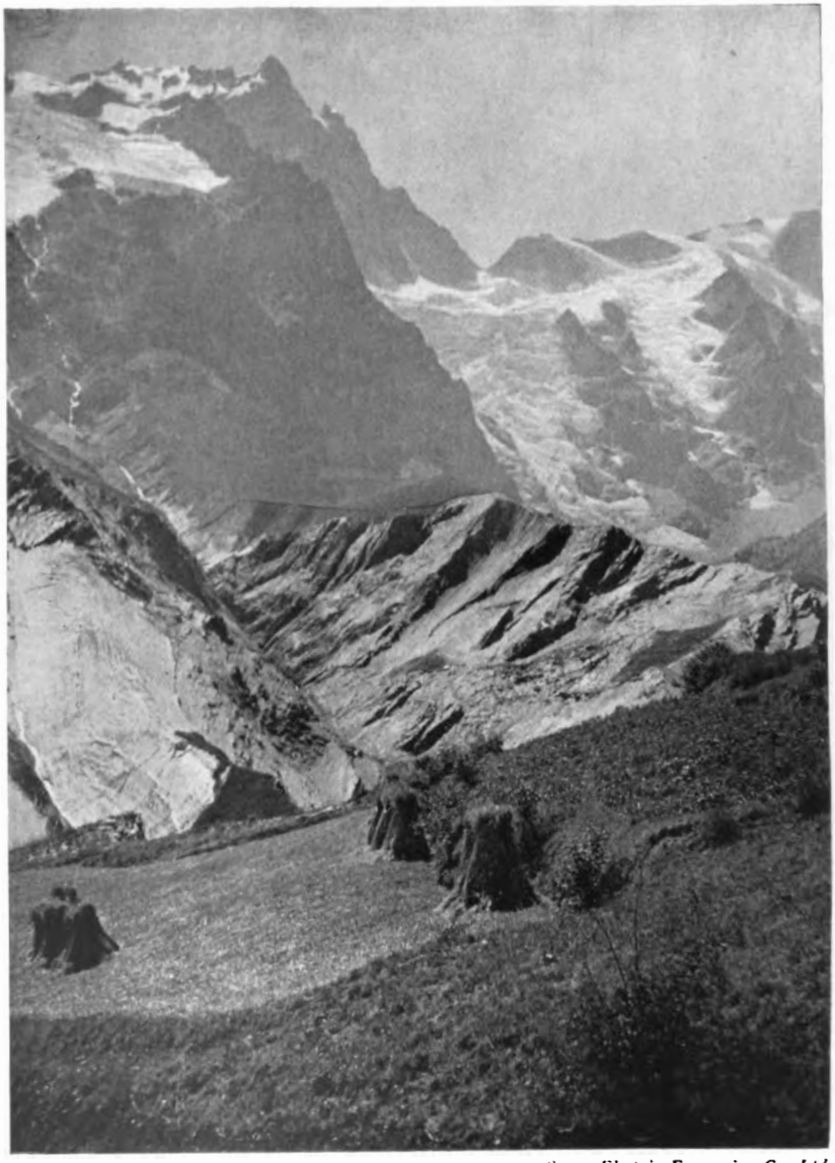

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THE MEIJE, FROM ABOVE LA GRAVE.

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THE

ALPINE JOURNAL.

NOVEMBER 1907.

(No. 178.)

Dauphiné in 1906: a First Visit.

By J. H. CLAPHAM.

(Read before the Alpine Club, April 9, 1907.)

IT is written that 'apology is a desperate habit,' so I will make no more preliminary excuse than this—that though I am asking you to listen to an account of something which to me was very new and delightful, I fear that it contains no new thing worth mentioning from the mountaineer's point of view. I am telling you a familiar sort of tale—how I fell in love with the peaks of a certain district; how I planned a visit; how after a time the plan was carried out; and how the place and the peaks that I had been studying and dreaming over seemed when I came to put them to the test.

