The Eastern Arête of the Meije.

By J. H. GIBSON.

(Read before the Alpine Club, February 1892.)

A YEAR ago the member of the Club who found himself in my position to-night felt constrained to admit the yearly increasing difficulty of writing papers on mountaineering in the Alps. That this was an accurate expression of an obvious, though regrettable, truth, must, I think, have occurred to most of us, but it is only within the last week or two that I have been made painfully conscious of the full force of the observation. Indeed, I now feel that the bearings of my friend's remark lie in the application of it.

In July of last year I paid a first visit to Dauphiné, a district which was blessed with a modicum of the fine weather denied to so many other quarters of the Alps. I was therefore enabled to make the expedition of which I now propose to give you some account. The chief feature of this climb was a traverse of the eastern ridge of the Meije from the top of the western to the top of the central peak—that is to say, we reversed, with one short variation, Herren Zsigmondy and Purtscheller's expedition of 1885.*

Before, however, I come to speak of my own particular doings, perhaps I may be allowed to say a few words about the ridge itself, which, at all events of late years, has not received from climbers the attention it so fully deserves. If, in so doing, I run the risk of saying what others have said before, it is merely in the wish to refresh the memory of those who may have forgotten the early history of this most fascinating ridge.

The eastern arête of the Meije, then, which is the ridge that runs nearly due east from the western or higher summit to the central peak, it will be remembered, was the scene of many, if not most, of the early attempts to climb the great mountain. The problem set before the climber who had reached the top of the central summit and sought for higher things was, how was he to pass over or turn the four great teeth and five corresponding gaps that go to make up the ridge. And from 1870, when Mr. Coolidge made the first ascent of that point, every would-be conqueror of the true Meije who followed in his footsteps, looked

* See *Alpine Journal*, vol. xii. pp. 393, 4.

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westwards, like Columbus, and longed; but for fifteen years most of them confined themselves to looking and longing. This was no doubt due, in many cases, to bad weather, unfavourable condition of the snow, and discouragement from guides; still the ridge seems to have had something of that glamour of inaccessibility, due to an imposing appearance, which in the early history of mountaineering was associated so notoriously with the Matterhorn. In 1874,* it is true, Mr. Oakley Maund, after reaching the top of the central peak, prepared to give the ridge a serious trial, but the weather forbade. In 1876 Mr. Gale Gotch† reached the gap lying immediately to the west of the central peak, the farthest point up to that time attained; but both his guides were against advancing further, and the party retreated. Mr. Gotch seems, so far as one can judge, to have been one of the few to consider that a way along the ridge might be forced. He, too, was sceptical of the truth of the opinion, which at that time held ground, that if the gap between the westernmost tooth and the Meije were once reached, the problem was solved—an opinion which I will endeavour to show, if I can show anything at all, was utterly at variance with the facts. In 1877, as everyone knows, the Meije was climbed from the south side by what is now the ordinary route, and for the next eight years climbers seem to have left the eastern ridge severely alone. At least I have not been able to hear of any attempts made upon it, and as we know 'an unrecorded ascent is nothing,' I suppose the same rule applies to unrecorded attempts. This neglect is surely a matter for some astonishment! The great ridge was worth climbing for its own sake, and even in 1877 virgin peaks were not as thick as blackberries, and the making of new routes had come into fashion. When, moreover, in reading over the early descriptions of the arête one comes across such adjectives applied to it as 'hazardous' and 'unspeakably formidable'; when one writer, speaking of the westernmost tooth, says, 'I cannot think any man will ever pass over this wedge to the west peak;' when Hans Baumann is reported to have declared that 'one Herr and two guides might get up if they never cared to come down again,' and Henri Devouassoud had exclaimed, 'Jamais, monsieur, personne ne passera par l'arête, jamais'; with in a word such an assemblage of

