

A LADIES' TOUR OF MONTE ROSA - 1997

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I was deep in the stacks of the University library, looking for reading to prolong the pleasure of a recent holiday with Eilidh Scobbie in Zermatt. There we had walked the high footpaths, and from beneath the Matterhorn and from the Gornergrat we had marvelled at the snowy ridge, which swept from the multiple summits of Monte Rosa to the Lyskamm, Castor and Pollux, and the Breithorn without falling below 4,000 metres, towering over the bowl of the valley and the long trails of the glaciers beneath. Now I found a pink and gilt volume published in 1859: "*A Lady's Tour Round Monte Rosa, with visits to the Italian Valleys in the Years 1850-56-58.*" I read with much pleasure the Lady's reminiscences of Zermatt, "*a miserable village*" now so different, and of the surrounding mountains so much the same. There followed tales of visits to the "*sweetest and most cultivated*" Italian valleys, where the "*majestic snow-capped mountains are set in a frame of the richest vegetation. The noble chestnut and walnut trees spread in the grandest mass of luxuriant foliage*" and "*the little Alpine plants and flowers abound more profusely than in Switzerland.*" The Lady wrote of long excursions, often on mule-back, of mountain passes and villages, of gold-bearing rocks, and spectacular views of the peaks of Monte Rosa, the highest point of which had just been conquered in 1855.

I reached the peroration: "*Gentle readers! Let me assure you that it requires neither very great strength nor a very dauntless spirit to make the Tour of Monte Rosa. I feel certain that any lady, blessed with moderate health and activity, who is capable of taking a little exercise "al fresco" and has a taste for the picturesque may accomplish the Tour with great delight and few inconveniences, and all who do so must bring back with them a store of delightful recollections for the solace of future years.*" And so an idea was born, to retrace the Lady's steps, to see the vistas she so delectably described, and to discover what had changed in 140 years. The idea then took a more concrete shape with the discovery of a more up-to-date Guide, the two volume "*Grand Tour of Monte Rosa*" by Chris Wright (Cicerone Press, 1995).

Thus it was that three years later Eilidh and I found ourselves once more in Zermatt, having spent a week toughening ourselves up at the Club Meet in Saas Fee. One thing had definitely changed since the Lady's day: there were no mules available. So for the first and highest of our mountain crossings the 3,290 metre Théodule Pass from Zermatt to Cervinia, we intended to use the late twentieth-century equivalent, the ski lift up to the Trockener Steg. Like the Lady, to see us on our way we had engaged the services of a trusty guide, my husband Ken. He, though, had to return to Zermatt as he was due to fly off to a conference in California the next day, and so with our first steps into Italy we would be on our own.

A worrying thunderstorm the previous evening had produced a sparkling blue morning, and as we made our way to the pass up the hard snows of the glacier the views across to Monte Rosa, to the Dom and beyond to the Bernese Oberland, were superb. Close at hand was the Matterhorn, metamorphosing from its chocolate-box profile to the black triangle of its southern face as we worked round its flanks. In the Lady's day there was already a hut on the col, kept by an old man and his daughter. Now the Italian Alpine Club hut provided welcome coffee and a marvellous vista over the blue Italian valleys to the snows of the Gran Paradiso, before we waved goodbye to the dot that was Ken returning down the northern slopes and set off for the deep south.

There was little snow high on the southern side of the pass, only fields of silt and rubble left from the ski activity. However, we were soon sunbathing on warm flowery slopes, under the impressive barricade of the Grandes Murailles, which stretches from the Matterhorn over the Dent d'Hérens, enclosing the west side of the Valtournanche with steep rocky walls and tumbling small glaciers. Once over the main chain, the country to the south was well described by the Lady: *"There is a series of spurs springing from Monte Rosa like fingers from an outstretched hand, and every one of these spurs, which itself forms a smaller chain of important mountains, has to be crossed in succession by the traveller."* Our route would thus take us over a series of high cols at around 2,800 metres, dropping down to the villages in the valleys at around 1,500 metres.

After a night in Cervinia we continued along the grand balcony route, high on the eastern side of the valley, a little embarrassed at losing the path in the first half hour. Italian maps are much more imaginative than the Ordnance Survey, and the path numbers helpfully marked on them seemed to bear little resemblance to the numbers on the signposts (at least that's our excuse). A delightful walk through alpine lawns, rich with clover and delicious scents, and cool pinewoods led to the little village of Chamois perched on a broad shelf accessible from the valley only by cable car. With the aid of the guidebook and my limited Italian, I had telephoned ahead for a room at the Hotel Bellevue. When we arrived, thirsty and weary, we couldn't understand why we were left sitting in the rustic little bar for hours. Finally we reached our room, passing on the stairs the carpenter who had just finished reconstructing it. Everything seemed to tremble at a touch, the stair-rail, the light switches, the taps, but the water was hot, the food excellent and the company friendly. The next day the owner apologised for being so much "in confusione," and gave us parting gifts of key rings and good wishes.

