Appointment with the Sun

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(*Plates* 55–57)

June, so far, had been abominable. By the end of the second week we'd already had twice the average rainfall for the whole month. Cold too, and blustery, it was more like March than light bright summer, with trees bowing to the east under a bullying, forceful wind. So when the invitation came to join a group wandering over Corsica, I jumped at it. Shrugging clouds, I had an appointment in the sun.

There are ranges and landscapes that stay close to the mind. Mountains that once were mere names become living realities, characters almost – like members of one's family. Obsessions grow from daydreams; daydreams to ambition; ambition to obsession. It's natural progression, unless kept firmly in check.

But there are others, secondary places of which you are only vaguely aware, that play no part in one's hours of insomnia. These mountains, valleys, massifs are part of Earth's upland fraternity; they people the globe, but are treated so often as no more than bit-players on the scene; members of a crowd. One's obsessions alone take centre stage and top billing.

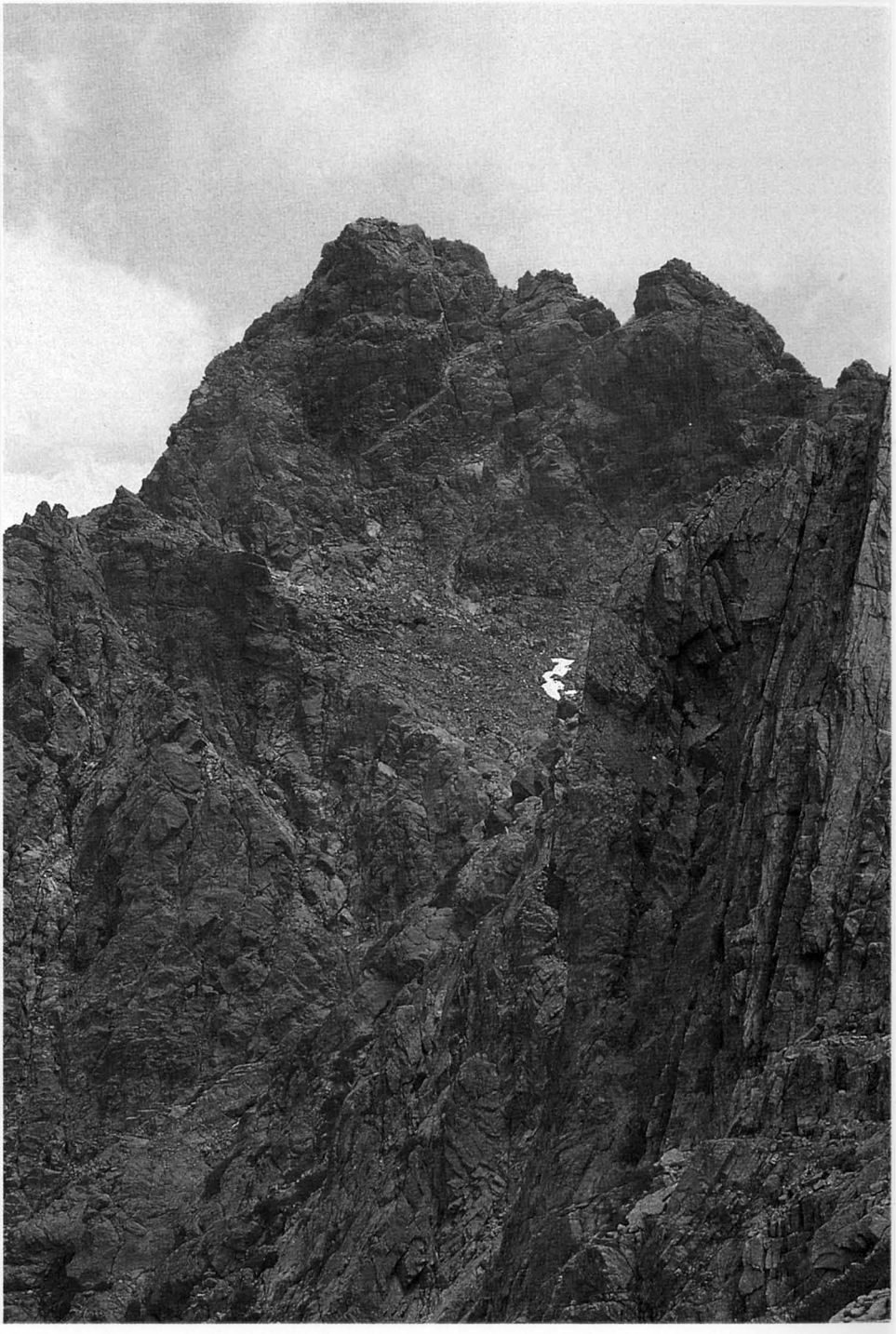
Yet now and again fate lends a hand and the bit-players are suddenly thrust forward. So it was with Corsica.

