



L. S. Leach, photo.

Swan Electric Engraving Co. Ltd.

The Valeille with Lilla in the foreground.

scorn the motor. It will enable you not only to revisit the Alpine Passes, but to approach them, as our ancestors did, through the stately avenues and vineclad hills of Central France and the idyllic landscapes and picturesque mediaeval townlets of the Swiss lowlands; it will help you to ramble at leisure over the sunny hills of Savoy and to enjoy once more the familiar beauties of Val d'Aosta and the flower-decked meadows of the Col de Lautaret or the Dolomites.

THROUGH VAL SOERA.

BY THE EDITOR.

PERHAPS it may not be altogether superfluous to explain the position of Val Soera. If a climber leaves *Cogne* for *Noasca* or *Locana* he may go up the *Valnontey* and crossing the *Col de Grandrou* descend the *Val di Noaschetta* to *Noasca* or passing the *Col Monei* reach *Locana* by the *Val Piantonetto*. Should he desire to follow a more easterly route the *Vaileille* and the *Col Teleccio* will bring him into the *Val Piantonetto* and so to *Locana*. All these routes are well known and fairly often used, but there is a yet more easterly passage of which this paper is to speak. The traveller may traverse the *S. Sengie Col* and either cross the *Ciardoney glacier* to the *Colle delle Uje*—in which case he will find himself above the eastern branch of *Val Soera*—or cross the same glacier westwards to the *Valsoera glacier*, and he will then stand at the entrance to the western branch of *Val Soera*. To reach *Locana* he descends *Val Soera* and then rounding the ridge between that valley and the *Val Piantonetto* into the latter valley joins the route of the *Cols Monei* and *Teleccio* and drops down on *Perebecche* and *Locana*.

On August 17, 1913, I started with Benjamin Pession, of *Val Tournanche*, from *Cogne* for the southern *Sengie Col*. Though the air was crisp and the voice of the torrent insistent, yet the subtle glamour of the moonlight made our progress almost like the involuntary movement of a dream. But when I became thoroughly awake as the mule bore me up the steep zigzags above *Lilla* I began to dream in earnest of how the beautiful day should be put to good purpose. As to the tramp of three hours up the *Vaileille*, I used to think

that it prepared one for the day's work: then I labelled it the seasoning to the day's pleasure, as the mustard is to the beef: then I took it as inevitable: lastly I said, 'Is there no "corpus vile" to do it for me?' Hence the mule which carried me from 2.40 to 5.30. The path towards the end of the Valeille became gradually less and less practicable for the mule, owing to the damage done by storms, and so at 5.30 I dismounted and said good-bye to the mule and his ruddy and very good-natured owner. We then went on slowly over slopes of moraine and snow to the flat part of the Valeille Glacier and had breakfast in welcome sunshine. The many couloirs in the cirque at the head of the glacier were full of snow. Then, after roping, we made for the southern Sengie Col. Benjamin had a considerable amount of step-cutting, mostly in hard snow, with an occasional small patch of ice. So to the Col. Just as we started down to the Ciardoney Glacier, which was as white and beautiful in reality as it had been in my memory, I looked back at the three Saints. Andrew and Orso were almost as imposing as Peter.

We crossed towards the Colle delle Uje, casting our eyes in passing over our routes of 1912 on the Piccola Uja. As we drew near the foot of the pass I examined the ascent with some excitement. Would it be easy snow, in which case I should not get a rest without calling for it, or ice, which would please me better, for then I should enjoy leisure and arrive on the pass quite fresh—and then I should perhaps be able to carry out the scheme of which I had been dreaming and which was now beginning to crystallize in my mind. The ascent, though short, is steep, and Benjamin's axe sounded pleasantly to his Monsieur as he made a model staircase. When we reached the Colle there was the view which I longed for—the vast promontory of the Maritime Alps with clouds in slowly moving waves—glorious in the extreme. The near plain was hidden by grey-pink vapour.

The view from the Colle delle Uje looking across the Ciardoney Glacier towards the N.W. is striking. The three Saints are imposing and so is the Ondezana. If not in scale, yet in stately bearing they will compare with more famous groups. Mr. R. L. G. Irving, who knows the ground well, writes to me of this corner of the Cogne Mountains: 'There is some special attraction about that little bit of country. It strikes one as a rare combination of virgin soil and friendliness. Usually the unexplored parts of high mountains are uncommonly hostile, to judge by accounts in the ALPINE JOURNAL.'

..Grande Uja di
Ciardoney.

..Piccola Uja di
Ciardoney.

Punte di Valsœra.

