

Note di viaggio riferite agli anni 1826/1828 tratte da:

“Illustrations of the passes of the Alps”

by which Italy communicates with France, Switzerland, Germany

by **William Brockedon F.R.S.**

member of the academies of fine arts at Florence and Rome

London 1836 – II edition

pagine 61-68 (la prima edizione è del 1828)

Vol. II

Capitolo

The Tende and the Argentiere

ROUTE FROM NICE TO TURIN,

by

THE PASS OF THE COL DE TENDE.

NICE has long possessed the reputation of having a climate and a situation peculiarly favourable to those invalids who arrive there from more northern countries; a circumstance that probably led to the improvements of the road which lies between this city and Turin, by the Col de Tende.

The situation of Nice is strikingly beautiful from many points of view in its neighbourhood, and many interesting remains of antiquity may be visited in short excursions from the city: these are sources of enjoyment within the reach of the valetudinarian, and add to the pleasures and advantages of a residence at Nice; but they are principally to be found coastways. The rich alluvial soil at the mouth of the Paglione, that descends from the Maritime Alps, gives a luxuriant character to the plain, which, near Nice, is covered with oranges, olives, vines, and other productions of a southern climate; but the moment this little plain is left, on the road to Turin, and the ascent commences towards Lascarene, the traveller must bid adieu to the country where "the oil and the wine abound." The sudden change to stones and sterility, with here and there a stunted, miserable-looking olive-tree, is very striking; and the eye scarcely finds any point of relief from this barrenness until the little valley appears in which Lascarene is situated. Soon after, the ascent to the Col de Braus commences at the village of Tuet, and sterility recurs, where it is in character with the wild and rugged acclivity, up which a zig-zag road—in some places blasted from the rock, in others terraced—winds safely and gradually; but it is ill preserved. The deep fissures and rifts in the mountain side, which the route in some places fearfully overhangs, increase the wildness and grandeur of the pass. On the summit, the station of a cantonnier offers during storms a miserable shelter: the view

thence over a barren country has great extent and grandeur, and the sea and coast towards Antibes are seen bounding the horizon.

On the eastern side of the Col de Braus¹ the little town of Sospello appears, deep in the valley below, to which the road descends by a considerable *detour*; and the traveller from the summit finds that he has been deceived by its apparent proximity.² The valley of the Bevera, in which Sospello lies, is rich in wood: the olive and the fig are abundant; the latter in particular is an object of commercial value to the people of Sospello. The torrent of the Bevera flows into the Roya a few miles above Ventimiglia.

Immediately beyond Sospello the ascent to the Col de Brovis begins; and, though less sterile than the Braus, it presents in the ascent a barren panorama; but after attaining the height of 4277 feet above the level of the sea, Breglio is seen from the summit, appearing like an oasis in these deserts, from the beautiful and luxuriant vegetation which surrounds it: these contrasts of scenery are striking in the route from Nice to Turin, and are peculiar to this passage of the Alps.³

The descent from the Col de Brovis is over a well-constructed road, which gradually leads, by long zig-zag terraces, down to the little post-station of Gendola, where a good inn offers, among other excellent refreshments, the delicious trout of the Roya, and good accommodations. Gendola should divide the journey from Nice to Coni.

This part of the valley of the Roya is very richly wooded; large chestnut and ilex trees are mingled with the varied forms and colours of the caroubier, the olive, and the vine. There is an air of neatness about the spot, which contrasts forcibly with the abrupt and barren peaks of the surrounding mountains. These are so lofty and so near, that in the depth of winter the sun cannot be seen at Breglio, a town half a league distant from Gendola, on the opposite side of the river. The estuary of the Roya is at Ventimiglia on the Mediterranean, about twelve miles below Breglio.

A little beyond Gendola the defile commences through which the road is carried, on the banks of the Roya. In some places the road is terraced, or built out, on arches; in others hewn from the rock which overhangs it.⁴ But sombre and savage as this defile is, it fails, from its proximity to the river, to excite those fearful emotions which are so appalling in the Via Mala, on the route of the Splugen, and in some parts of the Val Dovedro in the pass of the Simplon, where the head turns giddy in seeking to trace the course of the water struggling through the depths of its passage below the road. A striking scene occurs about an hour from Gendola, where the road crosses the river, and the town of Saorgio is seen,

¹ The height of the Col de Braus is 3845 English feet above the level of the sea.

² As it was late in the day when the author left Nice, it was night before he reached Sospello, where he had an unwelcome reception from the dirty old padrona of *lee quatre nations*, who ushered him into a filthy room, which was blackened by musquitos, who disputed with the fleas the privilege of destroying sleep. The author advises travellers to reach Gendola or Tende the first day, where there are excellent inns.