Our way now led through a series of hidden hanging valleys, where cows grazed watched over by camping cowherds, up to the narrow pass of the Col di Nana. Leaving our packs, we scrambled up to the Becca Trecare, 300 metres above, with glimpses back to the Matterhorn and of the closer, rocky Grand Tourmalin, only to reach the summit cross as cloud blew up from all sides. Once over the pass, and swinging round the mini-cirque on

the other side, we had views up to Castor and Pollux, where through the binoculars we could watch ropes of dots toiling on the snowy ridge. Down and down we went, through grassy meadows and woods, eventually slipping by the back door into St. Jacques at the head of the Ayas valley. A little further down we stayed at a hotel bursting with Italian holidaymakers up from the plains, dining at rows of tables laid out with military precision. In contrast to the quiet Swiss villages, the Italian valleys are very busy in August, particularly around the feast of the Assumption on August 15th, as we were to learn from an exhausting telephone session trying to find accommodation for the days ahead.

The evening haze had thickened next day into mist, as we took the short ski lift from Champoluc up to Crest towards the Rothorn Pass. On the grassy plain visibility fell to 50 metres, and the new bulldozed ski-road bore no resemblance to the path on the map. Plaintive moos echoed around us, and little tarns loomed out of the fog. Just as we were about to declare ourselves completely lost, we came across the towers of another ski-lift, and at last we were able to strike the bottom of the path to the col, leading up through a Scottish mixture of grass, rock and boulder field. Over the top, we passed two grey lochans, and then joined the dots of the yellow paint markings along a narrow sheep-track, admiring the only things visible, the flowers decking the steep grassy slopes. At last we dropped below the cloud above the village of Stafal, at the head of the Gressoney valley. This gave us another interesting hotel experience, this time scores of Italian babies with attached families, at a hymn-singing convention.

To our delight, the next morning revealed blue skies, and the "*majestic snow crowned head of the Lyskamm, which blocks up the end of the valley*" as the Lady had promised. On the way down to Gressoney la Trinité the special character of these valleys could be seen in the charming groups of Walliser houses, with deep slatted wooden balconies around three sides. The Lady explains: "*In the upper parts of the principal valleys the people are of German origin, and still speak the German language. It is not really astonishing that the Germans, who were living on the more inclement and barren side of the Alps, should have crossed the easier passes and settled themselves in the upper parts of the valleys on the southern side, which were at least as fertile and fit for habitation as the places they came from.*" Another mule-chair-lift took us up towards the Col d'Olen, with spectacular views to the head of the valley, and back to the Rothorn Pass, now revealed as a classic V-shaped nick in the high ridge on the other side of the valley.

The Lady had traversed this col from the opposite direction, in a marathon day, up and down 2,000 metres of steep path, only parts of which were possible side-saddle on mule back. We had the advantage of a choice of two high huts, situated just over the col, and so could meander at a gentle pace, admiring the views as we rose through the debris of the ski fields. But the Col was unchanged: "*It is formed by a narrow opening between steep rocks, and we*

observed a low wall or barrier of masonry probably erected in the calamitous times of the plague, when it was provided with a guard to stop all passage between the two valleys, and to keep the deadly scourge at a distance."

To the north of the pass still rises the Lady's Gemstein (now in Italian the Corno del Camoscio, or Horn of the Chamois), up which we scrambled in the afternoon. Although the main ridge to the north was in cloud, the southern views were very fine and we, like the Lady "*were attracted by the beauty and profusion of the wild flowers,*" gentians, King of the Alps, saxifrages and androsace. We sat on our hill, watching the mists come and go, until at last engulfed we navigated down to the hut by the sound of its throbbing generator. In the evening, the cloud sank down to the valleys, and we were left floating on our island, with the high ridges etched against the twilight around us.

At six thirty next morning, a row of heads emerged from the dormitory windows, to watch an orange-red sun creep out of the valley mists into a milky blue sky. Soon afterwards we were again on the summit of the Gemstein, where "*a scene of stupendous magnificence burst upon our sight, and called forth exclamations of delight and astonishment. On our right hand were the magnificent summits and gigantic masses of the Vincent Pyramid, and the Parrot Spitzen, two of the noblest peaks of Monte Rosa visible on the Italian side, and on the left there stretched away in an unbroken line of snow, the elongated ridge and lofty crest of the mighty Lyskamm, whilst beyond that mountain were to be seen the snowy tops of Castor and Pollux, and the broad round head of the distant Breithorn.*" The only difference was the hosts of ant-like figures making their way across the snows of the ridge from the high huts.

