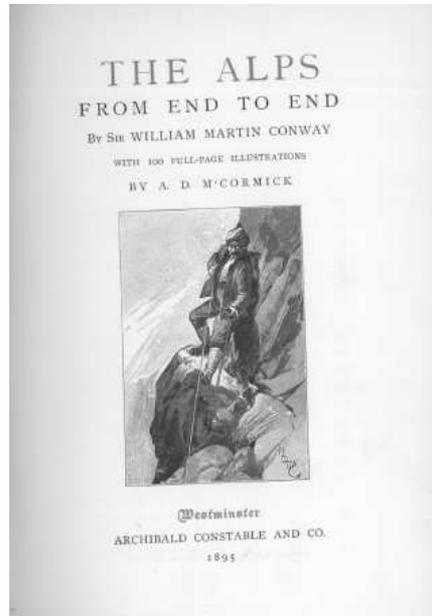


THE ALPS FROM END TO END

By Sir WILLIAM MARTIN CONWAY

1895



CHAPTER II

THE MARITIME ALPS

The assembling of a party from various places is always a troublesome process, however completely arrangements have been made. Mr. E. A. FitzGerald was to come from Florence. His guides, J. B. Aymonod (M N O we called him) and Louis Carrel, one of Whympers' companions in the Andes, were due from Valtournanche, Mattias Zurbriggen, my old Himalayan companion, was to arrive from Macugnaga; and I came from England with the two Gurkhas, Lance Naick Amar Sing Thapa and Lance Naick Karbir Bura Thoki.

The date fixed for our rendez-vous at Turin was the 1st of June 1894, and by 8 a.m. We were all in my room there, surrounded by a chaos of unpacked baggage, consisting largely, as usual, of unnecessary things. The number of our party was raised to eight by the addition of FitzGerald's excellent Austrian servant, the polyglot James. As our appearance in the streets of Turin was occasion for the assemblage of a crowd, we were not encouraged to delay. By two o'clock we were in the Cuneo train, where, with a traveller's usual lack of foresight, we reserved for ourselves two window-eats on the sunny side. The afternoon was hot, and we fairly roasted. Smoke entered at the windows and so blackened us that there became little to choose between us and the Gurkhas, in the matter of complexion. We passed through the fertile Piedmontese plain, by fields bright with poppies, with blue hills all around, fading up into the soft clouds that follow rainy weather. Here and there, through a valley opening, were glimpses of snowy peaks, which we could not identify. Patches of snow lingered low on their flanks, but for the most part the snow-line had already mounted to within 1500 feet of its summer level. The hours dragged themselves slowly along, each marked by the passing of some town, with an old brick fortress cornered with round towers, its walls pierced at regular intervals with holes for scaffolding. The castle of Turin, which every one knows, is typical of mediaeval Piedmontese fortresses. At Cuneo we waited an hour. Energetic persons would have utilised the time to see such sights as the place may afford; we more wisely dined, and smoked our cigarettes on the rampart, looking towards the foot-hills of the Ligurian Alps. We started on again by another train for Limone, timed to accomplish the intervening twenty miles in two hours. The official estimate of its speed was justified by the event. It was a friendly sort

of train; dogs ran beside it for a mile or two; people shouted from its windows to their friends in the fields; the guard was obliging enough to go off at one station to the neighbouring village and buy us a couple of Virginia cigars, amusing to light, though less satisfactory to smoke. The train wound up a charming valley, and crept through a series of tunnels, some of which are corkscrew in form, after the St. Gotthard manner. The slopes on both sides were richly wooded, and sometimes dyed scarlet with withered birches. A stream of clear water babbled below in graceful curves and the old road wound beside it. At last we reached Limone, and halted for the night at a simple inn. The railway is in active construction above the village, and is destined to be carried through a long tunnel down to the Mediterranean at Ventimiglia.

June 2.

Our intention was to start at five o'clock this morning. We in fact started at 7.30, and then only with a struggle, for the baggage had to be divided into two portions —half to be carried on our backs and those of our men, the other half to go round with James and meet us at Casteldelfino. One is liable to carry what will not be needed, and to send away the most necessary things. After walking a quarter of a mile we recollected that the camera and field glasses had been left behind and simultaneously the breathless James was observed hurrying after us for needful keys. The road was broad and excellent. We marched briskly up it, cutting off the zigzags so boldly that we lost sight of it altogether, and were contentedly advancing up a wrong valley. Sentries turned us back, and revealed the fact that the whole countryside is covered with fortified places, from the very sight of which civilian eyes are debarred. Without permissions from high authorities it is impossible to go anywhere in this part of the Maritime Alps. On regaining the proper road we hastened to catch our companions. The morning was bright, and every one we met seemed gay. Carters, hauling with their teams loads of bricks for railway bridges, cracked their whips as they went.