³ In a little hut on the Col of the Brovis, an old soldier is stationed as a cantonnier: he came out and offered to the author the welcome of rest and refreshment: he brought delicious peaches, bread, rum, and *eau-de-vie IVAndaye*: these might have been sighed for in vain in places of greater promise. The garrulous, cheerful, and intelligent old man, who was a Bordelais, fought some of his battles over again. He had served at Dunkirk against the English in 1794; and he had subsequently been employed eighteen years as a *gendarme*. He had been engaged in the campaigns of the Alps; and in some of his latest service he had assisted in extirpating the brigands which formerly infested these mountains.

⁴ Title Vignette.

from a little opening in the defile, stuck above the road on the face of the mountain, in a situation singularly wild and romantic: its houses seem to be hung out in front of the steep, and apparently inaccessible, rocks. A few chestnut, olive, and fig-trees, relieve the eye; and the effect of the scene is heightened by the view of the fort of Saorgio,⁵ on a peak of rock which commands the approaches to the town by the defile. Immediately below the fort, the road crosses the river by a single arch, and then passes through the narrowest and deepest part of the ravine, at the foot of the vast rock upon which the fort stands. A tabular face has been cut upon the rock over the torrent, upon which is the following inscription: -

PUBL. CISMONT. AC CITRAMONT. DITIONIS BONO
ITALLE AC TOTIUS ORBIS COMMODO
INVIIS UTRINQUE ALPIUM MARITIM. PRACIPITIIS
FERRO FLAMMAQUE PRAECISIS,
D. CAROLUS EMANUEL IIII.⁶ SABAUD. DUX XI. P.P.P.P.
PACE BELLOQUE FAELICISS.
PROPRIO MOTU, PROPRIO SUMPTU, PROPR. INDUSTRIA
HANC VIAM BASILICAM PERFECIT.⁷

In the defile the ruins of several bridges are seen; but whether these were destroyed by the contending armies in the campaigns of 1793-4, it is difficult to say, as the improvements in this route, which were made by Victor Amadeus III.,⁸ might have led to their destruction.

⁵ Saorgio was the centre of an important military line, assumed by Sardinia and supported by Austria, on the frontiers of France, at the commencement of the war which the powers of Europe entered into against the principles and leaders of the French Revolution. The Committee of Public Safety opposed to the Austro-Sardes a cordon of troops, which checked an invasion. Some severe fighting took place in 1793, especially at Saorgio, which post General Colli gallantly defended against the desperate attacks of the French, who gave to the fort the name of *le petit Gibraltar*, where they sacrificed thousands of lives in their efforts to force the Sardinian line. At the end of 1793, the insurrections of Lyons and Toulon led to the removal of a part of the French troops, with General Keller, man. In the campaign of 1794, the army of the Alps returned in greater force, and better organised, determined upon the invasion of Piedmont. Massena was appointed to the command of the division opposed to Colli; he consulted with Buonaparte who was at Nice, already distinguished, and holding the rank of Chief of Battalion of Artillery; the plan of attack recommended by him was adopted successfully; and Saorgio fell into the hands of the French on the 29th of April,—an event of great importance, as a part of a series of operations which gave to France the command of every pass of the Alps on her frontier. But dissensions in the revolutionary government prevented any brilliant consequence until Buonaparte received the command of the Army of Italy in 1796.

⁶ He was the fourth Charles, as inscribed, but the first Charles Emanuel. He came to the dukedom in 1580. Another Charles Emanuel assumed the distinction of the Second in 1638.

⁷ This is a little more modest than the inscription on the route of the Grotto, near Les Echelles. Yet the bombast amuses; for, like that, too, the original road has been so altered and improved, that the gratitude of the traveler is chiefly due to those who made it practicable. It is an honest glory, however, to have commenced such a work to facilitate the intercourse of mankind; and the bombast of an inscription may be forgiven for the sake of the benefit which it records.

⁸ Arthur Young, who crossed these Alps in 1789, says, that there was a long inscription in honour of Victor Amadeus the Third; and near it an old one to the eleventh Duke of Savoy: the latter inscription is quoted above. If an inscription to Amadeus exist, it escaped the observation of the author. Sulzer, however, who

After leaving the defile of Saorgio, the road opens into the little valley of Fontan, which affords a short but pleasant relief from the generally savage aspect of the country. The valley extends to Tende, a little town, of which Arthur Young complains, as being "black, stinking, dirty, and no glass;" and Smollett has left his malediction on the inn. The town has probably not much improved; but it would be unjust to allow an unfavourable impression to remain as far as it regards the accommodation to travellers : there are now two excellent inns, situated in the high road which passes through the lower part of the town, and the Hotel Royal offers good entertainment.

The appearance of Tende is remarkable: the town is built on the side of a steep hill, on the right bank of the Roya. The old castle of Tende commands the town and the road from its situation, and its ruins mark the former power of the feudal lords⁹ who held it; it is built on a knoll on the side of a mountain, which, rising above the castle, terminates in abrupt and pinnacled rocks.

altered and improved, that the gratitude of the traveller is chiefly due to those who made it practicable. It is an honest glory, however, to have commenced such a work to facilitate the intercourse of mankind; and the bombast of an inscription may be forgiven for the sake of the benefit which it records.