'A mountain rising from the sea,' the brochures announced. 'Corsica, the nearest of the faraway isles.'

There were cobbled alleys where of an evening the day's warmth was trapped, and calm set in while swifts raced screeching overhead. Stone stairways and wrought-iron grilles, lilies on the rooftops and distant voices duffed through peeling shutters. An accordion player tilted his chair on two legs against the crumbling façade of a tall pink building, with washing hanging out to dry on one dubious balcony above another. (Don't slam the door or an acre of plaster, two shirts and a dozen socks will come crashing down.)

There were time-scooped bays caressed by a six-inch tide. Gently slapping, yachts sighed against a sun-bleached jetty. Beautiful people drifted to the sand, their teeth dazzled the Mediterranean sunlight, their naked bodies turned to copper and from copper to bronze as June simmered. Inland, on the mountains, snow still hugged dark corries.

Col de Bavella was the nearest thing to the Dolomites I'd seen for years. The Cornes d'Asinao braced against the morning, rising like fence-posts of stone from a strip of pine. From a distance you could almost feel the texture of that lovely, lovely rock. It wasn't dolomitic, though, but granite. And oh, what a



55. Monte d'Oro (2389m), NW face. (Kev Reynolds) (p 117)

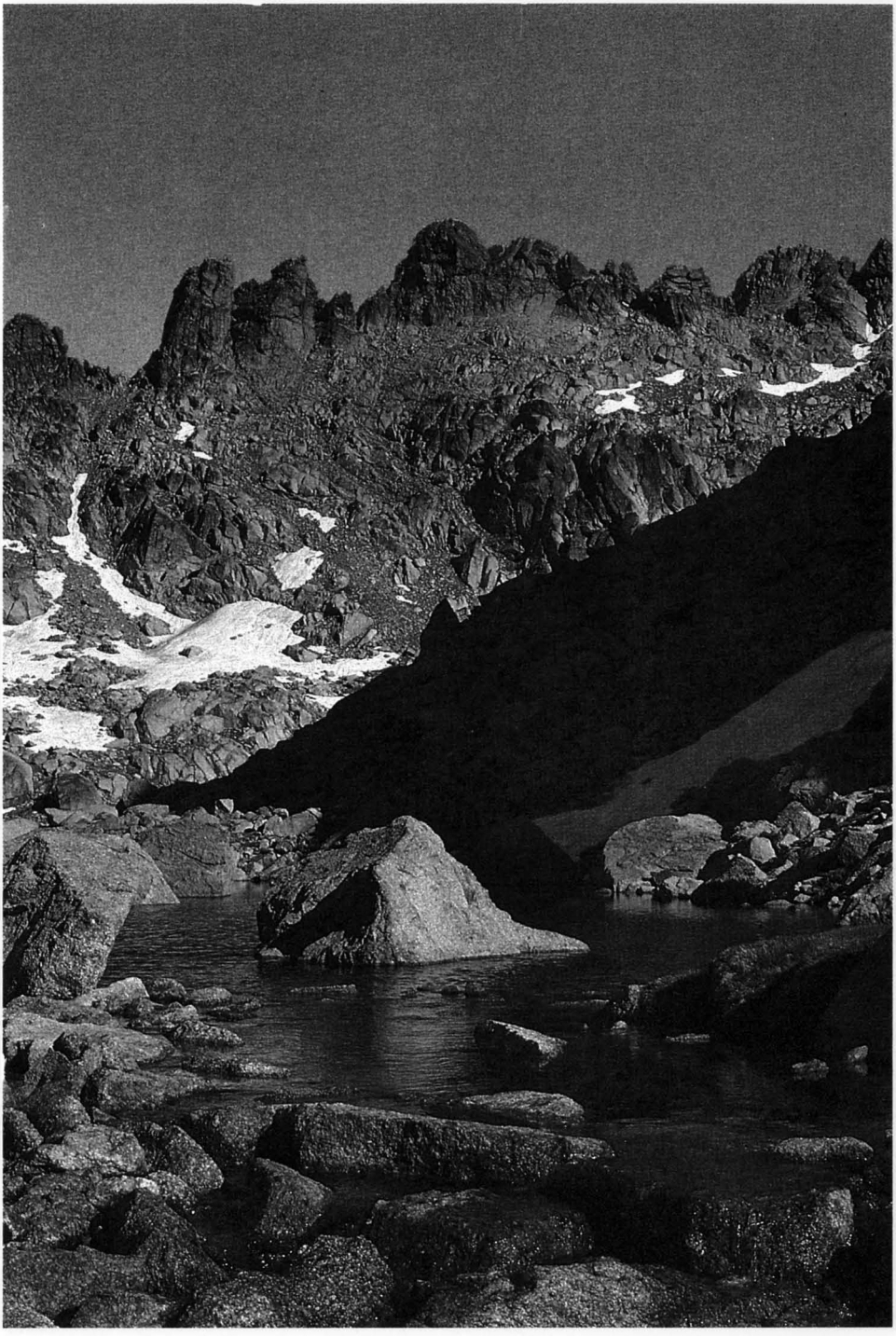
thrill to amble on. Not scramble but amble. The only ropes were those fixed in place for aid on a steep pitch with a back-pack. At the base of each pitch, it seemed, berberis thorned the horizontals. In full yellow flower, fragrant as honey, it drew the bees. Hundreds of bees. Nay, thousands. They came out of the valley with thunder in their wings and burst with a fever of industry about us: the loud boom of berberis in June.