* See *Alpine Journal*, vol. vii. pp. 417 *sqq.*

† *Ibid.* vol. viii. pp. 177 *sqq.*

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attractions, one is tempted to say, what could the enterprising climber ask for more? Surely here, if anywhere, was fuel to fire the imagination of the most languid mountaineer! I can answer at least for one. With an assurance that was born of knowing nothing whatever of mountain-climbing in general, or of the Meije in particular, I had at once decided, on reading Mr. Gotch's paper, that the arête could, and must be traversed, and that it would not be my fault if it and I did not become better acquainted. A brother officer once demonstrated to Mr. Peter Simple that the whole art in fencing lay in knowing nothing whatever about it; but, while I would be the last person to assert the same thing of mountaineering, absolute ignorance of the difficulties to be overcome may at least beget a confidence that may carry one far. The news of Herren Zsigmondy and Purtscheller's success in 1885, then, was less a matter of surprise to me than of regret that I should have been forestalled, but it did not divert, though it probably delayed, a long-formed intention. It was only last summer I put this into execution. The year before I had talked the matter over with Ulrich Almer, and had been delighted to find that he at once fell in with my designs upon the Meije for the following season. On the 3rd of last July, accordingly, I arrived at La Bérarde with Ulrich and his brother-in-law, young Fritz Boss, of Grindelwald, having travelled by way of Grenoble and the valley of Vénéon. For the first few days of our stay the state of the weather made the climbing of difficult rock peaks out of the question; the middle of the week following our arrival, however, saw a change for the better, and on Friday, July 10, having crossed the Ecrins, it seemed the time had come for attempting the climb, the thought of which it was that had really brought us to Dauphiné. Here I may as well state at once that my original intention had been humbly to follow, if we could, in the footsteps of the Austrian party, satisfied that, if successful, we should at least be achieving a very fine expedition and one well worth being repeated. It will be borne in mind that what Herren Zsigmondy and Purtscheller had in view was to reach the summit of the western peak, or Meije proper, by passing along the eastern arête. Starting from La Grave they reached the top of the central peak at 9 A.M., from there made their way westwards to the highest point, and descended by the ordinary route after spending the night on the Glacier Carré. As I have said, my original idea had been merely to repeat this

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expedition, avoiding, if possible, the night on the mountain. But our headquarters were at La Bérarde. To cross over the Brèche de la Meije to La Grave alone would take a day, and our time was limited. Moreover, one of my chief objects in coming to Dauphiné had been to get up the Meije—by the eastern ridge, if possible; if not, by the ordinary route—but it might very well happen that, after having climbed the central peak, we might fail to reach the top of the western, and, after all, be forced to climb the latter by the ordinary route. It was then that the idea was evolved, I cannot exactly say how, but I believe the suggestion came from Ulrich, that we should seek to reverse our predecessors' climb. Should we fail to effect the traverse to the central peak, we at least should have the top of the Meije to our credit. Whatever of novelty, then, if any, our climb possesses in the form which it ultimately took, it will be seen was the result of accident rather than design. The expedition, as amended, had besides an additional charm. All readers of the Journal will recollect that, when Herren Zsigmondy and Purtscheller arrived at the top of the westernmost tooth, they found themselves cut off by a precipice from the westernmost gap. After climbing down the face of this precipice for a few feet they found it impossible to proceed further in the same direction by ordinary means, as the rocks overhang. Accordingly, after some difficulty, they succeeded in fastening a rope to the rocks, and came safely down into the westernmost gap. It is, perhaps, as well to remark here that this gap, the deepest and best-defined in the whole ridge, now goes by the name of the 'Brèche Zsigmondy.'