..S.
..N.



R. L. G. Irving, photo.

FROM BOCCHETTA, SOUTH OF SCATIGLION.
(Not Bocchetta di Ciardoney.)

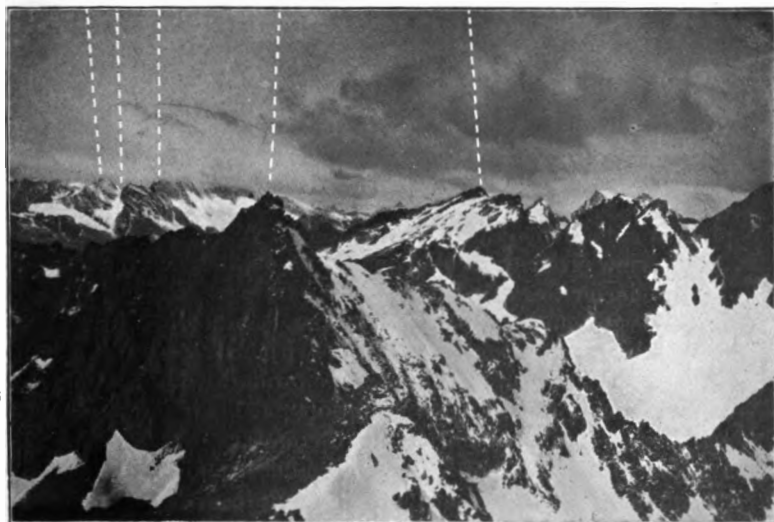
..E. Levanna.

..Levanetta.

..Central
Levanna.

Piccola Uja di
Ciardoney.

Becco di Valsœra.



R. L. G. Irving, photo.

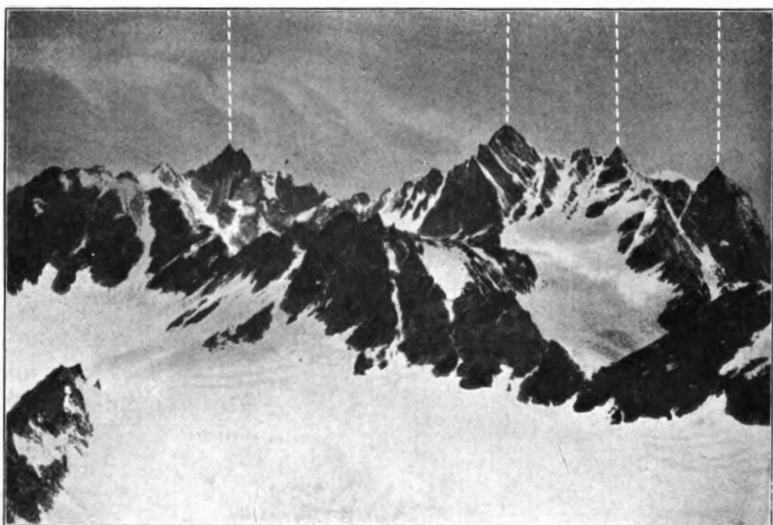
FROM GRANDE UJA DI CIARDONEY.

Ondezana.

Gr. St. Pierre.

St. André.

St. Ours.



R. L. G. Irving, photo.

FROM GRANDE UJA DI CIARDONEY.

Becco di Valsœra.

Ondezana.



R. L. G. Irving, photo.

FROM PUNTA (N.) DI VALSOERA.

Then, when Benjamin remarked that we might take off the rope, as there were no crevasses in the snow-field before us that filled the end of the eastern arm of the Val Soera, my joy was complete.¹

To know when to relax discipline with safety is one of the attributes of the satisfactory leader—it is also one of Benjamin's gifts. Did he not once allow me to descend a couloir of 3000 feet without the rope and behind him? Twice on that descent I think I accepted help, but I am sure we got down much more quickly than if we had been roped and without any serious risk. Where traveller and guide know each other completely there is liberty! So we descended while four chamois chased each other about for our amusement.