It was hard to leave for the long drop down into the valley to the flesh-pots of Alagna, at 1,100 metres the lowest point of the trip. Here we struck the Assumption problem - our hotel could take us for only one night, aborting the planned rest day, and every hotel in Macugnaga 10 hours away in the next valley seemed also to be full. Close examination of the map showed a blob marked Bivacco Lanti half way over the pass, so a compromise was hatched. We would spend the night at the Rifugio F. Pastore, on the Alpe Pile an hour and a half above Alagna, and the following night bivouac at the Lanti, where enquiry suggested there would be shelter but perhaps no cooking facilities. Faced with this problem, Cairngorm Club survival initiative was called for, and soon the curious sight might have been observed of two Scottish Ladies of a certain age crouched in the woods testing out their latest invention, a tiny saucepan heating water over a nightlight purchased from a handy ironmonger.

Satisfied that we would be able to stave off hypothermia, I set off on foot for the Alpe Pile, leaving Eilidh to carry the rest day to extremes by travelling up the valley on the bus. As I tottered up the tarmac in the noonday heat, with the sweat dripping from the end of my nose, I recalled the Lady on her visit to Alagna: "*I felt some uneasiness as to whether I could manage to go*

so far on foot beneath the broiling sunshine in a hot Italian valley. It is not difficult to walk a considerable distance when one breathes the cool, light air of a mountain top, but to trudge along dusty roads at the bottom of a valley is a very different undertaking." Soon, however, I was able to leave the road, and the spoil of the old gold mines, for the path through the woods climbing up to the Alpe. *"On arriving at the Pile Alpe we had to first pass through a little cluster of chalets and cow-houses, which were as unsavoury as can be imagined. We then found ourselves in a beautiful green meadow in the midst of the richest verdure, beside a pretty rivulet. The hillside to the left was covered with larches rising abruptly above it, whilst immediately in front was seen the mighty mass of Monte Rosa, lifting itself up to a prodigious height in the unclouded sky, its summits covered with snow, and its sides clothed with glaciers, out of which rugged dark rocks projected in strong contrast to the ice fields on every side of them. On our right hand was a deep valley, which commences in the very heart of the mountain. If Mont Blanc is the monarch of mountains, surely Monte Rosa is justly called the Queen of the Alps, and a mighty queen she is, and beautiful under every aspect!"*

The cow-houses are now the very savoury Rifugio, the green meadow was covered by frolicking Italian families who had come up the kilometre from the road-head, but the view was the same, and I sat under the larches, gazing like the Lady at the wonderful panorama, and reading her words.

We spent a pleasant evening, chatting to the warden of the Rifugio - Scots were welcomed as a group from Glenmore Lodge had used the hut as a base for running courses earlier in the year. He said that increasing numbers of people were doing the Tour of Monte Rosa each summer, but that most rushed through as fast as possible, without stopping to enjoy it properly. We had not come across many fellow tourists, probably because as far as Gressoney we had used longer and less frequented variants of the direct route. The warden was concerned when we said we would stop at the Bivacco Lanti, and offered to phone a friend in Macugnaga for us, but we decided that with all our intrepid preparations we should stick to our plans.

The Col Turlo leading across from Alagna to Macugnaga had a bad press from the Lady: *"We could not persuade ourselves to make the Turlo our route, in consequence of the unfavourable description given which Professor Forbes has given of it. He pronounces it to be one of the most tedious passes in the Alps, although it presents no difficulties."* We however, found the ascent from the south delightful, first through woods and then traversing across flowery alps with scattered stone shielings, and the view behind us of the steep flank of Monte Rosa. Below the col we were reminded that this was an ancient trade route by the sight of a couple of panniered mules. The northern valley is certainly long, stony and barren, but the skilfully engineered mule-track, renovated by the 4th Alpini in 1918, makes for easy passage of what would otherwise be purgatorial boulder fields. About 500 metres below the col we came on the Bivacco, a tiny stone hut which to our relief contained



Monte Rosa from East – Alpe Faller on Col Turlo Pass

calor gas cylinders and giant pans. There was an even smaller, green-and-white-striped tin shelter, with three three-tiered bunks crammed into it, which we shared with two French students and a couple of German Valkyries doing the Tour in the opposite direction. We were glad of the shelter during the night, as the clouds built up and a thunderstorm swirled around.