An ex-president has said that every true climber can fix the moment when first the mountains set their mark on him and made him their disciple. Those are not his words; but it comes to that. I confess to having explored my memory more than once in somewhat morbid fashion to find the day and the hour of my Alpine conversion, for I am eager to conform to the faith as delivered by ex-presidents; but I have failed. Failed, that is, so far as the mountains in general are concerned. But I am proud to say that I can state precisely the hour at which I fell in love with the high peaks of Dauphiné. It was on Saturday, August 16, 1902, between 12.30 and 1.5 P.M., probably at about 12.55. We were on top of the Grande Motte in the Tarentaise; late in the day, I admit, but it was one of those days when the whole circle of the horizon is clear at noon and the surface of the upper ice and snow melts and glistens everywhere under the sun. Just over the way were the harsh and rather forbidding slopes of the Grande Casse—alternate streaks of snow and disintegrated black shale. Away in the S.W. the walls of the massed

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Dauphiné peaks seemed to rise perpendicular from their deep-cut valleys. From that moment their claim on my imagination was established.

Plans were laid for an approach in the orthodox mountaineering fashion from the Maurienne valley over one of the Cols of the Aiguilles d'Arves range to the Lautaret road and La Grave. But that befell which dissolved these plans, and in the end I came into La Grave on August 8, 1906, not down the hills with a pack on my back, but up the main high road in an extra-powerful hired motor car with ladies and luggage. We had been forced to bribe the motor men who ply on the Lautaret road to make an additional journey, and that at night, because horses were not to be got at Bourg d'Oisans. So we sat on hot seats and sniffed the mingled scents of petrol and the wild lavender that grows among the fallen rocks of the Combe de Malaval, as the motor grunted uphill through the night. And in the end we were rather glad that we had been forced to do it.

Next day we began three weeks of almost uninterrupted fine weather, with a little training climb of no great interest to any one but ourselves. But the weather should be of interest to others, for from all that I could learn it was one of the finest and dryest seasons that Dauphiné has known for very many years. They told us there had been no rain worth mentioning since April or May. Most of the little fields were sadly parched and the peasants were looking forward to a meagre harvest and a lean winter. At the Chalet de l'Alpe, above Villard d'Arène, old Mme. Castillan, the keeper's wife—upon whose name be peace, for she can cook—told us there was less grass and more cattle than she had ever known, and that the herds would have to go down long before the usual time. Only those pastures or meadows that lay on slopes made of the grey-black shale, that crops out and glistens at the N. base of the Meije and along the Latuaret road, seemed fresh and green, and they only when the tilt of the strata was such as to allow accumulated water to ooze out in the little swampy springs that are a feature of that formation.

In consequence of all this, a good deal of the knowledge one had collated from climbers' guides and the like needed correction on the spot. We soon learnt that the phrase 'snow gully' meant, in August 1906, either a funnel of clean rock or, more probably, a funnel partly filled with stones and *débris*, with slithery black ice underneath. The Col des Ecrins, for instance, was clean rock for perhaps a third of the way down, ice and rubble for the rest. The Col du Clot des Cavales was all

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rubble, with a very little snow and ice at the bottom. The Brèche de la Meije was very icy, and so were the slopes to the Meije ridge on the north. There was an arête of solid ice on the Montagne des Agneaux, which we reluctantly left alone. The icicles of the Glacier Carré did not exist. Indeed the poor little glacier barely filled its shell and looked ridiculously like a pocket-handkerchief laid out on the rock to dry. As for the hanging glacier of the Ecrins, if it had not retired for the season, I must have looked for it in the wrong place, or else my powers of observation must have been so interfered with by circumstances to which I will refer shortly, that I passed and failed to recognise it.

