



This extract from a Climbers' Club Journal has been made available by kind permission of the Author and or Photographer and the Climbers' Club.

Copyright remains with the author/photographer. It is provided in electronic form for your personal use and cannot be used for commercial profit without seeking permission from both the author/photographer and the Climbers' Club.

Journal: 1899 No. 5

Author: William E Corlett

© Copyright 2009

CLIMBS IN THE TARENTOISE.

By W. E. CORLETT.

TO those who would see some of the beauties of the Alps and yet avoid the now crowded neighbourhoods of Zermatt, Zinal, the Oberland and Engadine districts, it cannot be too strongly recommended that they should make their first acquaintance with the Alps in the Tarentaise.

Lying between the valleys of the Isère and the Doron de Salins and embracing some of the highest mountains in France this district presents Alpine scenery of the highest order, and a variety of aspects such as few other districts in the Alps can show. Yet, strange to say, it is very little known to the English climber or tourist, and, in proportion to its accessibility, is undeservedly the most neglected portion of the Alps.

If the Inns in the Tarentaise were as dirty and rough as in 1859 and 1860 when Mr. William Mathews, Junior, made many of the first ascents of the neighbourhood, or as they are still in some parts of the Maritime Alps, it would be easily explained, but at both Pralognan and at Val d' Isère there are now Inns where good accommodation can be obtained at much lower prices than in more fashionable centres.

As a subject for my article I have chosen two ascents made in this beautiful neighbourhood, in the hope that perhaps some members of our Club may feel tempted at no distant date to visit a district where Nature has certainly been lavish in all that tends to make a country picturesque.

THE GRAND BEC DE PRALOGNAN.

In the early portion of the Jubilee week of 1897 my friend M. K. Smith and I found ourselves at Moutiers, the terminus of the Paris, Lyons and Mediterranean Railway, en route

to Pralognan. As a rule the climber finds Moutiers a warm spot, but on this occasion we arrived chilled to the bone, which was not very surprising considering the thermometer read only 40° Fahr. in the shade. It is only 16 miles further to Pralognan, and when we arrived at our old haunt we found the season the latest on record, deep snow extending almost into the valley, and climbing looked entirely out of the question for many days to come.

But on Jubilee day came a wonderful and welcome change, the sun burst forth in all its glory, and in a day or two made a wonderful alteration in the scene, and, after a couple of days spent in training walks we decided to cross to Le Bois, a hamlet on the north side of the Grand Bec, for the purpose of making the ascent of that peak.

The magnificent roads made by Napoleon III. in 1860 constitute one of the features of the Tarentaise, and, as we strolled down the well-kept and gently-graded road leading to our destination, we could not help thinking of the contrast it afforded to the stony and roadless wildernesses of Dauphiné. A short cut, some two miles through the forest, can be made to Le Bois, and as the day was extremely hot, and the shade more than grateful, we gladly followed that route.

At 4 a.m. on Saturday, the 26th June, we left the Hotel Ruffier, crossed the stream which comes down from the Becca Motta Glacier, and were soon plodding up the steep and broken ground lying at the foot of the Grand Bec. The local description as to the route to be followed to the base of the Peak being extremely vague, we of course went a long way round, but in some three hours or so we found ourselves traversing the Glacier to the north of our mountain, and noticed with some concern the extremely corniced condition of its ridges and the generally bad state of the snow.

It is exceedingly difficult to describe the appearance of a mountain without the aid of a draughtsman, but our Peak from where we stood appeared somewhat like—though on a much bigger scale—Crib Goch, as viewed from near Pen-y-Pas. The face was too steep and in too bad condition to be attempted.

The north ridge with two or three tempting pinnacles certainly looked none too easy, and, as the east ridge had been climbed before, we decided to adopt that route. For some time we cut straight up the face of the mountain, but as the slope became steeper and ice began to show itself, we bore off to the left and hit the ridge some 600 or 700 feet above the Glacier. From here the ridge ought to have been easy, but bad snow in large quantities makes even easy places difficult, and it was only by using the utmost care that we could slowly make our way along it, and mid-day had come and gone ere we reached the summit after cutting our way through a troublesome snow cornice which overhung the arête and extended about 300 yards towards the top.

The Grand Bec is 11,165 feet high, and standing out as an outlier of the main chain, of which the Grande Casse is the monarch the view from it is one of the finest in the Alps. But, while admiring the view, we could not help noticing that the sun was not shining quite so brilliantly as during the morning, and certain ragged and ominous looking clouds were seen fast gathering on all the distant mountains. A grander spectacle can scarcely be imagined than a thunderstorm when viewed from a snug hotel in the valley, or from a club hut, but the climber as a rule prefers to be off the summit of his mountain before the warring elements are let loose, and we were not long in packing up our sacks and preparing to depart.

