori, ascending by couloirs to the col on its N., and thence by the eastern side of the ridge. But we have been both up and down the Bondasca Glacier on our way to and from Masino, on each occasion finding the crevasses well and fairly safely covered with snow. But we knew its reputation, and climbed with the utmost caution, for few glaciers in the Alps are more dangerous, as the veritable maze of crevasses revealed, when the snows have melted, clearly shows.

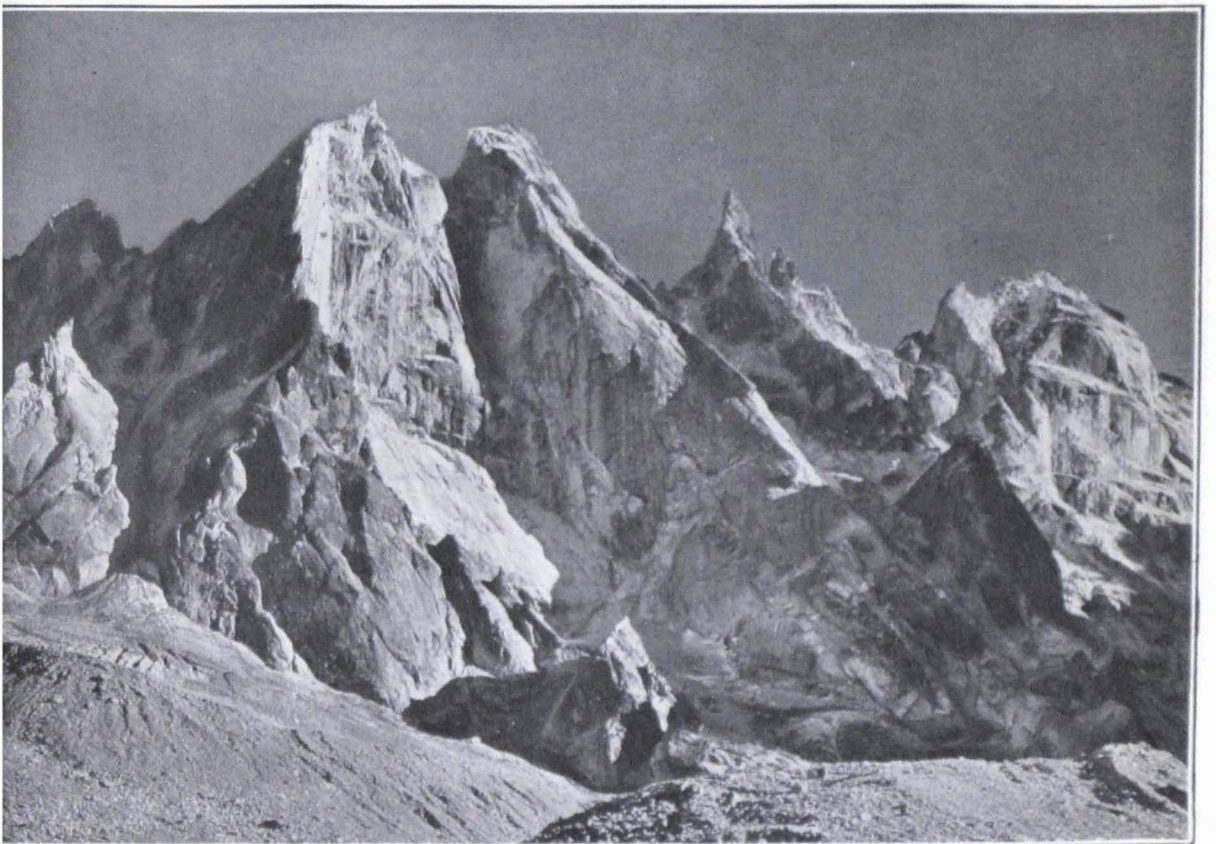
Leaving Promontogno, we pass Stampa and Vico Soprano before coming to a turning on the right, which leads in an easy 3 hours to the Albigna hut. A wonderful path it is, both in ingenuity of construction and in beauty; and the occasional glimpses of the vast precipices of the Largo and Bacone, some six or seven thousand feet of continuous rock from base to summit, strike everyone who sees them for the first time as something rather different from anything they have seen elsewhere. The middle part of the walk is steep, but wooded and shady, while above the trees one has a pleasant and gentle ascent up to the hut, crossing the torrent on a rather rickety bridge just above the point where it takes its giant leap into the valley. Between the hut and the snout of the glacier lies a flat plain covered with stones, pebbles, and grass, and seamed by numerous streams—once doubtless the bed of a lake, and shortly to be made so again; for a scheme is on foot—which, from the engineering point of view, seems fairly simple—to dam the outlet and so produce one of the most powerful turbine-stations in the Alps.

