

POST-WAR FRIVOLITIES : GRAIANS AND ORTLER.

By E. L. STRUTT.

(Read before the Alpine Club, February 3, 1925.)

I WILL not commence with the well-worn complaint, but I will say that I profoundly sympathise with you all that this paper should have to follow the most absorbing narrative of superhuman adventure that I have ever heard read in this room. I refer to Colonel Norton's paper of last December.

As I have little of interest to tell you, I will endeavour at once to justify the title.

In 1919 I was in the Near East, among Turks and polychromes. In 1920 I was far away on the shores of an inland sea, occupying fortuitously a kind of serio-comic 'Throne' in a democracy of unrest. The comic element became still further accentuated when I myself passed under the institution known as the League of Nations, while the arch conspirator and villain was appointed to the 'Throne.'

In 1921, at last, having compulsorily joined the great majority of unemployables, I was able to return to the Alps. In early July of that year I joined forces with that great mountaineer and profoundly thoughtful humorist Pierre Blanc, at Bonneval-sur-Arc. I do not propose to do more than dwell on a few of the expeditions that we contrived to accomplish during that very fine summer.

The first climb of any interest was the (first) crossing of the Col de Chalanson, 10,916 ft., between the Albaron and Piccola Ciamarella. It occurred quite by chance. For a wonder there had been a heavy fall of snow. On July 10 we started from Bonneval, Mr. R. W. Lloyd and Joseph Pollinger with us, for the Vallonet Glacier. Up that glacier we went, then over the Col du Greffier at its head, and on to the much-crevassed Glacier des Evettes. The day was very fine and hot. All four of us attained the kind of corridor on the N.E. face of the Albaron, and there Lloyd and Joseph parted from us, en route for the latter peak, while we continued east along the watershed, bound for the Ciamarella.

We crossed the head of the Col de Chalanson and were half-way up the Piccola Ciamarella, when it was borne in on us effectively that two feet of soft, fresh snow, under a tropical sun, over a ridge which looked about two miles long, was rather an exertion. When, however, Pierre had explained that no one had been on the N. slope of the Col de Chalanson, its

attractions, especially as the way lay downwards, became irresistible. We returned to the head of the Col and stared down its Evettes slope. On our left, W., was a vertical rock wall, crowned with heavy corniches; to our right, E., were evil slabby slopes flush with the ice, but the gully or snow curtain at our feet was in excellent condition. Some 750 ft. high and exceedingly steep, it led continuously almost to the surface of the glacier, and we concluded that we could return even if the last step above the Bergschrund proved too high to be jumped. We started straight down, and although the angle was certainly very great, yet so admirable was the shadowed snow that we arrived in some twenty minutes on the last step. Here all was almost perpendicular ice. Some fifteen steps—and they had to be deep enough to admit almost the full length of the leg—did I cut. Encouraging jeers came from above, but I had had enough and Pierre relieved me half-way down. We could not contrive a hitch for the rope, so he, amid my jeers, resumed the cutting till, after some fifteen more steps, we reached a spot whence a jump was possible if unpleasant. This was duly accomplished, and we landed on the far side of the enormous Schrund (50 mins.).

The rest of the descent over the gentle but rather crevassed Evettes Glacier, back to the admirable Refuge of that name, was quite uneventful. I discovered on this expedition that my companion considers it bad form to descend very steep snow backwards. Joseph Pollinger and I do not. The amount of time saved and also the margin of safety is remarkable.

Among other expeditions from Bonneval, the direct and almost unknown descent from the Albaron, over the N.N.W. cliffs above the Vallonet Glacier and down on to that glacier, is interesting. The route, a true chamois-hunter's, was discovered by old Blanc le Greffier, and is remarkably sensational and dangerous-looking. In reality it is comparatively easy and perfectly safe.

That beautiful mountain the Ciamarella I had the luck to ascend on two successive days, the first time that I have ever accomplished such a feat. I agree with Mr. Coolidge when he says that the view is about the finest in the Western Alps. Lloyd and Joseph Pollinger were my companions on the second ascent.