Our route up had not been a pleasant one, and we thought that we might find an easy descent on to the Glacier to the east of our Peak, and thence on to the Vanoise track and home, but we found the snow too treacherous to be trusted, so we hastened back to the summit, and after a hurried consultation decided to attempt the descent by the south face, which, though being far from easy, was fairly free from snow and had the merit of taking us into the valley leading to Pralognan. Short of time as we were, we could not help admiring the awe-inspiring spectacle of the storm raging all round us, though we well knew that before long we would ourselves be experiencing the fury of the elements. We had scarcely

left the summit, when all the winds of heaven seemed to beat down upon us. Hail and snow fell incessantly, and though we knew that on no account must we delay, we had at times to cling to insecure supports in order to prevent ourselves being blown away bodily. How it thundered and lightened! How the hail streamed down the rocks, and smote us on the face and on our bare hands, while the first man, having carefully negotiated difficult bits with the aid of the rope, gently entreated the last man to hurry up. But certainly Providence had a care for us on this occasion, and although we had to descend very steep and almost smooth rocks, and cross snow gullies filled with loose, incoherent snow resting on ice, we found ourselves some $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours later on the snow at the south foot of our Peak, safe and sound with the exception of finger tips, knees and garments somewhat the worse for wear.

After congratulating ourselves on our escape from what might have been a very unhappy experience we hurried down the valley to the south of the Point de la Vuzelle, and, after descending some 2000 feet, sat down on a rocky knoll by the side of a beautiful green tarn, and admired the magnificent view before us. The thunderstorm had just ceased, the sun was again shining, and Nature looked its loveliest. Behind us lay a glorious corrie walled round by magnificent cliffs, down which we had descended; in front of us lay the Pralognan Valley, some 3000 feet below looking most beautiful, and, amid the murmur of the torrents, could be faintly heard the tinkle of the cow bells from the meadows below. Down in the valley almost at our feet lay our hotel with the smoke lazily rising from its roof, and, as we had been out 13 hours with but little to eat we thought of the good dinner and the ease we intended to enjoy that evening. Somewhat foolishly we threw the remains of our provisions into a rapid torrent foaming on its downward course, and made preparations for our departure. We crossed the stream, and with some difficulty followed a track which ran downward, but after a time it lost itself on a wilderness of bare limestone

rocks, so we followed the stream at some little distance. After a short time we came to a forest, through which we forced our way, but finding the ground falling somewhat steeply we made for a huge boulder which had fallen from the cliff of the Pointe de la Vuzelle. From this point of vantage we discovered that the valley ended abruptly, and that immediately in front of us was a sheer drop of over 1000 feet, down which the stream, swollen by the storm, leaped in one magnificent cascade!

It took some time before we realised the situation. We hurried first to one side of the valley and then to the other, but there was no possibility of traversing round the buttresses on either side, and it would have been hopeless to attempt to descend such a cliff as lay before us. It was our first climb of the year; the snow had been so bad that we had taken over eight hours to make an ascent which can usually be done in four; we had been compelled to descend the hardest side of the mountain under the most difficult conditions; and when within sight of home, Nature had interposed a barrier which we had never expected to encounter.

Our only way was to reascend some 2000 feet, cross the Col between the Points de la Vuzelle and the Grand Bec, then trust to good fortune to find a track to lead us down to Planay and then a long trudge up the valley to Pralognan.

What a toilsome grind we had up that apparently never-ending slope, how soft and tiring was the snow down which we had glissaded only a short time before, and how empty we felt as we at last gained the Col at 7.30 p.m., with just an hour's daylight before us in which to find a short cut to the road. But short cuts are not easy to find at eventide, and night had quite set in when we at last hit the road near Planay and had only four miles steady walking to our hotel.

It was oppressively hot in the valley, and in the woods through which the road runs there seemed to be no air at all; but at last we reached Pralognan only to find the hotel in darkness and securely locked up. Smith pulled the bell with a vigour I scarce thought he possessed, while with the

knocker I gently insinuated that somebody desired admittance, and after a very lengthy delay a sleepy-headed waiter fumbled at the door, and we stepped inside having been $18\frac{1}{4}$ hours making our passage across from Le Bois.

THE GRANDE CASSE.

One of the most beautiful views from Pralognan is that obtainable from a low rocky knoll, whence you have a delightful peep up the Glière Valley, with the Mighty Casse and its 4000 feet of apparently vertical snow and ice forming a charming background to the picture.

