

FROM MT. BLANC TO THE MEDITERRANEAN.

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"THE Graian, the Cottian and the Maritime Alps." It was formerly for us no more than a jingle half-remembered from some schoolbook. It carried no conviction: one does not really believe in these things until one has seen them! Last summer, however, we decided to explore the region. We had a desire to break what was for us new ground, and the rate of exchange seemed to provide a favourable omen for a visit to the French Alps. The actual programme decided upon, moreover, was for me the execution of a long-cherished plan.

One spring, several years ago, I had stood on the heights above the Riviera, where the Alps reach the sea. From there I had seen a great succession of ranges over-topping each other northwards and receding dimly towards the central mountain region which I already knew. From that moment there had dated a desire to traverse the intervening region, to set out from the central Alps and to walk southwards until the sea lay below me. Every mountaineer knows the feeling; the goal that some former impression has made infinitely desirable; the thing, be it a climb or a mere pedestrian expedition, which demands to be done. The project had acquired in my mind the character of a romantic pilgrimage. Nice is perhaps scarcely a holy city, but the real goal was the Mediterranean lapping the last spur of the Alps.

The starting point was to be the neighbourhood of Mt. Blanc. My former visits to the Alps for climbing

or walking had had their south-westward limit at the southern extremity of the Mt. Blanc range, where one may cross the Col de la Seigne and so into Italy by the Allée Blanche. Practically, the convenient railway terminus of Bourg-St.-Maurice, half a day's march from there, was to serve our purpose. From it we were to go southwards until we found ourselves on the direct seaward slope.

We were to go on foot, of course, as pilgrims should, for one does not acquire merit by vehicular progression. The excursion was indeed to be a walking-tour of the good old-fashioned kind. Climbing equipment would not be needed. Nothing was to be taken which would not go in the rucksack. We were to be free from forwarded luggage, from hotel reservations, and from everything else liable to mar the careless pleasure of the open road. We were not to linger in pleasant places nor to deviate for supplementary excursions: this was a condition which limits of time imposed. We were to walk the whole of the way, or else the particular plan was to be regarded as abandoned. Strange to say, all these good resolutions were on this occasion faithfully carried out!

Thus it was that my wife and I left London on 14th August, 1925, already clad for walking and carrying nothing but our rucksacks, and reached Bourg-St.-Maurice the following forenoon. We had only to walk out of the station and our pilgrimage had begun. The hills rose grandly all round us, a hot sun shone in a clear sky, and the road lay before us for a fortnight.

A mere seven miles was all we expected to do in what remained of this first day. It seemed long enough, however, uphill in the heat, with unaccustomed loads and with muscles soft from city life and cramped by the train. The way lay southwards up the Val d'Isère, the stream on our right, and the Little St. Bernard road soon branched off on our left. We found quarters, perhaps the least comfortable of the whole tour, in the hamlet of Ste. Foy.

Next day we were still breaking ourselves in gently, and had only thirteen miles to do in order to reach the head of the valley. The weather was fine and hot, and the scenery was magnificent. The sides of the valley rose steeply, here in pine-clad slopes and there in precipitous crags, with strips and shoulders of pasture everywhere interspersed: at places waterfalls descended or the ends of glaciers hung over the crests, and snow-covered summits showed themselves behind. For most of the way the road wound along the eastern side some distance above the stream, ascending gradually. We lunched at Tignes with only four miles to go. Above that the valley rose in a steep step and then became a stony defile. Presently it opened out into a beautiful green cup formed at the confluence of two streams, and there lay the village of Val d'Isère. After depositing our rucksacks we had time to wander a little, and to sit on a slope above the village admiring the peaks of the Vanoise and Tarentaise while the shadows lengthened across the floor of the valley and up its eastern side.

Next day we could no longer idle on our way. The road at present comes to an end at Val d'Isère, and, starting early, we struck up a steep path across pastures and through woods to reach the higher slopes. The ascent then eased and the way led up a side valley to the Col d'Iseran. The Route des Alpes, which at present avoids the blind valley of the Val d'Isère, is, in time, to cross the pass, and will, it is said, there be the highest motor road in Europe (9085 feet). The survey stakes were already in the ground and on the summit a little inn was about to be opened in anticipation. A new range of Graian peaks was visible to the south, but as time pressed we cut quickly down a steep grass slope into a little valley and soon afterwards halted for food beside the stream. The valley then took a sharp turn and two sudden descents, taking us into the main valley of the Arc at Bonneval, an uninviting village which is the end of the road on this side of the pass. We walked through without stopping, as the afternoon was wearing

on and we wished to do another dozen miles that day. The way lay down the level valley, and at dusk we reached the pleasant little town of Lanslebourg, where the Mt. Cenis route comes over from Italy. We reckoned it a twenty-seven mile day.