In thus lowering themselves into the Brèche Zsigmondy, then, the Austrian climbers ran the very considerable risk that they might not be able to find any way up again, in the event of their being beaten by the rocks of the final peak. The chief difficulty, however, of that kind of mountaineering manœuvre is to get the rope fixed properly; once that is done, all that is needed is a certain amount of nerve, and a strong enough pair of hands. To get up those overhanging rocks was quite another matter. We were fairly confident we could manage to descend the rocks of the final peak, which our predecessors on the arête had ascended, and so gain the Brèche Zsigmondy. Then would come the critical part of the climb. A direct attack on the precipice was clearly out of the question; as I have said, the rocks overhang. A flank attack on the south was equally so, as the whole of the south face of the tooth is perhaps as sheer a wall as nature

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ever made. We should, therefore, be driven into trying to work round upon the northern, or La Grave slope, of the obstacle, and thus gain its crest. Failing that, the only alternative would be to quit the arête for the time, descend the steep slopes of the north face of the mountain in a slanting direction eastwards, and, keeping below the bases of the two western teeth, try to regain the arête somewhere about the third gap. Without, therefore, having much that was absolutely novel about it, our proposed climb had, for us at all events, all that element of glorious uncertainty characteristic of new expeditions.

Accordingly early on the afternoon of July 12 we reached, by way of the top of the Plaret, that oasis in the desert of the Vallon des Etançons, in which the Chatelleret hut stands, and had plenty of time for studying the south face of the Meije. But on the snow slopes of the Plaret the sun had been intensely hot, and having found what, after some experiments, I firmly believe to be the only piece of turf free from stones in the neighbourhood of La Bérarde, I fear I did not devote as much time as I ought to have done to examining our route, or so much as can be seen from the *refuge*.

Ulrich and I had agreed that we ought to be off the next morning not later than 2 A.M., hoping thus to reach the top at 9. It was of the utmost importance to have plenty of time for the arête itself, but when the morning came there were the usual delays over fire lighting, cooking, &c., and it was fully 2.30 before we filed out into the darkness. The delay was vexatious, and being anxious to make up the half-hour lost, we made our way up the moraine towards the 'promontoire' at our best pace.

It is well known that it is in the first hour or so of an expedition that the climber is most beset with doubts as to its probable result. This occasion was no exception to the rule, and I confess, for the first time since leaving home, I began to seriously question the success of our plans. The tremendous battlemented ridge of the Meije, cutting the starlight above us, was not calculated to inspire confidence in the breast of a would-be climber who had recently been roused from sound sleep and warm blankets. That my feelings were in some degree shared by another of the party I soon began to learn, for a vigorous conversation in Grindelwald patois at this point between the guides showed me something was wrong. On asking Ulrich what it was all about, I discovered that Fritz Boss had been

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having long talks at La Bérarde about the Meije with M. Tairraz, who had assured him that it was nothing less than 'der Teufel,' an estimate of the mountain that Ulrich had now been trying to lower. Of course it is only fair to Boss to say that, as we rose, so did his spirits, and in addition to less material troubles, he had to carry an exceedingly heavy knapsack; he was besides an entire stranger to the district.

The ascent of the Meije by the ordinary route has been so often described that I need not stop to dwell on it here. The rocks of the south face were quite free from ice, and we therefore made height rapidly, and with two halts reached the top at seven minutes past nine, thus making the first ascent for the year. Our first glance, I need hardly say, was towards the work that lay before us. I had made myself familiar with the appearance of the eastern arête by studying Signor Sella's photograph taken from this point. The photograph had been most instructive, but unfortunately it failed to show the real turning-point of the climb. I mean the western face of the westernmost tooth. Now this western face was in front of us, and we gave it our undivided attention. We noticed at once that a few feet below the top there hung what was apparently a fragment —4 or 5 feet—of Zsigmondy and Purtscheller's rope, but whether our way was clear or not it was impossible at that distance to tell. But what struck us more than anything was that we saw we were not to be the first party to try the arête that season. Right along the crests of the two western and across the northern faces of the two eastern teeth—that is to say, along the identical route we proposed to traverse—ran a continuous well-defined line of footmarks. They ended near the bit of hanging rope. Our first conjecture was, that some party from La Grave had been trying the ridge, and had got as far as the top of the westernmost tooth and, not being able to advance further, had returned the way it came, after cutting off the end of the rope as a trophy. That the party, whoever it was, had not got any further, however, was evident at a glance. The snow of the Brèche Zsigmondy was untouched, and we might still hope to be the second party to traverse the whole length of the ridge.