We moved to Pralognan later, and on July 25 made the ascent of the Aiguille de Lépéna, 3433 m. = 11,267 ft. Pierre had never been up the mountain before, and was very keen. A very full and picturesque account of one of its earlier ascents was given by Mr. Charles Meade in 'A. J.' xxii. 369-72, and I do

not propose to qualify his admirable account. The climb is very rarely made, and, judging by the cards on the summit, ours was about the eighth. Conditions and day should be equally perfect. If any snow remains on the broken ridge—really the left bank of the gully or funnel up which lies the only route—the mountain, or rather, its lower half, becomes from falling stones a veritable death-trap, and should be accomplished, as Meade did it, practically in the dark. In our case everything was bare; we left the Félix Faure hut at 06.05, reached the summit at 09.30, and had dawdled back to the hut by 12.50.

There are six or eight iron pegs in rather doubtful state in the funnel, but under our conditions, dry rock and no ice, they are unnecessary, at all events for a competent party wearing *Kletterschuhen*. As we had none, we found the said pegs more than useful. The funnel is exactly like a section of one of the *Mauretania*'s, perhaps 150 ft. high, perfectly smooth and practically perpendicular. We were able by making a traverse to avoid the lower half of it. It is one of the most repellent places that I know. Above it there is no difficulty, and the descent with a spare rope is quick and easy. My advice is, never touch the Lépéna save when absolutely dry and black. The Pralognan guides appear to have given up the practice of carrying some fifty to eighty pegs, inserting them in their prepared holes, and then removing them on the descent, as happened on the occasion of Mr. Meade's ascent. The ascent of the Lépéna is remarkable since, although I know of a possible one, no second route has apparently yet been found. The smaller Aiguilles to the W., called, I believe, the 'Pointes de Lépéna,' are too dangerously rotten, and their ascent appears to have only once been made.

Later in the season we moved off to the Mont Blanc range. No ascents of any particular interest were made; but on Mont Blanc itself, from the Aiguille du Gôûter onwards, we encountered one of the worst storms imaginable, and our porter, a somewhat worthless specimen, was blown right over the Bosses ridge on the descent. Such was the strength of the wind, and the consequent tugging of the rope, that I, who was leading, never noticed his disappearance till brought up short by the rope. The easiest glacier that we crossed proved to be the Nantillons! ¹

¹ As regards the N.-S. traverse of the Grands Charmoz, it is soothing to read that Mr. Geoffrey Young has also found the climb

In 1922 I went further afield than the Alps, and the season of 1923, after only two ascents, ended in tragedy.

You all remember the dreadful summer of 1924. Nevertheless, the month of July in the Ortler group provided not only fine but also excessively hot weather. Hearing of my plans, my courteous and charming friend Count Aldo Bonacossa met me at Milan station with his car, and motored me the same evening to Santa Catarina-in-Val-Furva, and I thus performed the journey in some nineteen hours from Paris, which must nearly constitute a record. I was more than grateful to Bonacossa (where is the friend who would lend his car for a 270 kilometre run ?), and still more so to Providence for my safe arrival. The driver was magnificent, and the speed and road equally appalling. The speedometer showed usually about 120 kilometres an hour. During the War I once thanked a distinguished Italian General in Macedonia for lending me his car, and spoke of the driver's skill. He only remarked : ' All our bad drivers have been killed.'

The worthy proprietor of the Stabilimento Santa Catarina received Pierre Blanc and me with enthusiasm, and, so far as my experience goes, food and prices on the Italian slope are respectively far superior and much less than in the French or Swiss Alps. I have always liked Santa Catarina and what used to be the Italian slope of the Ortler group. The peasants and visitors are charming, as Italians so frequently are. We made several interesting ascents, but perhaps, from a military point of view, the most absorbing one was a walk to the Passo di Gavia.² The fortifications and extent of barbed wire were truly remarkable, and the same applied to the whole extent of the Pizzo Tresero—Punta San Matteo ridge. We did this classic traverse on an extremely hot day, and it proved of more than pre-war interest.