We then made for the gap between the Punta di Val Soera (N.), first climbed by Messrs. Irving and Tyndale in 1912, and the Punta di Val Soera (S.), first climbed by S.S. P. Viglino and V. Paglieri on September 8, 1911, when they also crossed from W. to E. the pass between the two Punte di Val Soera and gave it the name of Bocchetta dei Ronchi. Having reached over slabs—but enjoyable slabs—the Bocchetta, from which the Viso was a splendid sight, we went up Mr. Irving's peak and found his cairn. Then I endeavoured to persuade Benjamin that the proper thing for us to do was to descend into the western arm of the Val Soera, for I had now resolved to make my way to Locana if it were anyhow possible, and so gain a knowledge of the wildest of all the valleys that lead down from the main mass of the Gran Paradiso Group to the Val d'Orco. Those of Broglio, Ciamoseretto, Noaschetta, and Piantonetto I knew well, and had even descended the Val d'Eugio, the stoniest of stony glens, but no Englishman, so far as I was aware, had ever traversed Val Soera. When Benjamin agreed, I led down—Benjamin occasionally

¹ A topographical note is perhaps advisable at this point. Val Soera at its head is divided into two bays: the eastern is bounded by the ridge which runs from the Moncimour to the Gialin, and then from that peak to the Grande Uja di Ciardoney. From the last-named mountain another ridge runs to the Piccola Uja from which springs the southward running ridge containing the *Punte di Val Soera*. The western bay is bounded on the N. by the spurs of the Piccola Uja and the Ghiacciaio di Valsoera; the arête containing the *Punte di Valsoera* before mentioned forms its eastern wall; while the ridge which runs southwards from the *Becca di Val Soera* (formerly known as the Scaigoun or Scatiglion) encloses it on the W. The Bocchetta dei Ronchi is between the two *Punte di Valsoera*.

shouting directions from above, but I mostly followed my own devices, as of course I could see details which he could not. I kept as much as possible in a sort of cut in the cliff with an overhang here and there to get shelter from stones if they fell, and there was evidence that they sometimes indulged themselves that way. I made as much haste as possible, and only recollect one troublesome place where I had to cross a slab sideways. At the end of the steep part there were several colonies of *Primula*, which I took to be *pedemontana*. We then came to a wilderness of great blocks—a distressful and detestable region, where I began to tire a little, but a brief halt to take off the rope set me right, and eventually we got clear of the blocks and the moraine and sat down to a meal, where a suspicion of turf began, and a few linarias and ranunculi refreshed the eye after the stony monotony of the big blocks from which we had just escaped. Moreover, the stream from the glacier at the head of the valley—the Ghiacciaio di Valsoera of the new map—made a pleasant shimmering and murmuring of water.

When, after a halt of nearly three-quarters of an hour, we went on, I felt that with three passes behind us Locana would surely be reached. By and by, on looking back at our Col in waves of mist and sunshine, it gave us the satisfaction of seeming of amazing size and height. We then came to the Val Soera chalets among the bleakest and dirtiest surroundings, and my companion was so horrified at the unclean and unkempt appearance of the herdsmen that he said: 'No—nothing could induce me to follow such a calling. I would sooner seek the plain and take my chance.'

These were strong words for Benjamin to use, for I have no doubt that he holds with Mrs. Browning:

' Hills draw like heaven
And stronger sometimes, holding out their hands
To pull you from the vile flats up to them.'

Poor fellows, they were civil enough, but their surroundings must militate sorely against cleanliness in dress. It would almost appear that if the man who feeds fat oxen should himself be fat, he who tends dirty cows should himself be dirty. If dirt were trumps what hands they would hold!

The whole basin looked weird, wet, and storm-beaten. There were stretches of cotton grass which showed a ghostly white, but shivered sadly as though they found themselves forlorn and friendless in a hopeless world. Matthew Arnold said

of Holland 'you live in a constant smell of ooze, at least in summer,—hot ooze when in the sun, cold ooze when you go under the trees.' Here there are of course no trees, but the wind does the refrigerating for you. I cannot help thinking that this valley, like La Bruna, must be a favourite haunt of mists and storms. A mediaeval traveller would certainly have thought it an abode of devils, or at least an antechamber of Tartarus, but Stygian as it is near the chalets it must not be forgotten that Valsoera leads also after much turmoil to Elysium, or what is equivalent to Val d'Orco.

After passing to the right of the chalets we came to one of the most curious places I have ever seen. The path led across bare rock, sometimes comparatively steep, but easy to walk upon when you got used to it, as the surface was rough. At the beginning of the traverse Benjamin walked below me to 'field' me if I slipped, but this precaution was soon recognised to be unnecessary. Below us was the Val Soera Lake—a large sheet narrowing at its southern end, deep blue, silent, unruffled, as if its waters were gathering strength for the work they will have to do hereafter. I could not help wondering how the cows managed to cross such country as the path led us over, and Benjamin said that accidents must happen occasionally.