The sunshine on the top was delightful, and it would have been pleasant to have spent some hours there; but time was precious, and at a quarter to ten we turned to face the really serious part of the day's work. Ulrich led, and

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our course lay down a shallow gully that sloped downwards in a direction that, had it been continued far enough, would have taken us nearly straight to the bottom of the brèche. The climbing was easy at first, but the gully ended abruptly in a low wall of rock, and further progress in the same direction was barred. To the left lay, however, another gully forming an oblique angle with the one in which we stood, from which it was separated by a large smooth slab of rock. Here our difficulties began. Almost at once the rocks became extremely steep, the slope averaging, I should think, from 60 to 70 degrees. Yet, had this been all, matters would not have been so bad. The serious part of the business was, that all the rocks of this second gully were ice-coated from top to bottom. The hot sun of the past few days, while it had melted the ice off the rocks of the south face, up which we had toiled in the morning, had been powerless to affect this side of the mountain. I must attempt to describe our situation at this point. We stood at the top of a narrow but steep gully, some 200 feet high, that ran downwards from our feet, not to the Brèche Zsigmondy, which was hidden by the wall of rocks on our right, but straight down the north-east face of the mountain. In fact, from where we stood, we looked down upon the eastern branch of the Glacier de la Meije. In order to get into this gully, however, we had to cross the slab I referred to before, and nowhere on it, or on any of the rocks we passed over, was there any direct hold whatever. Indeed, I may safely say that I cannot remember getting a single good downward grip anywhere on that part of the Meije. Everywhere the rocks slope the wrong way for climbers, more particularly so for those descending. They reminded me somewhat of the lower rocks of the Aiguille du Dru, which, however, are not nearly so steep, and are much firmer. But we were not altogether unprovided for such contingencies, having brought with us 150 feet of spare club rope, as well as certain instruments of torture, known at Chamonix as *pitons*, which we now prepared to use. Ulrich accordingly made his way across the slab and a few feet down the couloir, and tried to work one of these articles into a crack behind a block slightly detached from the main mass. The attempt, however, was a failure, for the crack was too wide, and there were no small stones at hand to wedge the iron in with. But Ulrich Almer is a man of resource. Cutting a piece about three feet long off our spare rope, and tying the ends together so as to form

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a ring, he contrived to force this firmly over the projecting block. Through this ring the rope was passed, and, holding it doubled, we began to advance down the gully. But the rope was not long enough to reach to the bottom, and it was plain that another hold would have to be found. This Ulrich fortunately discovered about 30 feet lower down, on the left side of the gully, where the rocks were freer from ice. Here a *piton* was jammed into a crack, and, the rope being pulled down and readjusted, the difficulty was practically over, as the two ends were just long enough to allow us to get to an easy place. All that was needed was to keep a good hold of the rope and let oneself swing down. In this manner we arrived at the bottom of the couloir, where it widens out on to the slopes of the north face. To the right, and some little distance below us, lay the Brèche Zsigmondy, to gain which we had to make a bend to the right across easy rocks and snow. For the moment all trouble was past, and in a few minutes more we found ourselves on the level floor of the brèche. It was 11.30. A descent of between 250 and 300 feet had taken an hour and three-quarters. I have perhaps made too much of the difficulty of these rocks. The really bad part is only a little over 100 feet in height. Yet I feel convinced that they might fairly be called difficult even when free from ice, and in their then condition I should hesitate to try to descend them without artificial aid. Their extreme smoothness is their most objectionable feature. I will not exactly assert that in drawing our rope after us we had—if the metaphor be not too mixed—burnt our ships. I suppose, if we had been beaten further on, we could have got up those rocks again simply because we 'had to.' But had they formed part of the ordinary route up the mountain they would have turned us back I am convinced. Of course, I am only speaking of them in the state in which we found them. Later in the year the ice, no doubt, would be gone.