The following stage was theoretically a short one, sixteen miles down the valley to Modane. Actually it seemed a long one. For one thing, we were feeling the effects of the first serious exertion and had not acquired our "second wind," or rather its muscular equivalent. For another, the valley descended abruptly at Termignon, at the end of an hour or so, and after that the heat at the lower level in the middle of the day was great. Finally, a name "L'Esseillon" on the kilometre-stones, which for long stayed us with visions of an inn, an omelette and red wine, proved to belong to a barren fortress, of picturesque but unsatisfying appearance, on the opposite side of a deep gorge; we had perforce to make some biscuit and chocolate suffice. In the afternoon we reached Modane, the tunnel-terminus, just in time to escape a thunder-shower.

Ten more miles down the valley was the first part of the next day's programme, and we lunched at St. Michel-de-Maurienne. Here our route joined the present one of motors following the Route des Alpes and coming up the valley from Chambéry. With them, we had now to strike across to the south—since Bonneval the trend of the mountains had been forcing us westwards—by the Col du Galibier. The afternoon gave us a long pull uphill. The road zig-zagged continually to get an easier gradient, and wherever possible we cut off the bends. We cut off one too many on the higher slopes: our road did not come back as expected, but, as we afterwards found, continued round the shoulder of the hill to take a new direction. We persisted for some time until our error was fully apparent, but were luckily able to follow a pleasant path round the shoulder without losing altitude, eventually rejoining our road several miles ahead. The

last few miles were downhill, as the Galibier route does not begin in its proper valley, which is steep and narrow in its lower reaches, but climbs into it some distance up. We spent the night at Valloire, twenty-two miles from Modane.

Valloire is only half-way up the long ascent from the Maurienne to the Galibier Pass. The first part of the next stage was thus still uphill, at first gradually up the open valley, and afterwards in zig-zags up steep slopes. The old road, of which the derelict sections near the top will soon become merged in scree, crosses the path at a height of 8725 feet, but as rain had come on we kept to the improved road which pierces the ridge below the pass by a tunnel over four hundred yards long. So we passed from Savoy into the Dauphiné. The great peaks should have burst upon our view, with the Meije just opposite, but unhappily the weather hid all this from sight. The rain soon stopped, but the low clouds obstinately remained as we made the steep descent. The road follows an astonishingly tortuous course in order to avoid severe gradients, and the pedestrian can cut off many of the bends by running down the grassy slopes. Despite the late date we could see something of the great variety of flowers for which the locality is noted. At the bottom the route turns south-eastwards down the Guisane valley after joining the road that comes over the Col du Lautaret from Grenoble. We stopped at Le Monetier, twenty-two miles from Valloire, and, as the inn itself was full, we were billeted in an empty house.

Next day we walked the remaining ten miles down the valley, to its confluence with the Durance at Briançon, and had the afternoon to spend in idleness there. Briançon is a picturesquely fortified town with a superb situation. It seems to stand on a hill blocking the valley. Actually the hill consists of two approaching shoulders, one from each main wall of the valley, and is cleft by a narrow gorge. On one half stands the town, itself fortified, and on the other a citadel, a little

bridge connecting the two: on the surrounding heights are numerous outlying forts. The narrow streets of the town are of extreme steepness, and in a gutter in the centre of the chief one a stream of clear water races down. From the upper battlements the view is magnificent, particularly north-westwards up the valley whence we had come and south-westwards down the main valley where we proposed to go.

The Route des Alpes makes an eastward detour among the Cottians after Briançon, but we decided to follow the direct if probably less interesting route down the Durance, and so to reach Guillestre, where the valley bends westwards, in one day instead of two. The weather, as luck would have it, now interfered for the first time with our plans. An hour out it began to rain, and soon heavily. We sheltered until it abated a little, then went on in our water-proofs. The abatement was short-lived and a steady downpour for the rest of the day seemed all too likely. Eight miles from Briançon, therefore, at the village of L'Argentière, we decided that where we had lunched we must also dine and sleep.