Although we had spent a number of weeks at different times at Pralognan, the Grande Casse—thanks to bad weather—had never been climbed by us, and we accordingly were very anxious to try conclusions with the Monarch of the Tarentaise. Situate almost due south of Mont Blanc, and being the highest point between it and Monte Viso, it commands a magnificent view, extending from Monte Rosa on the east to the Cottian and Dauphiné Alps on the south and west. It is joined to its great neighbour on the east, the Grand Motte by a long and very jagged ridge, the passage of which has never yet been made, but by means of an extra early start we hoped to climb the Casse, cross the ridge to the Grand Motte, and descend on to the head of the Leisse Col and thence reach the comfortable little inn at Val d' Isère in one day. It was a somewhat ambitious, and certainly a long day's programme, and meant, in addition to plenty of climbing, covering many miles of ground, but we were satisfied as to the weather and hoped for fate to be kind to us on this occasion.

At 12:40 on the morning of the 29th June, 1897, we (*i.e.*, Smith and myself) shouldered our somewhat heavy sacks, and, by the aid of our lanterns and a brilliant display of stars, we steadily marched up the steep Vanoise track. There was plenty of snow all the way from the Glière Chalets, which, however, was frozen hard and made it fairly good walking

and at 4 o'clock we halted at a spring issuing out of the Moraine at the foot of the Casse and had a leisurely breakfast, while we discussed the probabilities of carrying out our day's programme.

From where we stood the whole of the route up the mountain could be clearly seen, and from the quantity of snow on the rocks to the right (true) of the Glacier, it was very plain that the Glacier would have to be followed throughout. Putting on the rope, we started from the Moraine at 5 a.m., and for a time the way was easy, and gave no trouble.

Owing to the immense quantity of snow on the mountain the crevasses, sometimes very troublesome, were easily passed, but the upper portion of the Glacier, which lies at an angle of over 45 degrees seemed steeper than usual and the brilliant sun of the past week had turned the snow into an icy slope upon which vigorous kicking made no impression, and the axe had to be called into play. Luckily the leader was desirous of some good practice in step cutting and got it to his heart's content. At first the angle was easy and moderate steps sufficed, but as we rose the angle steadily increased, the ice crust got thicker and harder, and the steps required to be cut larger and closer together.

The views over the Vanoise chain were very beautiful, but as we had a long day before us we pressed steadily on, and the leader, who was in an obstinate mood, cut almost continuously for 2 hours and 35 minutes, until the slope eased off sufficiently to dispense with the axe, and after wading through some troublesome soft snow we finally reached the summit about 9.45.

Our first thought was of the ridge leading to the Grande Motte. Will it go? Alas for our hopes! One look was sufficient. In front of us extended the ridge, some $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles long. Instead of the easy route that we had hoped to find there lay before us giant towers, jagged gaunt pinnacles, serrated edge after edge, with lovely snow cornices overhanging the cliffs below, and, except where the rocks were absolutely vertical, they were covered with ice and snow in

extraordinary profusion. It needed no arguments to convince us that, under such conditions, the ridge was impracticable, so, with a sigh, we turned our back upon our enemy and started upon our second breakfast. It was a lovely day—not a cloud even flecked the sky, and a charmingly soft wind agreeably tempered the fiery rays of the sun. Pralognan lay apparently at our feet, though 8000 feet below, and the contrast between its beautiful green meadows, the pine woods above them, and the snow-clad mountains now encircling us on every hand was very striking.

But unfortunately Father Time will not wait even for mountaineers, and so, at 10:30, we started downward and in a few minutes descended to the depression between the two summits, and from there prospected the descent which we proposed to make direct into the Leisse Valley; a much shorter route for us if it were feasible.

On this the south side the Grande Casse is furrowed by immense and innumerable couloirs. For a long way we could see a route downwards, then a series of cliffs intervened, and the rest of the way had to be imagined. Some kind (?) friend had informed us there was an easy way down this side of the mountain, so, with light hearts, we bade good-bye to our plateau, and started off. For a short time the way was easy, though the snow was beginning to soften rapidly under the sun's brilliant rays, but easy rocks were at first readily available and we made rapid progress. But very shortly our rapid progress became slower, the snow slope became steeper and softer, and now and again huge sheets of snow would become detached from the surface, and slide down, with ever-increasing quantity and speed, to disappear over the cliffs still far below us. Using almost the full 100 feet of rope, the leader cautiously advanced, until he could get to some kind of anchorage when the rear man would carefully descend to the same spot.