From the hut one sees the lower precipices of Largo and



oto, J. Gaberell, Zurich.

CENGALO AND BADILE, from near Soglio.



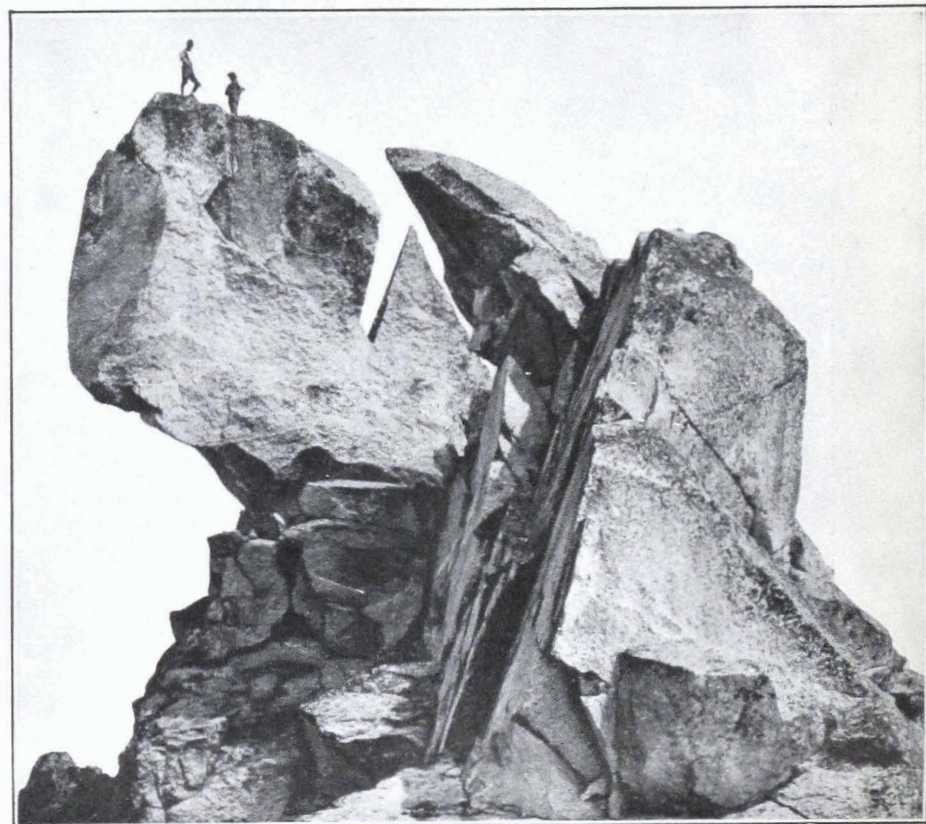
to, J. Gaberell, Zurich.

SCIORA GROUP. (Bondasca Side.)



Photo, J. Gaberell, Zurich.

AGO DI SCIORA. (Albigna side.)
(The route lies up the left sky-line.)



Photo, J. Gaberell, Zurich.

IL GALLO
(before the top fell off.)