It rained itself out in the night, and we set off early to make up again on our programme. If we could do the remaining thirteen miles of the walk to Guillestre while the day was yet young, the next stage, the seventeen-mile crossing of the Col de Vars, could still be done before night. This we did, and in all it was one of our best days and graced by perfect weather. Above Guillestre the road to the pass winds in narrow bends up a steep shoulder. From this a splendid view is obtained, looking back up the valley of the Durance to the Écrins, the Ailefroide and Mt. Pelvoux. There is an indicator here with a coloured sketch-map in the centre, a diagram of the view round it, and named directional lines in an outer ring. Towards the summit (6940 feet) the route is fairly level, but on the other side the descent is steep and the road rough and tortuous: few cars appeared to use this section. St.-Paul-sur-Ubaye, at the foot of the pass, was our stopping-place, and

accommodation was found despite the fact that the hotel has ceased to exist.

Next day the rain was on again, a drenching down-pour that continued all morning. After lunch it was less heavy, and we set out in water-proofs and were soon rewarded by its ceasing altogether. Fortunately, too, the programme was only a thirteen mile walk to Barcelonnette, for which half the day sufficed. At first the road lay beside the stream at the bottom of a picturesque gorge, but later the valley became level and wide, and the air was scented by the lavender which was growing in great abundance among the stones along the banks. The Ubaye was swollen in flood after the heavy rains, and at several points the road was obstructed by fallen stones, loosened by the wet, or by the overflow of tributary streams. Luckily we had pressed on for fear of renewed bad weather and so got in betimes: later on motorists and bus-passengers arrived from various directions in much greater numbers than the place could hold.

There followed our third and last wet day. We had only one more march, but it was to be a long and, we hoped, very fine one, so we made no attempt to proceed. Thus we stayed a day and a second night at Barcelonnette, filling in the time between meals with short walks in fair intervals, and, incidentally, seeing an Osprey hawking up and down the river. Speaking of time, the town clock here, like some others in this region (made in Briançon), strikes each hour twice over, with an interval of a minute or two. The first chime is presumably a warning, and one is ready to count the strokes of the second: as to which indicates the hour correctly we are not quite clear!

The evening had promised a change for the better and the morning happily brought realisation. We breakfasted early and set out to break the back of a long day before the first halt. The road went southwards, later turning eastwards, up the bottom of a grand ravine with sides precipitous in many places.

Here and there falls of rock or earth induced by yesterday's rain had blocked the road, although a few cars got across later in the day. Then the valley opened out and led southwards, becoming steeper, then more level, and finally very steep for a long final pull up which the road wound. After eighteen miles uphill, in all, we were on the top of the Col de Cayolle (7715 feet), and astride the chief western rib of the Maritime Alps. We unpacked the lunch from which we had for some time been refraining with difficulty, and sat down to appreciate our position.

The pilgrimage was in its essential accomplished. We were at the top of the direct seaward slope. Hitherto every valley we had crossed, or gone up or down, had been one whose waters flowed ultimately westwards to the Rhone: the stream at our feet flowed southwards and south-eastwards to the sea. Whether we saw the sea or not is a moot point. We considered this to be a theoretical possibility, and a distant haze to the south may or may not have been it. In any event the condition we had set ourselves was satisfied.

It remained but to complete the day's march, still not half done although now all downhill, in order to reach the railway. We had originally meant to spend the night at Entraunes, a dozen miles nearer, but were now anxious to make up for lost time. The road is wonderfully engineered down the first steep slopes, but we were able to cut off many of the bends. Then we were in the valley, and four hours of following it, latterly through scenery of fantastic barrenness, brought us to our goal at Guillaumes. We had covered forty miles by the stones that day, to our no little satisfaction, and two hundred odd since we had left the train at Bourg-St.-Maurice at a date that seemed distant, so full had the interval been of experience and impressions and of the substance of pleasant memories.

From Guillaumes a light railway connects with trains for Nice at Pont-de-Gueydon. In the event, next day,

we went the whole way in a motor coach, of which journey the least said the better. Had we known of the wonderful red gorges just below Guillaumes, imperfectly seen as they were, we should certainly have done another day on foot. Further down we were tempted to linger by a glimpse of the old fortress village of Entrevaux, rising in an angle of the Var and approached by a draw-bridge across the stream. Lower still there are again great limestone gorges at the bottom of which the road and railway run beside the stream before finally emerging on the littoral. But past all these things we were merely transported, and they do not properly belong to this tale. As we descended the pines gave way to olives, and these in turn to vine-yards: the vines finally to oranges and lemons, and the last stretch of road was bordered by eucalyptus and bamboo. As evening drew near we reached the sea-front at Nice.

After the joy of energy, the joy of relaxation. We had two days of that at Nice, idling in the heat, bathing prolongedly in the Mediterranean water, and basking in the sun on the shingle for as long as we thought our skins would stand. On the second evening we took train *via* Marseilles and were back in London the next night.