Each peak is covered with fascines and gabions, while the reverse slope is provided with excellent huts, from most of which the foundations have now fallen, leaving them precariously perched. ' Téléphérique ' cables abound, and frequently trip one up, while quantities of still live rifle cartridges, Italian and Austrian, litter the rocks. The slight difficulties of the great corniche forced us rather on to the steep S.W. face

up the first gendarme, with only two on the rope, a rather formidable undertaking. *A.J.* xxiv. 473.

² During the War a motor road, leading to Ponte di Legno, was constructed, and is in daily (and dangerous) use over this Pass.

of the San Matteo, and as we clambered up the ice and rock of this face I was attracted towards a great slab. Cut in large letters were the proud words 'Hoch Kaiser Karl!', the loyal thought of the gallant Tyrolese rifleman.

San Matteo was the scene of much skirmishing, which was all this 'peak' warfare ever amounted to, although mountain artillery and heavy howitzers were continually employed by the Italians, and even occasionally by the vastly outnumbered Austrians. As a general rule, throughout the Ortler, the Italian works, especially their sub-glacial galleries—those on the Zebrù Glacier are in parts extant—are of the most elaborate kind, while the Austrians, with their few old but experienced mountaineers, wisely relied on natural defences alone. The statistics of the respective 'Alpine' accidents, if obtainable, should prove illuminating reading; I do know that the Tyrolese were quite negligible. This is a delicate subject, and I had better stick to our climb.

The descent from the San Matteo over the magnificent Forno Glacier was of surpassing beauty. The crevasses were of gigantic size, and many resembled circular caverns. The greatest care was required, and the full length of our 80-ft. rope was in use. I have heard British mountaineers declare that there are no glaciers or snow in the Eastern Alps. Well, let them visit the Ortler or the Oetzthal, even if the Zillertal and Glockner lie too far afield.

Our descent eventually led us to the comfortable little Forno Hotel, the best mountaineering centre in the Southern Ortler. Nothing can exceed the kindness of the Buzzi family. They have many curious anecdotes of the War, notably an Austrian raid on the hotel, which, for the Tyrolese, was of a somewhat humorous nature.

We eventually crossed over to Sulden, and I was back in a part which I knew intimately more than thirty years ago. We traversed the Monte Pasquale and the Cevedale ridge, descending on to the Sulden Glacier by the historical Eisse Pass. (The new Italian names are quite beyond me, and, moreover, appear to vary daily.) Old times seemed to flow back when we caught up on the Sulden Glacier a family—father, mother, son, and guide, the former wearing in deep, soft snow enormous crampons and armed with prodigious poles. They were tied four feet apart, and whenever the guide was a little doubtful of the proximity of a crevasse he brought them up in line abreast with him to try a fall with Death. Pierre was delighted, and we strode past them, tied with the full length

of our 150-ft. rope (Everest 'line'). They gazed at us with admiration, and no wonder, since the sweep of our taut rope seemed to include most of the pinnacles of the glacier. Soon we caught up another party, tied two and two, six feet apart, guide leading. Truly, tradition among the second-class guides of Sulden still dies hard. The good men there will, however, bear comparison with most. Of such are the Dangls and Pinggeras of the past, or the present-day Pinggeras.

Adventures are for the adventurous, and on the mildest part of an inoffensive glacier they came—out of the blue. There was the well-known prolonged wail and whistle, followed by the splitting crash of H.E. bursting below the Königsjoch. Another shell somewhere on the Hinterer Grat, and yet another somewhere on the Tabaretta. Could this be a 'bracket'? No, not even with recruits. Then a deafening explosion about a hundred yards in front of us, snow and débris flying in a cloud, and two war-worn soldiers lying full-length behind a lump of ice, and worming their way to the boulders of a friendly lateral moraine.