Bacone, with the great Balzetto (Balme des Chamois) lying between the two—an area most of which has never been visited by human foot. To the right of the Piz Balzetto—the sentinel of the great (unclimbed) W. arête of Bacone—come the beautiful snow slopes of Cantone, broken at the foot of its W. arête by the rocky Punta d'Albigna, and hiding the snows of Castello. At the head of the glacier is the perfectly shaped Monte di Zocco, beyond which lie the Punta Qualido and the Torrione del Ferro, with its (unclimbed) E. arête. Then comes the Ferro Centrale, up which Colonel Strutt and Pollinger made a magnificent ascent from this side, and from which the Sciora group branches northwards, forming the left rampart of the glacier. Of these peaks the southernmost—the Sciora di Dentro—is easily scaled from the upper Bondasca snows, and has also been ascended from the Albigna, though quite unjustifiably, for at no point is this face free from danger, even in the best of condition. Next comes the Ago—from this side secludedly placed, so that when one comes up from the hut round the corner of the Pioda the first view of this glorious needle, each time one sees it, seems to take one's breath away. Whatever may have been the case fifty years ago, no real climber who sees the Ago can rest happily in his bed till he has been on the top. I saw it first in 1908, tried it first in 1911, but did not get up till 1923; no wonder that I have suffered from insomnia! Though the Ago has been ascended from the Forcola on its N. (I think only once), the right way up the final peak is from the Bocchetta at its S. foot; but to reach the Bocchetta is no easy matter, and many parties have been baffled, both in the attempt to scale the rock wall and in the alternative traversing route from the Forcola. On our first attempt Wicks, Bradby, and I started from the Allievi hut on the S. side of the Zocca Pass, took 4 hours to reach the foot of the wall, tried in three places to scale it, spent 4 hours on or near the rocks, and started back disconsolate at 2.15. Twice since then I have been one of a party who have failed, and even now that I know the way, and the trick which makes the crux fairly safe—though only when the rock is absolutely dry—I confess that I don't quite like that giant slab. This year (1923) I started twice with Klucker for the Ago. On the first occasion we saw that there was snow on the big plaque, and ascended the Pioda instead—a fine climb. The second time we were a party of three, for Bradby had joined us. Klucker, who made the first ascent, though by no means at his first attempt, now of course knows every step, and we took but

1 hour 20 minutes from the foot of the rocks to the Bocchetta, and 40 minutes thence to the top. One climbs practically on the S. skyline as seen from below, except the top bit, which is reached from the W. The route is very steep all the way, but for the most part there are splendid holds. The first pitch is difficult, and the last bit I thought very difficult; and though I am not conscious of having actually used the rope, I was very thankful to have it above me. The height of the aiguille is about 420 ft. from the Bocchetta. Klucker, at the age of seventy-one, led like a careful lamplighter, and, as the average age of the party was sixty-four, we were by no means displeased with our record.

North of the splendid rampart of the Sciora comes the Cacciabella group, on which there is plenty of good climbing, and the ridge ends opposite the hut in the Piz Spazzacaldera—a striking and remarkable peak, the top of which can be reached without much difficulty, but which has on its summit ridge a series of unclimbed spires and towers which will probably for long baffle the ardent gymnast. One of these towers is very conspicuous from the road below Casaccia, whence it looks almost like a flagstaff.

And now I must finish up the Albigna climbs with some account of Il Gallo—a somewhat insignificant pyramid of rock on the ridge between Cacciabella and Spazzacaldera—a point first climbed and named in 1909, and which has lately become very famous—firstly, because Mr. Jean Gaberell's beautiful pictures, which I am using to illustrate this paper, have familiarised people with its uniquely fashioned summit, and with the singular methods used in effecting the final ascent; and secondly, because now, some five-and-twenty ascents only having been made, the top has tumbled off, and Gallo has been pictured in *The Times* and in illustrated papers throughout the world. A finer block of granite than the whole of Gallo forms I never saw: no loose stones anywhere—at any rate on the Albigna side—glorious rock to climb on. I went up with Klucker on June 29, 1923, a few days before Bradby came out; and Bradby went up with Klucker's worthy successor, Walter Risch of St. Moritz, a few days after I left for home, on or about July 18. We neither of us pushed the top off, as our friends have so flatteringly suggested, and one party is known to have climbed it later; but when Risch went again, in the middle of August, he found an immense sea of broken blocks and stones on the Albigna side, through which he had to thread his way to reach the peak, up which he had to make a

new route, as the E. face was much altered ; and he found that the actual summit had toppled off on the other (or western) side. No one knows how the thing happened. An earthquake seems excluded, as Gallo was the only peak affected. Possibly a bombardment of thunderbolts, similar to the one which recently made a shell-hole in the Manchester golf course, may have been the cause. Anyway, no one will again make the ascent of this remarkable summit, nor use again on it the picturesque technical methods of climbing—some of them new to me—of which the series of slides I am able to show afford a graphic record, but which would be very difficult to describe in words. Why two seemingly respectable elderly gentlemen like Klucker and myself, remarked a lady who had seen these pictures, should indulge in such antics, was beyond her comprehension. I confess it is also beyond mine, unless it be that we had learned control of bodily equilibrium at the expense of mental balance ; for, strange as it may seem, these singular contortions give me as much pleasure now as they ever did, and they don't take much longer to do.