The Brèche Zsigmondy, in which we now made a short stay, before preparing to settle the question of the day, is a somewhat remarkable spot. Seen from the Vallon des Etançons, it is a deep, square-cut gash in the ridge, and so straight do the walls and floor seem to be, that it almost looks as if a piece had been cut out of the mountain. The bottom of the depression, from the base of the final peak to the westernmost tooth, is an almost perfectly level stretch of snow nearly a hundred yards long. Should any climber ever be forced to spend a night on the arête—which, for his

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own sake, it is to be hoped he never will—here alone could he find a minimum of shelter. It is, besides, the broadest part of the ridge—at no place narrower than a yard. Viewed from the brèche, the westernmost tooth, now seen end on, appeared a huge wedge set up on the ridge. On the right-hand, or south side, the rocks go down sheer in tiers of cliff for 3,000 feet to the Glacier des Etançons; on the left, or north side, there is a slope of nearly 70° leading down to the Glacier de la Meije, and the face that fronted us is a precipice 80 to 100 feet high, the upper rocks of which overhang. Down this precipice Herren Zsigmondy and Purtscheller had come by the aid of a fixed rope, but to reverse that part of their climb was an impossibility. A high authority has told us that certain phases of mountain-climbing are merely 'an inferior form of gymnastics.' It will need a very superior form of gymnast to get up the rocks that overhang the Brèche Zsigmondy even with a rope—indeed, that type of mountaineer has yet to be developed. Our halt over, we advanced towards the rocks of the westernmost tooth, our excitement rising as we neared them. Fritz Boss, whose knapsack was by this time considerably lighter, had more than recovered his spirits, and announced his opinion by shouting out, 'Es geht! es geht!' I confess I was not so sanguine. On one point, however, there was no room for difference of opinion. If the rocks would 'go' at all, it was at one place, and one place only. Imagine a line drawn straight down the westernmost tooth from the point at which the rope hangs to the bottom of the rocks. A little to the left of such a line would be seen a narrow crack, which, starting from near the base of the crag, runs diagonally upwards towards the left for about fifteen feet or so, and then bends round on to the northern slope of the tooth. The crack is well seen from the top of the Meije itself, but, of course, at that distance it is impossible to judge whether it can be made use of or not. At 12 o'clock we stood at the bottom of the rocks, and it was now or never. The crack is just wide enough to admit the toes of one's boots, and Ulrich contrived to worm himself up to the edge of the north slope, but to get round the corner was at first beyond his power, there being nothing on the other side to lay hold of so as to swing himself round by; and his only course was to press himself against the rocks as hard as possible and try to squeeze round as best he could. Fortunately, just at the corner itself, thanks to some kind providence, the crack broadens a good deal, but above the cliff bulges out in such