We had our first experience of the state of the higher peaks on August 11, when the men of the party—Mr. C. F. Bennett, Mr. C. A. Werner, and myself—went to look for the S. Aiguille d'Arves. It is rather a long walk from La Grave, especially if you take a wrong turning early in the day among the villages, as we did, and get the full power of the morning sun in the dry and weary land on the way up towards the Col Lombard, where the rocks seem to be made of a kind of red clinker. Arrived under the peak, we turned on to the broken rock at its S. foot before reaching the Col, as one easily can, and looked about for the 'snow-filled couloir' of the 'Climber's Guide.' Various rubble-filled couloirs came our way, but very little snow. However, the route would be hard to miss, so long as one keeps close under the steep part of the S. face; and in time we struck the notch on the S.E. arête in which the gully ends. We had hardly been *in* the gully at all, except for the last 50 ft. or so, having worked up most of the way on the rough and easy rocks of its right bank. The gully contained a little snow and ice at the top; but that was a hindrance rather than a help. When we came to the notch, where one passes on to the E. face to find the 'Mauvais pass,' we met a very horrible thing—a red arrow painted on the rocks, pointing round the rather ugly-looking but not really difficult corner which hides the stiff bit from any one standing in the notch. It was helpful, but one would rather not have been helped in that way. There was a suggestion of some Teutonic brain about that arrow, the kind of brain that has conceived the notion of filling the woods and daubing the rocks of the Harz Mountains, especially the Brocken, with arrows red, white, and green, sloped at ingenious angles to indicate contours and facilitate mapless and compassless and thoughtless sight-seeing. (I wonder if many members of the Club have climbed the Brocken, by the way? One *can* climb

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it in a *char à bancs*, and dinner in the excellent hotel on the top costs 3 m., or 3.50 if you take no wine.) The rest of the climb has no special history. One gets up the stiff bit, gets over the eaves of the gable crest of the mountain, by the help of a fixed rope (which at present has *not* got a ring at the end of it, as it seems the old rope had); then one climbs a straight and perfectly easy crack, and lastly one walks along the roof-tree of the gable to the summit. It was late in the day and there were a few clouds about, so that I lost the view of the Tarentaise which I had been promising myself on the way up, and only got the view of the central Aiguille, which, however, is almost as fine in its way as that of the Grépon from the Charmoz. I am sorry to say I have not a picture of it, for the photographer was slightly out of sorts and apathetic that day, and the light was bad.

Another instance of the effect of the dry season on the climbs came in our way ten days later, on Tuesday, 21. The whole party was at that time established with Mme. Castillan at the Chalet de l'Alpe, and we were prowling about the glaciers and peaks of the neighbourhood. Something drew us towards the Brèche Charrière at the head of the Glacier de la Plate des Agneaux. I think it was the curt notice of the 'Climber's Guide'—'a steep snow couloir, about 1,650 ft. long (stones fall in it).' We did not mean to cross it to La Bérarde, but we had vague notions of cutting up those 1,650 ft. and looking over the other side. The Plate des Agneaux is a stony glacier, even stonier than the Italian Miage, I am inclined to think; but about half-way up you mount a lateral moraine, such as I have only seen in Dauphiné—straight, clean-cut, sharp-edged, untrampled, running uphill for a mile or so, and generally just wide enough to walk on, though one must keep one's eyes on one's boots. This brings one in time to what you might call the apse of the glacier, above an ice-fall, where it lies flat and fairly free of stones, surrounded by a half-circle of steep reddish walls of rock. The Brèche is a true Dauphiné type. It looks as if an angry giant had bitten a piece out of the ridge, while it was still soft. From it to the floor of the apse runs that 'steep snow couloir, about 1,650 ft. long' (in which stones fall).

The local men told us later that it is seldom crossed now, and never so late in the season. I should be much interested to know if any more experienced member of the Club has crossed it in August, and if so, how he found it. Certainly it looked uncrossable enough on August 21 last—it was just

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LES PERINS FROM THE PIC DE NEIGE CORDIER.