In the valleys and on the lower hillsides flowers thrashed one's senses. Drawn by the sun, every head demanded attention: broom and heather, hellebore and asphodel – while saxifrage and thrift painted the rocks to which we were inevitably led. Inspired by the sun, aromatic plants drenched the air with fragrance: peppermint, thyme, juniper, rosemary, honeysuckle. I wandered in a haze of intoxication.

Monte Incudine was the first summit. If you collect such things it will do, yet in truth it was merely the highest rock around, brazen with a large cross and climbed by Freshfield in 1880. But views were all and I peered in glory at that craggy spine, at dark-shadowed peaks far off, at softer hills wearing shawls of cloud-shadows, at blue-distant summits and the ever-present sea moulding in bays against the sky. Wandering north then, to a ridge that was no real ridge but rather akin to a moorland plateau falling in the east, we later skirted westward and dropped to beechwoods and a tent by a stream. It was only a day later that we discovered real crests that went on for ever and grew in quality with each successive summit gained.

GR20 is the way to take across these mountains; the hill-walker's route *par excellence*. Old shepherds' paths, so they say, linked together to form a continuous trail along the island's spine. Yet where were those shepherds whose way we trod? Waymark flashes on boulder and tree did most of the guiding and a Braille of cairns where doubts might otherwise occur. But it was not so much the mountains that confused and conjured doubt, as their slopes. The dreaded maquis. That deadly undergrowth became an overgrowth; it swallowed paths, rocks, boulders, people. Alder scrub and scrub oak with groping tentacles to scrape at legs, arms and rucksacks as a route was fought off the ridge and into a valley that beckoned. We bivvied in meadows by tumbling streams and there doctored our wounds; next day we had to fight our way through again to get on to the spine once more.

Day by day we strode towards the knotty heart of Corsica, checking its pulse as we went. And it took no time at all to become captivated by the scented isle and every single facet of it. The light had something to do with it, of that I'm sure. Out of the Pyrenees I'd never known anything quite so pure. You couldn't describe it. You couldn't feel it, smell it, touch it. But wandering on those ridges the light absorbed mountains and men. Perhaps its intensity belonged to the Mediterranean whose influence was all around. Certainly it was fresh as spring water; edifying, unadulterated. Like the streams that poured through the valleys – jade-green pools trapped among the boulders, cascades of persistent spray that sparkled in the light, then tossed globules and rainbows on to wayside fronds. Valleys were green by these streams, as green as ever you'll find. But the mountains often were white. Not white with snow, but white with the rough light-spinning crystals of stone that made this island in the sun such a raw and magnificent lump of delight.



56. Monte Rotondo (2622m) from the south. (Kev Reynolds) (p 117)

Monte Renoso was a dome of snow rising from the blue of Lac de Bastani, yet its summit was bare. It was bare of snow; a wind-blown pile of rocks on a wind-blown plateau. Huge views spun a panorama flattened by a grey scum of cloud that had no right to be here in the Mediterranean in June. Across that plateau we faced the wind heading north. And then the broad crest made a convex slope and gave a new dimension as pinnacles rose defiantly ahead. Lovely, those pinnacles were. They played at real mountains. One close-shaved pair clutched between them an almost circular boulder high above the cairned route. Teased by a dozen possible routes and another dozen impossible for us to climb, we turned our backs away from them and instead picked a way down to the ever-threatening maquis.