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a way as tends to throw the climber off his balance. It is, perhaps, one of those few places where it is a positive advantage to be short; but, little fellow though Ulrich is, he could not manage the corner until he had taken off the spare rope which he was carrying and thrown it down to me. Once on the other side, the difficulties seemed only to begin again. The slope is tremendously steep, the rocks loose and ice-coated, and there is not a good grip to be got anywhere. The place is, indeed, excessively unpleasant for the first man, and those below can give him no help. Boss and I were standing on the snow at the foot of the rocks, while Ulrich, fifteen or twenty feet above our heads, and round the corner, was trying to get a firm hold on the face above him. Had he slipped, the rope must have gone out nearly thirty feet before his fall could have been checked. He cannot be more than ten stone, but whether the rope would stand a strain of ten stone falling thirty feet, is a question I must leave to the committee of the Club on mountaineering equipment to decide. The spot is so extremely nasty for the leader, as well as so sensational, that I was on the point of advising Ulrich to come back, when, at last, after dislodging half a ton or so of loose stones, that went crashing down on to the Glacier de la Meije, he managed to find something that not only held on itself, but also allowed him to hold on, and thus got a few feet higher, where, without being by any means *ganz sicher*, he was able to get some pull on my rope. I then followed, and, after some struggles, aided by pulling from above, got round the corner on to the edge of the slope. The place is bad enough for anybody, but, of course, much less so for the second man. It was now Boss's turn; but the knapsack was terribly in his way, and I found I should have to get both hands on the rope in order to help him. There was nothing for it but to turn round in half-sitting posture, grasp the rope with both hands, and haul. I can confidently recommend the view of La Grave and the valley of the Romanche to be seen from this coign of vantage; but it is too theatrical for people troubled with weak heads. A little further up Ulrich finally got good hold, and we were out of our difficulties, and in a minute or two later reached the crest of the aréte. We had taken three-quarters of an hour from the Brèche Zsigmondy in climbing not more than a hundred feet, of which, perhaps, thirty only are exceedingly ticklish work. Putting aside all such *mauvais pas* where there are permanent ropes, I cannot remember any one place that has ever impressed me so much. There is a

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well-known bad bit on the Dru which it reminded me of in some respects—I mean the place where, by the aid of a rope fixed above him, the climber swings round a projecting corner of rock to safety on its further side. I do not know how that bit was negotiated before the rope was fastened, but the spot I have been attempting to describe is quite as hard for the first man, and three times as sensational.

It was 12.45, then, when we stood on the top of the westernmost tooth and looked along the ridge at the climb that was still in store for us. The situation is a striking one. On the left was the slope of 70° up which we had just come, on the right the continuous wall of precipice that forms the southern face of the mountain, at our backs was the cliff that overhangs the Brèche Zsigmondy, and in front of us lay the sharpest knife-edge I have ever seen. The mystery of the footmarks I spoke of before was now cleared up: a party had indeed been on the ridge—not of men, but of chamois.

Up to this point I have not sought to conceal that we met with very considerable difficulties both in the descent to, and the ascent from, the brèche—short in themselves, but serious in quality. Once, however, that the top of the westernmost tooth was gained, the character of the climb altered entirely. The ridge is not the place to play tricks on, of course; but as I have conscientiously stated that the climb hitherto had, at least in one part, been exceedingly hard, I feel equally bound to say that the rest of it was as exceedingly easy. Indeed, there is very little more to tell, except that we had a delightful exhilarating walk along the high-level route that connects the two peaks. In a few minutes we gained the second gap, which, though plainly enough marked when seen from below, is scarcely perceptible from above, and from it it was a mere stroll to the top of the second tooth. The rocks of the eastern face of this elevation are steep—nearly perpendicular, in fact—but they gave us no trouble to speak of, and at five minutes past one we stood in the third gap. So far, we had kept to the edge of the arête, but the two teeth, the crests of which we had just passed over, differ entirely from the two more easterly ones. These latter, as may be seen from Signor Sella's photograph, resemble the central peak itself in miniature, and, like it, overhang the Glacier des Etançons. The most direct course is clearly to cross their northern slopes, which, moreover, are much less steeply inclined than those of the two western teeth. This was the route taken

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by the Austrians, no less than by the chamois, and we profited by their example. The advantage of making this expedition early in the season now became strikingly evident. There was just enough snow on the rocks to give us good foothold, and what there was was in as perfect a state as it was possible to wish for. The inclination of the face is about 50°, and to cross it step-cutting was needed; but a slash or two with the adze end of the axe was all that was wanted for each step, and ten minutes later we stood in the fourth gap. A repetition of the same process followed, and in another quarter of an hour we reached the fifth gap, at the foot of the central peak. Here the climber must once more keep close to the edge of the precipice; but the rocks are easy, and, going up the last bit with a rush, the top of the central peak was gained at 1.45—exactly four hours after leaving the western summit.