'*Quel sacré feu d'harcèlement!*' said my companion with contempt, but stayed behind his rock. The summits of the Ortler and Königspitze remained immune; the rest of the landscape was unhealthy.

After some 250 rounds, shrapnel and H.E., the firing ceased, and we gingerly descended to the remains of the Schaubach Club hut. A young Italian gunner captain, acting as F.O.O., here appeared flourishing a large red flag.

'*Espèce de Bolchévik!*' exclaimed my companion, rushing at him. Then in fluent Italian he enquired of the officer why he had been shelling his Allies. A torrent followed:

'*Ce n'est pas lui, c'est son frère Manöel à l'autre poste d'observation,*' explained Pierre, pointing vaguely towards the Hoch Joch.

Thoughts of a private school, 'Please, sir, it wasn't me, sir,' came to my mind. I shook hands with the attractive Italian, and we parted in the friendliest way. My companion and I descended towards Sulden.

'Abominable!' kept muttering Pierre.

'Well, it is exactly what you and I would have said, Pierre.'

'*En effet, oui,*' and we smiled somewhat ruefully, for, after all, French artillery have never shelled the Mer de Glace, nor British guns the sandy heights of Blackpool beach. And yet a dozen deserted glens encircle the 'Conca di Sulden,' so why

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choose the most frequented centre of the Eastern Alps for untrained gunners' practice, and in mid-July ?

We entered the floor of the valley and strolled towards the Sulden Hotel. Tourists of Northern European nationality streamed in front of us, making for Gomagoi and safety, while the offending guns entered simultaneously from the Zaythal. They were two mountain howitzer batteries of surrendered Skoda matériel, a good stamp of men and mules, all well equipped except for the gunners' boots. Our satisfaction at the stampede of the tourists was tempered by having to pass through the barrage of flies and smells arising from the 'stables' literally surrounding the hotel. Having already been too outspoken, I may as well add that officers and gunners vied with each other in civility to us and in explaining the effectiveness of their gun mechanism and telemeters. They were much amused at our having been under fire.

Enough of such frivolities, and of the fate of our two parties on the Sulden Glacier the communiqué is silent, although, as in Mafeking, a mule was killed.

Of serious mountaineering there did not appear to be much, but some idiot had just made the third ascent of the Ortler by the so-called 'Schück Rinne.' His guides were still extremely angry at the dangers incurred; they should never have consented to start, although times are hard and the tariffs, for those who have won the War, prodigious.

A blazing day followed, Sunday, July 13; it was embarrassing to encounter a kind of local deputation near the immemorial 'Eller.' Rumours of certain episodes in an undistinguished past attracted the former Tyrolese. They were loyal to their ancient traditions, and grateful to a Briton. The same feeling was obvious in other directions; my bill was ridiculous, and but for my remonstrances would have been probably nil.

On the following day we started at midnight, Franz Pinggera accompanying us for 'auld lang syne.' At fearful speed he led us to the Sulden Glacier,³ to the great Cirque encircled by Königspitze, Zebrù, and Ortler. Lightning flared all around. We gave up the Hinterer Grat ascent of the Ortler and descent by the Hoch Joch ridge. Three times have I been on one, and twice on the other, and the latter, since the War, boasts almost of a path. Changes are apparent everywhere. The

³ Several fresh shell-craters were in the path below the ruined Baeckmann hut.



Photo: R. S. Morrish.

KOENIGSSPITZE, MONTE ZEBRU, HOCH JOCH, ORTLER,
from the EISSEE PASS.



Photo: O. K. Williamson.

PUNTA DI SAN MATTEO
from Forno Glacier.

simple if steep ice or snow slope of 1893 and 1894, leading to the Hoch Joch, is a formidable overhanging mass of impenetrable séracs. The route lies far to the N., under the decaying crags of the S.E. extremity of the Hoch Joch ridge. The N.E. face of Monte Zebrù, up which Miss Beatrice Tomasson (now Mrs. Mackenzie,⁴ and one of the best lady climbers of her day) and her dauntless guides forced their splendid way in 1898, lay gaunt and unassailable. Stones growled freely down 'Harpprecht' and 'Minnigerode' gullies of Ortler's flanks. The ice-fall below the Sulden Joch, up and through which Joseph Lochmatter once led me faultlessly in 1903, was utterly hopeless. Universal wastage, universal shrinkage.