It was still misty in the morning, as we swung down the track to the Valle Anzasca, passing a tiny church with a clanging bell and a procession of old ladies with crosses and statues, accompanied by chanting priests with a microphone. Macugnaga was pullulating with tourists, and we soon took the lift up the valley to the Belvedere *“the summit of an enormous ancient moraine at the very foot of Monte Rosa, which separates into two limbs the great glacier of Macugnaga. It is not however like ordinary moraines - a huge mass of earth and stones without vegetation - but its surface has become clothed with a forest of firs and an abundance of grass and bilberries.”* When the Lady visited she had looked in vain for *“a summer house for the convenience of travellers”*. Luckily for us there is now a charming little *ristorante*, with terrace attached. A further three-quarters of an hour up the glacial moraine brought us to the Alpe Pedriola, and the Zamboni Zappa hut. Henri de Saussure (who had made the second ascent of Mont Blanc in 1787) camped at the Alpe in 1789 and ascended the nearby Pizzo Bianco, in an attempt to measure the height of Monte Rosa. The lady quotes his description of this *“truly delicious spot. We were encamped in a meadow carpeted with turf, hemmed in by the lofty Alps, and enamelled by the most beautiful flowers: these meadows were bounded by the glaciers and rocks of Monte Rosa, whose*

lofty pinnacles were magnificently cut into sharp relief against the azure vault of heaven. Near our tent flowed a rivulet of the freshest purest water." To Scottish eyes, the Alpe with its grassy flats, random giant boulders and little streams is reminiscent of the Lost Valley in Glencoe.

This spot was a pilgrimage not only in the steps of the Lady: another of my Alpine writer-heroines, Janet Adam-Smith, writes in her classic "Mountain Holidays" of Professor W.P. Ker, who had introduced her to the Arran hills in the years just before the Great War. W.P. himself died in 1923, on an expedition to the Pizzo Bianco with his goddaughters, one of whom was Freya Stark. "*As we came through the corrie above the Alpe, where the stream was shallow in the grass, and one can look out on the ring of Monte Rosa and see all the hills of the Val Anzasca, he said: 'I thought this was the most beautiful spot in the world, and now I know it'. A few minutes later his heart stopped.*" We had looked in vain for his grave in the churchyard at Macugnaga, under the lime trees.

We spent a day at the Rifugio, wandering through the meadow to the stony desolation of the glacial basin above, watching the clouds through which we could catch glimpses of the peaks, and listening to the ice falls grinding down the flanks of Monte Rosa. In the evening, a stir of wind promised change, and in the night the view from the dormitory window was of brilliant moonlight on the snows. In the morning I rushed outside, half-dressed, as the huge eastern face of the mountain glowed red in the rising sun. The walk down to Macugnaga was through crystal air and sharp shadows, always with the bulk of the largest face in the Alps looming at our backs. The Lady seems to have had a knack with the weather, and she was passing her luck on to us as we made for the Monte Moro pass back to Saas Fee.

"By reason of the excessive steepness of the Italian side, it would be an almost impracticable undertaking for any lady to cross the Moro from Macugnaga to Saas, and no lady should attempt it unless she is prepared to travel in a chaise à porteur." Thus, faithful to the last, the Lady was even providing us with the perfect alibi for avoiding the 1,500 metre ascent, and justifying our use of the lift. As we swung effortlessly upwards, we could look back up the Valle Quarrazza to the Turlo Pass, and the blue ridges beyond, and back up the route of the morning to the great mountain. "*All the peaks that form her crown became visible, and beneath them was an immense wall of perpendicular rock, so steep that the snow could only rest on a few projecting ledges, and in the hollows of the deep fissures with which its surface is seamed. Below our feet, at an immense and almost inconceivable depth, were the glaciers, valley and little village of Macugnaga.*"

North from the col stretched Switzerland, and the long valley leading past the blue trough of the Mattmarksee, back to the familiar skyline of the Saas Fee mountains. In the sunshine we idled down the rocky path, against the tide of perspiring tourists struggling up to the golden Madonna on the crest. As we sat enjoying the view, we noticed a frieze of ibex horns high on

the ridge to the left; they seemed to be performing especially for us. Beyond the last difficulty, on the last grassy slopes before the track along the lake, I said to Eilidh "Well, we've done it!" Two minutes later, she tripped on a stone, and, though neither of us realised it at the time, cracked a bone in her elbow. Rather shaken, she opted for the bus from the dam at the lake end. I took the paths along the valley side, through the fragrant woods, and beside the rushing stream, finally climbing up the Waldweg to Saas Fee, deeply satisfied at the completion of our long circuit. One hundred and forty years had separated us from the Lady, but we felt in her a kindred spirit. We had shared with her the valleys and the high places, the long views and the flowers underfoot, and returned as she had promised with our own store of delightful recollections.