Yet the whole thing is for me, nowadays, a much more leisurely affair than it used to be, and this year we took three very easy days over the Ago instead of doing the whole thing in a single long day. Coming down from the hut in the early morning of the third day, we met a large party of Swiss students on their way up to the hut. There were at least a dozen of them, and very queer they looked. The weather was hot, and their costume consisted of a zephyr shirt, linen shorts, and thick stockings turned down over hob-nailed boots, while on his back each carried an enormous pack surmounted by a heavy tweed coat.

The Swiss, besides carrying immense lengths of rope, are apt to take with them a singularly complete outfit, and, in addition to the necessary stout knickers and the usual necessaries, no doubt the contents of these packs comprised scarpetti, crampons, and a raincoat, and if we had met one of these young men descending later on in the rain he would, no doubt, have presented a very different appearance.

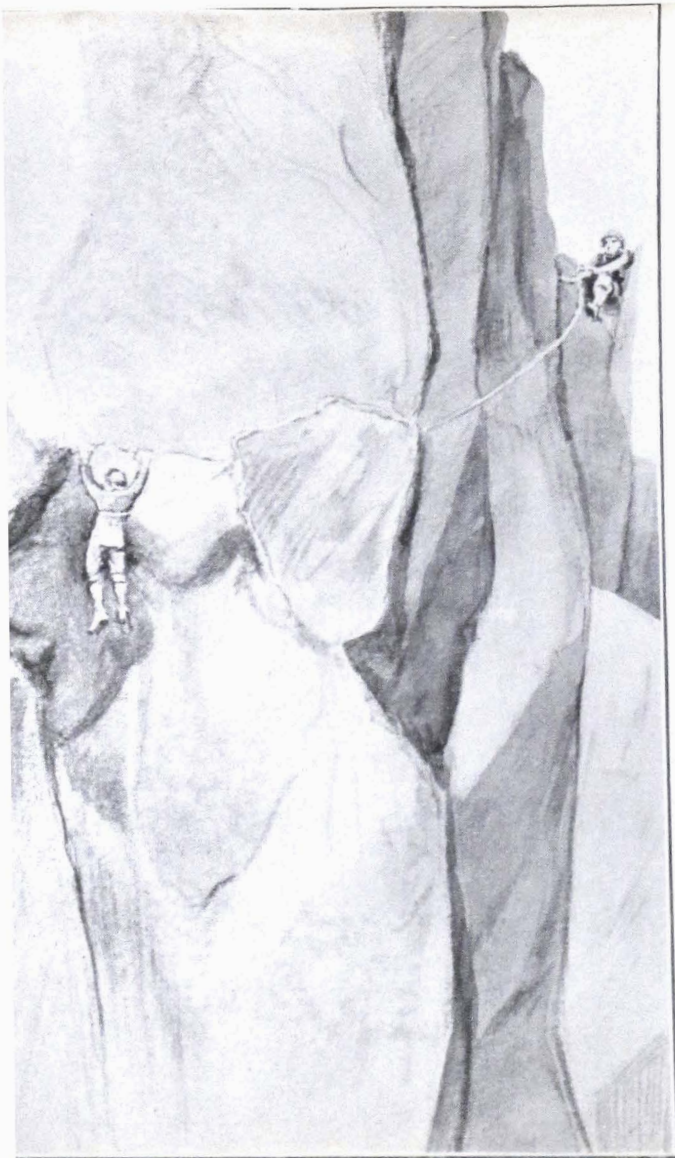
Leaving the Albigna, I must devote the remaining space at my disposal to a brief description of the Forno Glacier and its surroundings, and conclude with a short description of one of its climbs. All the Forno mountains can be done in a day from the Maloja, but if one makes a short stay at the Forno hut—originally built for his own use by Dr. Curtius, but always (may I say ?) ' curtiously ' placed by him at the disposal of

climbers, and finally, a year or two ago, graciously presented to the S.A.C.—the Torrone group becomes much more easily accessible, and of the easier or shorter climbs more than one can be taken in a day.