We turned to the Hoch Joch, Pinggera in front, Blanc in the middle, and myself in the post of dishonour. The pace was tremendous, and there was cause. Dawn was breaking, and the glacier was pitted with rocks. By a horrible avalanche track, hard frozen, dreadfully rotten, not easy rock of true Ortler characteristics, finally a traverse to the left, S., across almost perpendicular ice, and by a similar cornice or wall, the pass was reached (4 hrs. 10 mins. from Sulden). The wind was high, and as we sheltered on the Hoch Joch Grat, high above the shelled ruins of the hut, we beheld avalanches of stones descending on to our route, surely now the most dangerous pass of any that I have seen. The day became no worse; we reversed, and I led by easy slopes to the summit of Zebrù (20 mins.) with its perhaps incomparable southern view.

We descended gently to the Ortler Pass, traced the new war-path up Thurwieser's shattered S. flank, and viewed its once peerless eastern knife-edge ridge, now sadly shrunk into a wall. Beyond lay the crumbling Baeckmann Grat of 1894 memories, and Trafoier Eiswand, whence Austrian stormers destroyed all living souls on Thurwieser, only to meet a similar fate the following night. . . . *Vae victis!* All these were before me and my Tyrolese companion. It was bitter indeed for him.

Down the long Zebrù Glacier to the Capanna Milano with its marvellous camouflaged encampments and traces of war, and so finally to the mouth of the lengthy Val Zebrù at San Antonio. Here I parted from worthy Franz—best of shall I call them 'Eastern Alpine' guides?—while Pierre and I turned

⁴ Mrs. Mackenzie, with the guides M. Bettega and B Zagonel, on July 1, 1901, accomplished the first ascent of the S. face of the Marmolada.

to my mountain lodestar, the granite rocks, the sparkling falls, and wooded depths of Masino and Val Bregaglia.

The best handbook ⁵ by far for the Ortler range is that published by the C.A.I., and written by Count Bonacossa. It came out early in 1915, and must have been invaluable to the Italian G.S.

A very good map ⁶ of the Sulden Valley and its surrounding peaks has also been issued by the Military Topographical Bureau, Florence. The scale is rather too large, 1:25,000. The old Tyrolese names appear, most fortunately, in brackets under the new Italian ones. I believe a similar map is in preparation of the Trafoi valley.

I am very grateful to Messrs. Withers and Morrish for the loan of their beautiful slides.

THE SCHMADRIJOCH.

(From the late Sir Edward Davidson's Notes.)

Saturday, September 21, 1895.

LEFT Trachsellaunen at 4.35 A.M., accompanied by the landlord of the inn, who wished to go up to the chalets of the Breitlaunen Alp to look after some sheep, goats, and herd-boys he had up there. We put out the lanterns at 5.30 A.M., and reached the upper chalets of the Breitlaunen Alp at 6 A.M., where the landlord left us. We then traversed over very decent slopes, crossing the Schmadribach high up and reaching the moraine at 7 A.M. Later on we stopped at some water to breakfast from 7.40 A.M. to 8.20 A.M. We then reached the ice; went up a narrow couloir next some rocks on the right, down which water was running plentifully between the rock and a casing of ice which was, of course, transparent and let one see the water running down behind it, producing a very curious effect. Above us at this time was a hanging glacier, under whose range we remained for about ten minutes. This was immaterial in the early morning, but might have been less agreeable later in the day.

As soon as we had got up this couloir or gully we traversed to

⁵ *Regione dell' Ortler.* Milano. 1915.

⁶ *Carta della Conca di Sulden,* 1923.