A man came running down the hill with a hand-cart, so balanced by a friend seated on its back edge that the weight of him in the shafts was almost counterpoised. The vehicle ran itself down the hill, and the carter's feet only touched the ground every ten yards or so. It was as good as a glissade. Thus, in what should have been an hour's walk, but took nearly two, we reached the mouth of the tunnel, which goes under the Colle di Tenda, and is some two kilometres long. We sat down to cool before entering its chilly shadows, where water drips from the vault in a continual shower. When we started in, most with one consent began to shout and sing, and the others that followed did the same. The hollow place rang with

"O Jean Baptiste,
Why have you greased
My little dog's nose with tar?"

and the like classic ditties; and the Gurkhas, not to be outdone, raked up reminiscences of Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay, learned from Roudebush in Kashmir.

The tunnel was sixty-two lamps long; we ultimately passed the lot and made our exit through the iron doors at the end. Workmen, blasting an apparently aimless hole and chucking the stuff down into the stream, were the first beings we saw in the daylight. They directed us to the neighbouring Albergo del Traforo, where we hoped to find the man who was to procure permission for us to climb in the neighbouring hills. He was not in, so Zurbriggen went up the road to the first military post inquiring for him, and, by means of the telephone, succeeded in bringing him down. We presented letters from our friends of the Italian Alpine Club in Turin, and these, with some help from S. Maurice (what he had to do with it I could not make out, but he was in it somehow), apparently put a better complexion on our prospects.

Having nothing more to do, we ordered a meal, though we were not a bit hungry, and resigned ourselves to being bored. This occupation was interrupted by the coming of the man under the patronage of S. Maurice who was to work the oracle for us. He, Zurbriggen, and I started off to walk up the hill and interview the military authorities about our *permesso*. We were armed with letters from the presidents of various Alpine clubs, *viséd* passports, and other documents. In addition, a letter had been written on our behalf from the Royal Geographical Society to the Italian Embassy in London and this had been communicated to the War Office in Rome. We had every reason to expect a favourable result. We climbed about 500 feet to a house occupied by soldiers, where we had to stop whilst telephonic communication was held with the upper regions. I only heard the near end of the talk: "An English gentleman with his guide." "Wants to see the colonel." "Has letters for the colonel." "One English gentlemen." "English." "His guide, his domestic." "On foot," and so forth. Ultimately we were told the colonel was asleep or out; we must wait. We waited an hour.

The captain then rang us up. We might come on, provided that the man under the patronage of S. Maurice came with us. We climbed a thousand feet or more, and entered cloudland.

We were close to the fort of the colonel. A ghostly captain emerged from the mist. The colonel had sent him to see our letters, and to assure us that we were undoubtedly most respectable persons, but that, etc. Our letters were read, and the captain went off with them to the colonel, whilst we sat down for half an hour and threw stones at our ice-axes. The clouds rolled and played about us, opening occasional glimpses towards, but never of, the southern sea, which we were told is visible from this point. The captain returned with the news that we could not have permission to go anywhere in the neighbourhood, except back through the tunnel or down to Tenda. We might go to Mont Clapier, or elsewhere in that direction, but this fortified circle of the hills was closed to all the world. He continued to assure us of his distinguished consideration, and then down we went, followed by three soldiers with loaded rifles to watch us off the premises.

I see I have forgotten to say what we came to the Colle di Tenda for. This pass is chosen as a convenient eastern limit to the Maritime Alps. East of it the Apennines are by some considered to commence. As a matter of fact they do not ; the two ranges overlap one another for a certain distance—the one rising eastwards, the other, parallel to and south of it, rising westwards. But for practical purposes the Alps may be counted as beginning at the Tenda Pass, and the first peak of the range is the Rocca dell'Abisso. It is a trifling hump, but being number one we wanted to climb it. Unfortunately it commands a view of all the forts. A mule-path has been made up it, and a sentry stands on the top. Mont Clapier, which comes next, is the first real peak, and to this we had now to turn our attention.

June 3.

To start at 4 a.m. for a mountain is one thing—to start at that hour for a tunnel is quite another. There is nothing to awake one in a monotonous tramp in the dark. FitzGerald set the pace. His habit is to carry no knapsack but to fill his large pockets with things. It takes him some time to get up momentum; when that is accomplished all he has to do is to keep pace with his pockets.

Hungry, for we had not breakfasted; sleepy, for our night had been short ; footsore and disgusted, we reached the station at Limone, entered the train and went to sleep. A moment later we awakened at Borgo S. Dalmazzo.

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Limone – 2015 –m.b.