The mountains on the right bank of the glacier are very beautiful and, for the most part, easy of access, though there are difficult routes. But the chief climbing interest centres in the peaks at the far end—the Torrões and Rasica—and in those which separate this glacier from the Albigna.

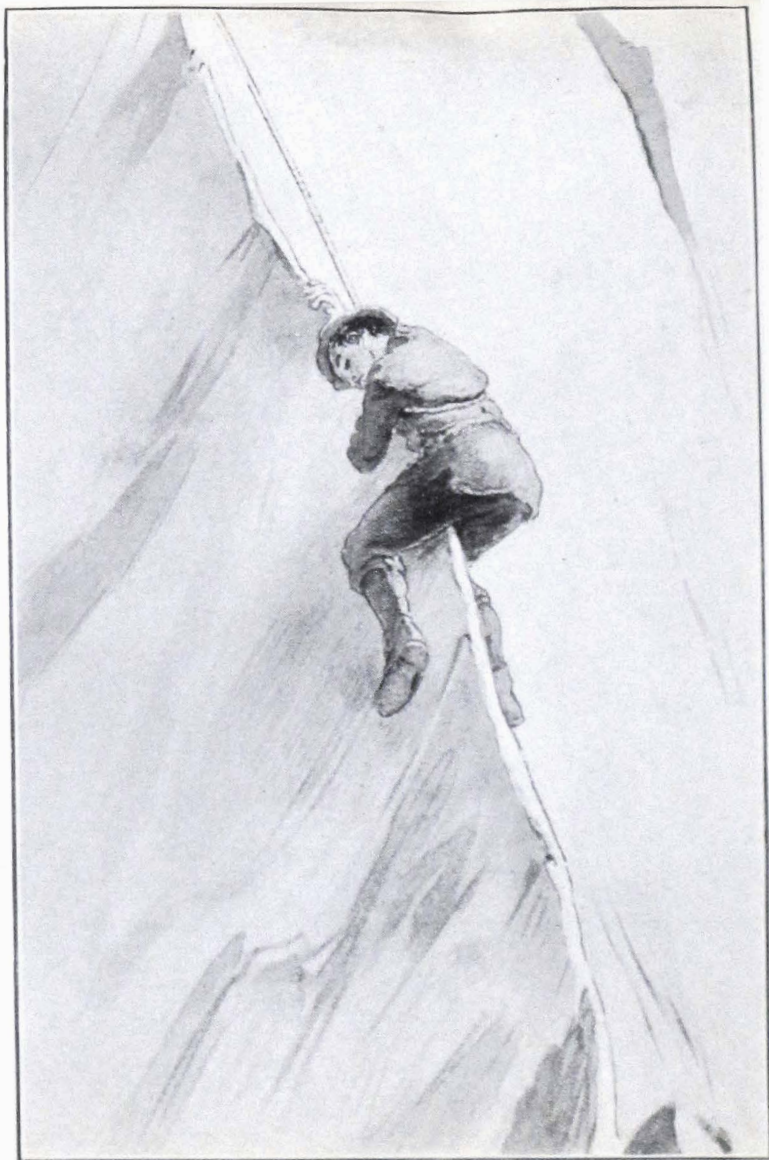
The steep and formidable barrier which walls in the S. end of the glacier has always had its specialists, and, in spite of Dr. Finzi's (led by young Franz Josef Biner) conquest of the Ago di Cleopatra this year, probably one of the most difficult bits of rock-climbing ever done, there still remains new work upon this ridge; and, indeed, the little group of the Torrões, like the Ferros and the Scioras, could afford ample material for a paper, and, doubtless, some day the details of these beautiful climbs will be adequately presented to the Club. But here we have no space to do more than give them this passing tribute.