Of the climb I have only one or two words to add. I repeat, I may have—though unwittingly—exaggerated the difficulties of the descent to, and the ascent from, the brèche, but of the rest of the traverse I have only one opinion. The beauty and grandeur of the situation are undeniable, but I must clearly state my impression that this part of the ridge, when in good condition, is nothing less than a gigantic fraud, from the point of view of difficulty. Indeed, I cannot remember a single difficult step between the top of the westernmost tooth and the top of the Pic Central; our time between those points—barely an hour—is the best proof of my assertion. The singular, almost unique, appearance of the ridge must, I suppose, be held accountable for the effect it produced upon the earlier climbers. Of course, I readily admit that the conditions in which we found the mountain were very favourable, perhaps exceptional, and that later in the year another traveller will find ice on the northern slopes where we found snow; but even then it would be always possible to advance by passing over the tops of the two eastern teeth. On this point I am able to speak with the less hesitation, as I notice that Herr Purtscheller has already expressed the same opinion. On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that later in the year there would be this compensating advantage—that the rocks of the final peak would be free from ice. Still, taking the ridge from west to east, as we did, I am inclined to think that an expedition pretty early in the year has the best chance of success.

In the short account of the Austrian climbers' ascent given

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in the 'Alpine Journal' for November 1885, Herr Otto Zsigmondy commits himself to the opinion that 'the eastern ridge would become the easiest route up the Meije, if a rope ladder were to be fixed to facilitate the descent from the fourth'—or as I have called it the westernmost tooth—'and another rope of 40 mètres on the Grand Pic itself.' While devoutly hoping that these aids to mountaineering made easy will never be associated with this side of the great mountain, I entirely share Herr Zsigmondy's views. That is to say, I assert that the ascent by the arête would then be beset with less actual difficulty, in the strictest sense of the term, than that by the ordinary route. But that it will ever become as popular, or rival, not to say supersede, the latter, I must beg leave to doubt. To begin with, the very much longer time required for the ascent by the eastern arête is against it. Zsigmondy and Purtscheller, starting from La Grave, took from 1.50 A.M. to 4.15 P.M.—or 14 hrs. 25 m.—to reach the top of the Meije by the eastern arête, and granting that by the help of fixed ropes 3 hrs. could be saved, and the ascent made in say 11½ hrs., how does this compare with the very liberal allowance of 8 hrs. 25 m. which the compilers of the 'Guide du Haut-Dauphiné' give as the time up the south face from the Chatelleret hut? The establishment of a hut at the Rocher de l'Aigle would no doubt bring the two routes into greater equality, in point of time, but even then there are more formidable objections to the new route to be kept in view. For it cannot, I think, be doubted that the route by the eastern arête is the more likely of the two to suffer by changes in the weather. This must be the conviction forced upon one if the experience of the earlier climbers is to go for anything. An instance that occurred last summer in support of this view I will detail a little further on. Moreover the risk run, in case of bad weather coming on, would be infinitely greater on the ridge than on the rocks of the south face. Even a moderately strong wind would make matters extremely awkward on that knife-edge, and what would happen to travellers caught there in a storm it is not pleasant to think. We may therefore hope that this side of the mountain may escape such useless desecration as the fixing up of permanent ropes and ladders would mean, and without these inventions of the evil one the route by the ridge will always present features of difficulty superior to anything on the Etançons side.