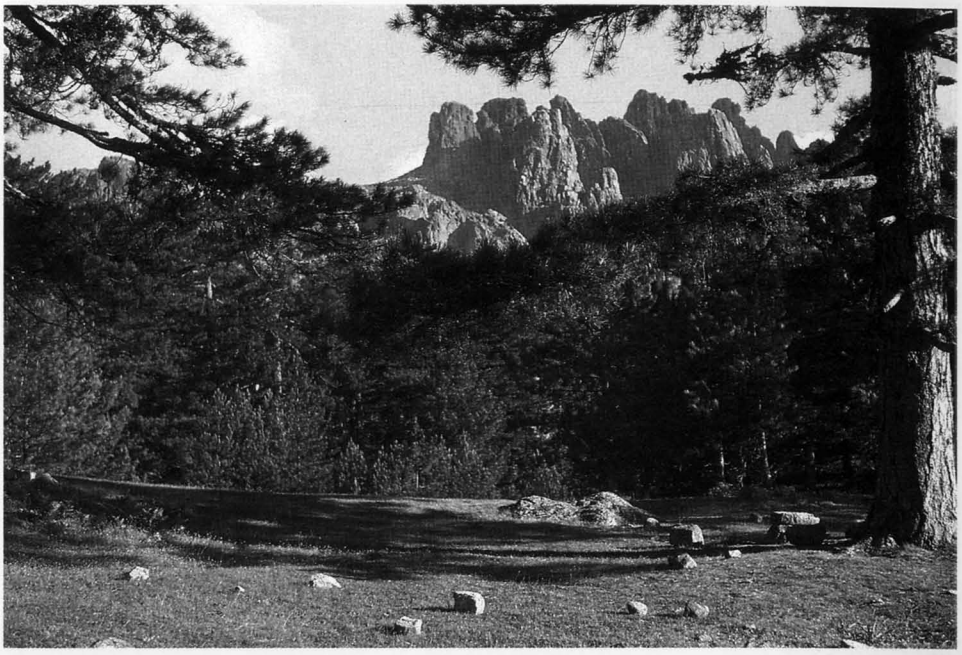
On the far side of Col de Vizzavona, Monte d'Oro wore a cap of cloud, yet, the day we took to the Agnone valley leading to it, summer had returned in full splendour. We wandered through the valley on one of those magical mornings when in the lower woods we trod stepping-stones of light dappling the path. Above the woods there was the maquis zone and, above that, rose sturdy ribs of the mountain itself. Hitting the ridge we looked across a void and gazed into the northern corrie, then scrambled over towers and into hollows of scree, and finally up a series of steep little couloirs to the summit. A most satisfying diversion, that was, but then so was the next day away from the true path when we strayed into the arms of Monte Rotondo.

Rotondo is the second highest peak on the island, although it looks modest enough from most angles and is indeed amenable to parties of limited experience. Gathered round Refuge de Pietra Piana we looked to the tumbling mists that had appeared from nowhere. A wild pig, black and undeterred by massed humanity, came quizzing for food, poked its head inside a rucksack and made off with a plastic mug. Two of us took up the chase and wrestled it back, then set off up into those mists.

Long strips of snow took us into the mountain's rough inner sanctum. There, with barely a blade of vegetation and with black tarns holding no vestige of summer, we prepared to bivvy. Rotondo's ridges curled in an embrace and covered us with their excess vapours. A cold night followed and, while others grumbled, I lay there with a smile of contentment. After all, they were paying for the privilege of an uncomfortable night in a poly bag; I, at least, was at work!

Sunrise drew us out. That daily gift to the earth worked its miracle and we thrashed up the south ridge growing warmer by the minute, and on the crown spread the world in an orange hue. Summit panoramas are not always satisfactory. Rotondo's was. It was an unreal conglomerate of ridge and crag, of tarn and scree, of valley and distant scoop of bay, of shadow and sunbeam and stream and snow-field twisted and patched in a carpet of wonder. Half an hour breathing the warmth of early morning, then down. Down to Restonica's bursting cascades, flowers, trees and streams with pools to entice. Down away from GR20 for a long loop of waywardness.

Corsica won my heart with her wild and empty uplands. I gazed on deserted bergeries, and dreamed. I heard pigs snorting in the tangled maquis and watched buzzards soaring overhead. The shadows of Tavignano's forested gorge were brightened with cyclamen; I bathed in her deep placid pools and



57. Cornes d'Asinao, southern Corsica. (Kev Reynolds) (p 117)

58. Looking to the Northern Glacier and Reusch Crater from Uhuru Peak, Kilimanjaro. (John A Jackson) (p 136)

inhaled the incense of her aromatic plants. The drug worked. For who can turn away from the Scented Isle and not crave to return? Not I. I'm hooked.

Daydreams then, lead to ambition; ambition to obsession – and the list of mountain landscapes that fill the hours of insomnia has lengthened.