Castello is the culminating point of the entire group. A grand wall of rock faces the Forno Glacier, whence the most interesting ascents are to be made, while the descent is best effected by the snow slopes on the Albigna side. Cantone, with its graceful curves, must not detain us, for something must yet be said of Bacone and the Largo. The former is a vast and marvellous mass of rock, which I have been up or down by four routes; but there are others, and, as already noted, there remains the immense W. arête, which, if climbable at all in its entirety, might take a week. The last peak of first importance on this ridge, and the last I shall allude to in this paper, is the three-headed Cima del Largo—one of the grandest aiguilles in the Alps. It is curiously situated, for all three peaks lie well to the W. of the main ridge, one consequence of which is that it is not seen from the Forno Glacier, nor, indeed, at all in the ordinary line of ascent till one arrives at the Forcola del Bacone. Here the magnificent tower which forms its eastern and culminating summit, and behind which the two others lie concealed, bursts suddenly into view. The splendour of the spectacle can hardly be exaggerated, and few rocks are there that look more impossible of ascent. Yet it is not so; there is a good, a safe, and by no means a very difficult route up, and, indeed, the last and most impossible-looking pitch offers a choice of two variations. The first of

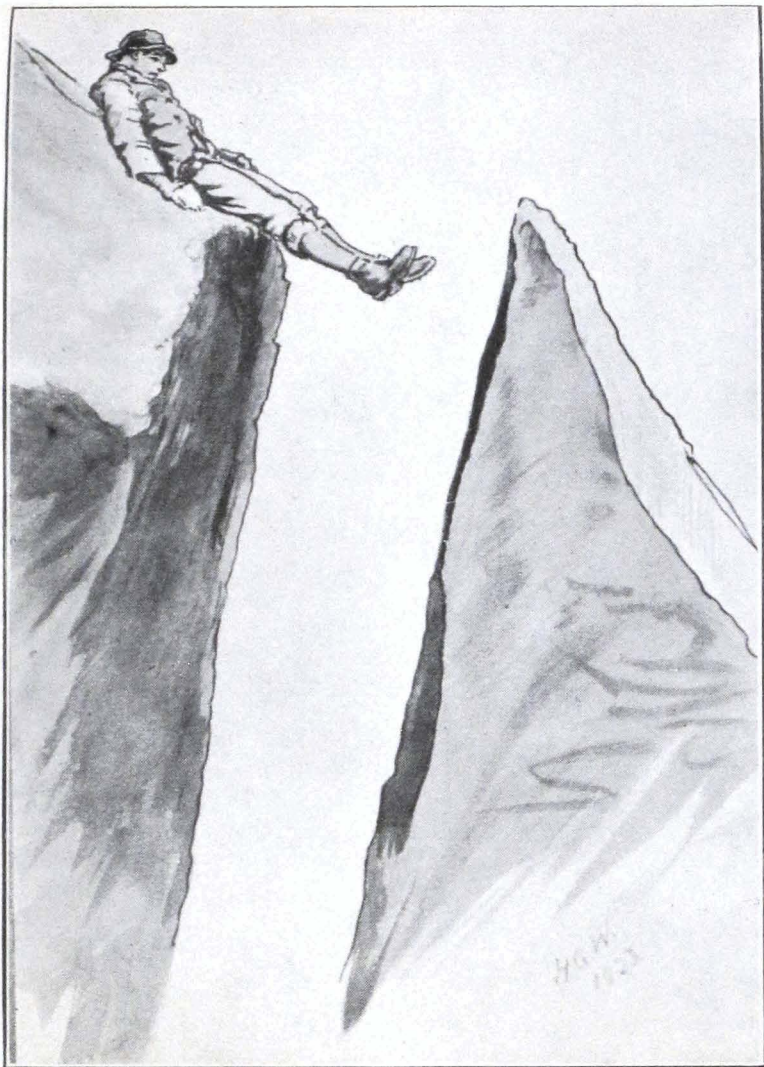


G. Willink.

ASCENT OF LARGO, Traversing S. Face.



DESCENT OF LARGO. W. Arête.



H. G. Willink.

Position 1.



Position 2.