Before we got to the Bubna Lake (in older maps called Balma) the path was not so bad, though not altogether easy to find, but after we left that lake we came to a place where the path appeared to mount to the right, yet the map seemed to indicate that it went to the left. Benjamin made for a bridge over the effluent of the lake, but I called him back, for I was sure we had not to *cross* the stream. We then continued by the stream round a projecting mound or knoll. When we had turned the corner we saw the path above us to the right and to reach it had to take to a brook, a feeder of the lake effluent. We found a precarious passage through the little gorge of the stream, though it seemed that nothing short of a miracle could save us from falling into the water. The miracle happened, and, escaping immersion, we safely reached the proper path.

Here we found perhaps the finest *Dianthus neglectus* I have seen. This beautiful little mountain flower is peculiarly plentiful in the valleys opening on the Val d'Orco from the N. On the wild rocks above the Val Soera Lake a *Campanula* which I cannot name (it reminded me a little of *Zoysii* and *excisa*) was beautiful, and in many spots, especially among the

slabs, quite abundant. The common harebell occasionally grew side by side and emphasised the rich colour of its small but handsome relative. There seemed, when the two grew close together, a touch of red in the unrecognised variety which attracted one's attention at once. Eventually, after passing three groups of chalets where there were a considerable number of civil people and a certain variety of harmless dogs, we came to the descent—steep and in many places fringed and even embowered with hazels—to the Val Piantonetto, which we reached at S. Giacomo.

There are divers varieties of paths which prove irksome at the end of a long day, but none more destructive to boots and good temper than one paved with rough cobbles. The memory of previous tribulation on this particular path was offensive, but in no way exaggerated the reality. To slip off one cobble and grind your foot against the next moves even the meekest to speak unadvisedly with his lips. Still we knew now where we were, so on we went. The dusk soon began to close in upon us, and when just below S. Lorenzo we came to a bridge the question arose were we to cross it or not? Memory said 'Cross,' Prudence said 'Consult the map.' So Benjamin, after laborious research in the depths of his sack, solemnly produced one of those bits of candle which are so dear to guides, and though it did not throw its beams far yet it enabled me to decide that the bridge must be crossed. Then the dusk deepened, and the stream by the path-side sometimes usurped its neighbour's territory, but I was now happy as we splashed through the trespassing waters for I knew we were not far from our Elysium. Then the moist evening air became heavy with the varied fragrance that always fills the side glens immediately above Val d'Orco at the fall of night—and this excited me like a new enthusiasm. So we stumbled down the wooded slope into the moonlight and the main valley just above Perebecche. We here seemed to be in an enchanted country. The moon that had smiled on our setting out now looked down graciously on our coming in, the fresh-cut hay in the meadows by the Orco gave out an all-pervading scent, and by and by, as the road drew away a little from the loud Orco, the fern-bordered brook on our right sang a pleasant song of youth and freshness in the pauses of its great neighbour's hoarse music. It was 10.30 when we entered Locana.

There we sought for beds at the 'Three Partridges,' but a gloriously attired damsel affirmed positively that that hostelry was full. Politeness forbade us to contradict a lady, but we

could not suppress our unspoken incredulity. Falstaff would have said stoutly, 'If this house is full, call me horse,' and perhaps have been shown into the stable, but we retired ignominiously, there was not even a hayloft offered us. Then eventually we found kindly treatment and clean beds at a café kept by a man and his wife who had lived some time in Wisconsin, in U.S.A., and spoke English well. A sweet-scented, large-blossomed white Plantain Lily garnished the balcony of my room, and in the wooden gallery of a house opposite was a fine specimen of *Lilium speciosum*. One always notices fresh flowers in Val d'Orco; my previous recollections are of carnations and scarlet geraniums.

The next morning one sad disappointment befell us. 'Twas all in vain we searched the shops and stalls for such peaches as we had found on our previous visit. Some of the virtue of the very sunshine seemed to disappear with our vanished hopes of peaches. A public automobile took us to Pont at a charge of 2 francs 50 centimes for the two of us. The road in some of the hamlets was so narrow that the motor only just found room to pass. In fact one was reminded of the York tradesman's answer to Sydney Smith when he said that Coney Street was so narrow that there was not room for two carriages to pass: 'Oh yes, Sir, there is an inch and half to spare.' The most vivid memory of that ride that remains with me is the flight of such goats as were in or near the road as we appeared. They seemed to regard the automobile with terror, and, bolting through fences as soon as they caught sight of it, seemed to make over the hills and far away!