It was not long before we found out that we had made a mistake, but unfortunately it was too late to retreat. Mid-day had come and gone, it would have taken a long time to

regain the summit, and to retrace our steps down the Glacier would have certainly taken longer than we could have spared if we desired to reach Val d' Isère that night ; moreover, as the Chalets at Entre-deux-Eaux, in the Leisse Valley, were still unoccupied, we would have had no alternative but to return to Pralognan, which seemed to us out of the question.

Luckily there were a few rotten ridges of rock along which we could cautiously continue to descend whilst all around us the snow began to play, first in tiny avalanches, and as we crept slowly downward, in ever increasing volume, until above, around and below there seemed to be nothing but snow in motion. How carefully we had to thread our way across gullies filled with loose, unstable snow ! and how, as we hung on to a friendly rock, we would get bespattered with the dust of the avalanche tearing valleyward at express speed, and whose nearer acquaintance we had no desire to make ! But we still pressed steadily on, and at last we stood on the edge of the cliff which separated us from the valley below. To our amazement it fell almost sheer for two or three hundred feet, and further progress in that direction was hopeless. With some difficulty, and keeping a watchful eye upon the avalanchy snow above us, which ever and anon raked the cliffs as we traversed along to the northward, we at last found a tempting-looking gully leading down on to some broken rocks, from which a devious way might be found to the valley, still far below. No snow had apparently reached it that day, and though it was somewhat steep and wet, yet it was quite practicable, but we had a haunting dread of that loose snow above, so we decided to leave it alone and follow the cliff still further along, the wisdom of so doing being soon brought home to us.

After going some 50 yards or so further, we forced a very difficult passage down some steep and dangerously rotten rocks, which gave us infinite trouble to descend, and great care was necessary to avoid bringing huge quantities of rock and debris upon our heads. When we were only half way down we were suddenly astonished to hear a terrible roar on our

left, while the whole cliff seemed to tremble, and, holding on to whatever support we could, we saw the gully which we had nearly entered swept by a huge avalanche of snow, ice, mud, stones and debris of every description.

After descending a few hundred feet over steep slabby rocks, we came to a further cliff down which we could see no feasible way, and our only means of escape was to cross a huge couloir some hundreds of feet wide, down which a regular procession of avalanches was falling. We were still nearly 3000 feet above the valley. The couloir was fed by a Glacier, which extended up to the summit of the mountain, and séracs upon séracs towering high above, in every kind of decaying attitude, seemed as if they dared us to venture. But necessity is a stern taskmaster, and we had no alternative but to go on. We waited patiently until a huge avalanche had gone tearing past, and, with our hearts in our mouths, we made a mad rush across, and reached a friendly rock on the far side, safe and sound, only the last man getting a dusting from the advance guard of another avalanche.

From here our route should have been fairly easy, but steep and smooth rocks covered with the filthiest of black debris made our progress very slow, and it was with a sigh of relief that we at last crossed on to a grassy ridge, which seemed heavenly after our former experiences. We had now to descend into the valley by a smooth rock gully, which we found very disagreeable, but at last a beautiful snow couloir was found, down which we descended by delightful glissades into the Leisse Valley, and somewhere near the track, which was, however, hidden by deep snow, we at last sat down, having spent $6\frac{1}{4}$ hours upon the most dangerous descent we had ever made.

Looking upwards from where we stood, we could scarcely imagine that a descent could be made down the route we had followed, and a resolution was immediately carried that that was our first and last descent of the Casse into the Leisse Valley.

We had not stopped for a moment on our way down and we were both hungry and thirsty, but we had still a snow col

to cross and Val d' Isère to reach, so, after a hasty meal, we shouldered our sacks, with the addition of a now dirty, wet, and very heavy rope, and at 5.30 put on full speed for the Col de la Leisse. Fast as we went darkness came on faster and a dirty wet night had set in as we reached the summit of the Col at eight o'clock.

The beautiful view of Mont Blanc from this Col—almost the finest of its south face obtainable—was not to be seen to-night, no friendly moon assisted us over the tedious Col de la Freisse or down through the forest into Val d' Isère, but with some luck and the aid of the lantern we found ourselves at last on the road, and at 11 p.m. were kicking at the stout pine door of Monsieur Moris's Hotel. We had been 22 hours and 20 minutes crossing from Pralognan, and a fairly hard day we had experienced. But dinner and bed soon puts the mountaineer in trim, and part of the next day was spent in the pleasant company of two enthusiastic members of the Climbers' Club who were making their first tour in the Alps.

We were informed that our descent of the Grande Casse by the route described above was a new one, and, as far as we are concerned, it will be the last, for in addition to its difficulty, it is too much swept by avalanches ever to be safe.