DESCENT OF GALLO.

these is very steep and smooth, but in Klucker's estimation easier than the second, which our party first made in 1908, and which traverses part of the splendid S.E. precipice. The short traverse is not really difficult, but it is a bit of a trick-climb, and ends up with a somewhat sensational hand traverse, the legs hanging down the thousand feet of sheer cliff. In my opinion this is the best way up—certainly the most amusing. What is the best way down? Again, in my opinion, undoubtedly the traverse, if the rocks are in good condition, as they always must be, for, if not, no one will get up at all. Yet the traverse has been very seldom made. Wills and I made it in 1922, but Klucker told me this year that he had never done it; and Walter Risch, who made the expedition with Bradby after I left, had not done it before. Yet the whole climb is a safe one for practised cragsmen, and I know of no rock-climb in the Alps which affords more delightful sensations. The descent of the highest peak is effected by one of the steepest and quite the narrowest ridges of rock I have been on, with immense and nearly vertical walls on either side. The position one assumes is that of a jockey on the neck of a horse, or, more prosaically, 'the monkey on the stick' attitude. The hands grasp the narrow but splendidly sound knife-edge—one from each side and one above the other—while the knees grip firmly the rough rock, being separated from each other by not more than a foot or 18 ins. So one descends to a saddle, perhaps 50 ft. down, where the second man joins the first. Then a similar passage to a safe and ample spot where an impassable gendarme bars the way. Here a 30-ft. drop with a spare rope down the S. wall to a fine ledge—almost good enough, as Mummery would have said, for bicycles—by which the ridge is regained; and then a final passage, *à cheval*, leads to the gap between the eastern and the central peaks. The two lower summits give but little trouble, and a diagonal route is made down to the *névé*, whence the Forcola del Bacone is easily regained. The whole expedition can be made in 12 or 14 hours from the Maloja, and is one which no ardent rock-climber should miss. I should like to do it regularly once a year. And here my story ends.

The slides I have shown have been mostly of a type of mountain formation in which grandeur of outline mingles with a somewhat grim austerity of surroundings. But such is far from a true conception of the general scenery of the district. Even the flat Engadine, as one approaches the Maloja, can be, in certain lights, quite beautiful; and, when one takes to

foot, the paths towards the glaciers lead through woods and glades of the rarest beauty, while the higher tracks often wind away among cliffs, ledges, and ravines, perhaps concealed by the surrounding brushwood, but only too evident to the careless wanderer who may happen to stray off the one and only way. Then, indeed, the beauty of the surroundings hardly compensates for the tribulation which awaits him.

But the lake of Cavalloccio on the Forno route, the varied beauties of the Albigna path, the lovely woodlands of the Bondasca glen, the glimpses on looking back, with the quaint beauties of Soglio itself, and the crowning view from thence, are not to be surpassed in any Alpine district.

And then I must confess that one of the charms of the group lies in its proximity to the Lake of Como. If the best route to the Bregaglia lies through the terrible St. Moritz, the best way back is by the lake.

A long day on moor or mountain may end up in a hut or a barn, and all may be well ; but surely a bath and a good dinner is the best end to what the dreadful song describes as a 'perfect day.' Similar—on a larger scale—is the holiday: it also may be rounded off gracefully. I have climbed to the last day, rushed home, and felt I had done well. But, on looking back, recollections of a somewhat different ending stand out as landmarks and add distinction to a few red-letter years. And to no vacation may such happy memories be more easily assured than to a holiday among the Bregaglia mountains. A week of training on the easier ascents, and a fortnight of the superlative scrambling that the steeper ones afford, places the mountaineer who has alternative tastes in a state of body and mind just ready for a few days of luxurious idling, in an almost tropical temperature. A swim in the cool water, a basket of figs and peaches—or possibly, for some, 'a loaf of bread, a cup of wine, and thou,' under the awning of a skiff ; but for me, whether 'thou' be there or not, meals delicately arranged by skilled and agreeable head waiters at luxurious hotels, and served in gardens or on verandahs looking out on the loveliest lake-scenery in the world, make up the best ending to a climbing holiday, and one which sends the degenerate wanderer home, a sweet taste in mouth and mind, and imbued with the pleasing, if delusive, conviction that 'all's well with the world.'