Pont Canavese was crowded with people attracted by a cattle fair and its attendant excitements. We found another automobile at the railway station which soon took us up the beautifully wooded valley of the Soana to Ronco. I observed one curious sight at Pont: where the crowd was densest the swallows seemed to be busiest. They flew very low, sometimes actually between the heads of the people, with an air of positive enjoyment and blithe freedom very delightful to watch. Often as I have traversed this valley it always seems to disclose new beauties. In one place on the way children offered bunches of cyclamen, whilst I noticed in a garden fine tiger lilies and hollyhocks. At Ronco we had lunch, not at the Grand Hotel Soana, but at a humbler inn, and then we walked up to Campiglia.

When we reached the Albergo Reale at Campiglia I took

a rest, and whilst I slept rain began and soon showed what a difference wet weather makes to such a place. Like many another hostelry with the same lordly title, the royalty is but an unsubstantial pageant. The awning let in the wet, the air became cold, the children grew refractory, the hens attempted refuge and research in the dining-room. I began to wonder what I should do if the rain continued all night—and on the 17th the weather had seemed settled for good!

When I talked to Benjamin: 'Ah,' said he, 'if the rain had caught us at the Val Soera Lake where should we have spent last night?' And when we discussed Val Soera he summed up his judgment of it thus: 'The good God has never passed by that route, nor the Saints, *pas même* Judas.'

There was at the inn an itinerant musician with a big concertina, who, accompanied by his brother, a boy of perhaps thirteen or fourteen, had spent a whole day in trying to find a pass to Cogné and failed. Inspection evidently satisfied him that I must have music in my soul and yet be fit for stratagem, for he played all the time I was at dinner and then, when he thought that the music must have mollified me; appealed to Benjamin if I would allow himself and his brother to accompany us in the morning. Of course I agreed, for I was sorry for their wasted efforts and for the boy's weariness and whatever route we took no difficulties were to be anticipated. I asked Benjamin what the man was. 'A musician,' he replied, 'from *la basse Italie*. He wishes to live without working. Next year he will have to begin his service in the Army. Then,' with a smile, 'he will learn what it is to fetch and carry, and obey orders.'

Next day mist troubled us all the earlier part of the morning, and a heavy rainstorm caught us before we reached the pass. The only sights of interest that we came across were an ouzel in the torrent and a fine *Saxifraga longifolia* in an inaccessible position as usual—sights which I had seen there before. Just below the place where we crossed the ridge one of the strangest sights possible was given to us: a stone avalanche came down the snow, and little stones ran all about in an almost comic way, looking as harmless as rabbits. My respect for falling stones is very great, and nothing but the evidence of my eyes could have made me believe that they could be so innocuous. We were really in no danger whatever, but the musician was deeply impressed. When we got to the other side of the ridge—I do not think we crossed any recognised pass—we came to a steep snow-slope. Benjamin cut five

or six steps whilst he held the boy by the hand. The boy slipped two or three times, but Benjamin's grip was retentive. Then he started to glissade. I felt sorry for the musician, who had never been on snow before; and exhorted him to 'aller seurement.' When he got to the place where Benjamin had begun his glissade, he halted and watched me as I followed. The encouragement of a tiro was quite a new employment, but I did my best to remove his distrust of the snow. Then I glissaded down nearly to Benjamin, while the man from *la basse Italie* plunged downward with a rueful face. When he reached me I pointed out to him again that there was absolutely no risk, and that all that he suffered from was want of experience; so he took heart and we got down to the Lago Miserin. Some distance beyond the lake I stood looking back, and when I turned round our two companions had left us, for which I was sorry, as I meant them to share our lunch. They had shown much natural courtesy, and I fancy their departure was due to a feeling of delicacy when they saw Benjamin preparing for lunch. I heard the concertina at Cogne in the evening, and afterwards saw them doing what looked like good business in Aosta.

After lunch the weather improved and our walk to Cogne was pleasant. After passing Bosc and crossing the torrent we saw our ruddy friend and his mule at work in the field. At the sight of us he hurried across the upturned earth, asked after our welfare, and managed one of those pleasant compliments which come so naturally to the Italian peasant. I am afraid that the compliment like many another was not quite true, for how can 'vous êtes très robuste' apply to a man who shirks three hours' walking by riding a mule? Then we passed by Lilla. The road from Lilla to Cogne is always beautiful; it is to me, moreover, if I may make a presumptuous comparison, what the Via Appia was to the war-worn legionary returning in triumph to Rome, for have I not come back by it after successful climbing with Alphonse Payot or Ulrich Almer or Benjamin Pession?

The traverse of the Val Soera had always been an ambition, and its accomplishment thirty-four years after my first visit to Cogne was a great satisfaction. Then it was the fulfilment of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' and now it solaces me as 'A Winter's Tale.'