On the left bank of the Roya a little plain extends to the foot of the Col de Tende,¹⁰ where the road enters a rocky valley, up which it is carried in zig-zag turns, which are remarkably tortuous. An inn is situated about half-way up, called *La Ca*, which was built by the King of Sardinia, for the protection and assistance of travellers: it is a station for the carbineers appointed to guard the roads; and, formerly, the men who carried travellers in a *chaise a porteur* across the Col de Tende were stationed here. Its situation amidst the mountains is wild, and the scene, on looking back, presents the long winding road by which the ascent is made from the valley of the Roya; but to attain the col, the road rises by a succession of above sixty turns: near the summit there is a little house of refuge, called the Osteria of Barraconi, which is often a welcome shelter in storms. The crest of the passage is an absolute ridge, 6162 English feet above the level of the sea: the scene from it is very extensive; on the north-west the range of the High Alps present their rugged pinnacles and snowy summits, even to the Monte Rosa, and, on looking back, the Mediterranean is faintly seen in the horizon. The descent to Limone is well constructed, and a rapid succession of tourniquets carries the traveller down towards the plains of Piedmont.¹¹ The landlord of the inn at Limone was very communicative upon the present

passed herein 1776, only three years after Victor Amadeus ascended the throne of Savoy, mentions it, though, as he speaks only of one inscription, it is probable that he made a mistake in naming Victor Amadeus for Charles Emanuel, and that Young has fallen into his error.

⁹ The Counts of Tende were once independent and powerful, and their authority extended over many towns and villages. In the fifteenth century, the country passed under the dominion of the Dukes of Savoy, though this was above a hundred years later than the first dependence of Nice upon the same government. Tende was possessed by a family named Balbe, afterwards called Lascaris; because one of the descendants of Pierre Balbe married the daughter of Theodore Lascaris, the emperor of Constantinople. The Balbe-Lascaris, who also possessed Ventimiglia, sold that part of their domain to the Counts of Savoy, after these had acquired the country of Nice—DENINA, *Tableau de la Haute-Italie*.

¹⁰ Generally called in the country the Col di Cornio.

¹¹ About one-third of the way from the summit is a grand work conceived and begun by Anne, Duchess of Savoy, which, as a public undertaking, is one of the most gigantic ever attempted to be carried into effect: its object was to pierce the mountain, and carry a road rough it, to avoid the often dangerous, and always tedious passage of the Col de Tende. Victor Amadeus, in 1782, renewed the excavations; and workmen

and former state of the roads; he said, that they owed to Napoleon the completion of the carriage-road over the summit of the Col de Tende, and its general improvement, as it was done under his direction, whilst Piedmont was annexed to France; it is certain, however, that the road was made practicable for carriages as early as 1789, as Arthur Young passed the col in a voiture in the month of September of that year.¹²

From Limone, the road towards Turin passes through the valley of Vermenagna, which widens as it approaches its junction with that of the Gesso; the woods of chestnut-trees which clothe the sides of the valley—the meadows and cornfields, and the villages of Vernante, Robilante, and Roccavione, enliven the road, and contrast cheerfully with the sterile and generally savage character of the route south of the Col de Tende. The river Gesso is crossed before the traveller reaches Borgo Saint Dalmazio, where, though its elevation is 1800 feet above the level of the sea, the plains of Piedmont may be said to commence; for the descent is so gradual towards Turin, that the road is only observed to decline by marking the course of the stream.

The Alps which bound the plain of St. Dalmazio, and, like an amphitheatre, more than half surround it, are beautiful in their appearance; and when the bright pinnacle of the Monte Viso appears towering over the snow-line of the Alps, as high apparently above them as they are above the plain, it is one of the most striking objects in this route, as its height is more than 12,000 feet above the level of the sea. From Borgo St. Dalmazio to Coni is about six miles, whence the direct road to Turin, about twenty French leagues, lies through Savigliano; but to the traveller who is not pressed by business to hasten to the capital, a *détour* by Saluces and Cavour to the Protestant valleys of Piedmont, and thence to Turin by Pignerol, over good carriage-roads, will repay his devotion of a few days to this visit. The Delphine is an excellent inn at Saluces; and the Canon d'Or, chez Bartolomeo Revel, at La Tour, in the Val Pelice, may be made head-quarters in visiting those interesting people the Vaudois, and the beautiful and magnificent scenes amidst which they dwell.

Limone Piemonte – 2014 – m.b.

were engaged upon it until 1794, when the French took possession of the pass. Its length, if it should ever be accomplished, will exceed a mile and a half,—a work which, in its magnitude, will leave every similar enterprise in comparative insignificance: there is little probability, however, of this stupendous undertaking ever being completed.

¹² At Limone there is a custom-house,—a nuisance permitted to exist between two districts under the same government: the officers there exercised their power upon the author's baggage in an offensive way, unpacking every article, and examining every scrap of paper, and then begging something for not having annoyed him more and detained him longer. In general, the Sardinian *douaniers* are courteous in their disagreeable duty; but their conduct at Limone has been noticed before by English travellers.