After a rest of half an hour on the Pic Central we turned to descend; the rocks were glazed and gave us little trouble,

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but once on the Glacier du Tabuchet we made rapid progress, and reached La Grave at 5.30 P.M., a very much earlier hour than any of us had at one time dared to hope—after an expedition of 15 hrs. including halts. Arrived there our difficulties were not over, for in planning our attack on the Meije I had neglected to take into account the course of political events, and the eve of July 14 is not a suitable occasion to make one's appearance in La Grave after a day in the mountains; more especially when one's bed has not been bespoken beforehand. The village was *en fête* to celebrate the anniversary of the declaration of the French Republic, and it was long ere we could be attended to. The guides, I believe, were accommodated in a hay loft; I received a shakedown in the salon. The next morning we crossed the Brèche de la Meije to La Bérarde, and reached that place early in the afternoon to find the little inn now filled with climbers of both sexes. Amongst others I met Monsieur E. Piaget, of the Lyons section of the French Alpine Club, who was kind enough to give me some details of an attempt made in 1885 to climb the Meije by the eastern arête. It appears that one of his guides, Louis Faure of La Grave, who seems to be an enterprising sort of man, started from that place with two porters, and reached the rocks overhanging the Brèche Zsigmondy, at as early an hour as nine in the morning. The mountain was in good condition, and no great difficulties were encountered, but the porters refused to descend into the brèche, and the party accordingly was forced to return the way it came.

As affording a good illustration of what I said before as to the way in which changes in the weather affect the eastern arête, I will bring my remarks on the Meije to a close by giving some particulars from a letter I lately received from M. Piaget. A short time after our expedition, that climber slept out on the Rocher de l'Aigle, with the object of trying the eastern arête, and reached the top of the Pic Central at 5 A.M. Fresh snow had, however, fallen since we had made our traverse, and the arête was heavily corniced, a state of things that, coupled with a terribly high wind, forced the travellers to beat a retreat.

In conclusion I will add a few words in regard to La Bérarde; not indeed that I can claim to know much about it on the strength of only a fortnight's stay, but to do so is at least a convenient form of recording my own impressions. Of the district generally I am not qualified to speak.

Now that the road over the Col du Galibier is finished,

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and one can drive from St. Michel du Maurienne on the Mont Cenis Railway all the way to La Grave, I should personally much prefer to reach the Pelvoux group by that route, instead of by the usual one by Grenoble and the valley of the Vénéon. That the stony treeless slopes of that valley affect travellers in different ways is clear, but for my part I can remember the greater part of the road between Venosc and La Bérarde for little else but stones and desolation. At the latter place the prospect is not so absolutely repulsive, but its great drawback in my eyes—I cannot say how it may appear to others—is the almost complete absence of short walks, and consequent want of occupation for the off days; ours, indeed, were mostly spent in playing bowls, or in superintending the building of an *annexe* to M. Tairraz's establishment. Some of the other valleys of the district, I am told by those that know them, are as rich and beautiful as this valley is the reverse, but they lie at some distance from the great peaks, and no one place can compete with La Bérarde as a convenient climbing centre.

Still, all things may have their uses in this world, even the stones of La Bérarde. They at all events may serve as barriers to arrest the inrush of those that have destroyed, at least for us, so many better known haunts. Indeed it is difficult to see what can take people to La Bérarde who are not Alpine climbers or Alpine artists. Once above the snow-line, however, the unattractive valley foregrounds are forgotten. Such mountain forms as the Ecrins, the Ailefroide, the Meije, need only be known to be appreciated as they deserve, and for their sake the climbing public might surely give the place a fair trial. But to many the great attraction of the spot must be its comparative seclusion. It will be long, I imagine, before the Tête de la Maye is crowned with a counterpart of the inns that disfigure the Faulhorn and the Flégère; or the Gaspards and the Rodiers tempt unwary crowds to brave the perils of the *mauvais pas* of the Glacier du Pilatte. Here then the evicted mountaineer who has fled from Grindelwald and Zermatt, in the fear that 'Philistines may jostle,' may find a retreat as yet untouched by the hand of the spoiler, and in the roar of the Vénéon forget his sorrows, and feel the great mountains have not lost their charm.

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