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an evil stone-shoot, full of grey ice, polished by falling rubble, with hardly a bit of clean snow in all its 1,650 ft. Between 9.0 and 10.0 we saw and heard the big stones rumbling down it. It was about 8.0 when we got to the foot.

A council of war had decided at sight that it would not do; but there seemed a possible alternative route. To the right of the gully, as you face it, stands a great red tower, detached from the main wall. From the point where this tower abuts on the wall we fancied that a bit of steep traversing might bring us to the Brèche; but I must hasten to say that we never tested our theory, except through field-glasses. We worked up to the right round the base of the tower, on easy glacier-worn slabs, and then turned left into a little gully behind it, leading up to the point where it joins the wall. The gully was snowy at first; but it soon changed to ice, and as a few stones came down there also we gave it up. Perhaps we were ill-advised to do so, as the stones were not serious; but I think it was sound mountaineering. So we got nowhere in particular; but learnt a good deal, having 'powtered up and down a bit and had a rattling day.' Also we were home in time for a glorious bathe under a waterfall, in the reasonably warm stream that comes down past the Chalet de l'Alpe from the Col d'Arsine.

I missed one of the most interesting climbs that our party did from the Chalet de l'Alpe, the traverse of the Pic de Neige Cordier from the Gl. des Agneaux to the Gl. d'Arsine. The misfortune of the mountains had fastened on me, and I got up that morning to act much as the navvy acted in Kipling's story 'My Sunday at Home.' I made a start all the same; but I rolled in my gait, and when I sat down and dropped my ice-axe and looked at it, it would *not* keep still, but behaved sinuously, for all the world like Aaron's rod. So I decided that I was not fit for a climb, and looked about for a sunny place and curled up to sleep on the stones, while the other men did the mountain. They had a great day and superb views; for the peak, standing at a point where three ridges join, is very attractive to any one who wants to learn the country. This made me sulky when they got back, although I was physically convalescent.

Omitting a few minor excursions from the Chalet de l'Alpe, I should like to say something about the Chamoissière. It is but a little one, like the city of Zoar or the less respectable baby in fiction; but it stands admirably, has three peaks, and some very attractive rocks along its crest, as indeed most Dauphiné mountains have. And since it rises straight above

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the Chalet de l'Alpe it is available for experiment. Moreover, Mr. Coolidge said that the central peak was still unclimbed. I see from the 'Journal' for November 1906 that Messrs. O. K. Williamson and H. Symons went up it, rather more than a month before our party, and, like ourselves, found a cairn on top. I said the Chamoissière was available for experiment. Certainly we experimented rather freely. We were three men and two ladies. The day was Monday, August 20. Getting off about 5.0, we first tried to make our way up the great rocky ridge that comes down northward from the W. summit towards the Chalet de l'Alpe, with a view to traversing all three peaks. Careful reconnoitring would have shown us that it was *not* a good way up. After a very interesting scramble—which I do not for one moment regret—we found ourselves on top of a big tower, about 7.0 o'clock, and had to come down again. After that we got down from the ridge altogether, losing a good deal of time of course, and struck across slopes of scree and snow on the N. face of the mountain to the foot of a very obvious gully that descends from a point a little W. of the central summit. Our route must have been almost identical with Mr. Williamson's—up the gully, with a little real climbing at first, and then on to the easy broken face on its left bank to the ridge. On the summit the ladies stayed to rest, and we had a most excellent climb to the E. and highest peak (10,230 ft.) It is a narrow though not particularly difficult ridge most of the way, and it has to be climbed, not walked. We took as nearly as possible two hours out and back, going steadily.

Then followed what I fear was a fool's experiment, though no harm came of it—a descent on the S. side of the ridge into the glen that descends eastward from one of the most preposterously artificial-looking of all the Dauphiné breaches, the 'Brèche Gaspard.' It was a fool's experiment because we had ladies with us, and had never seen that side of the mountain except from above. Rubble and stone slopes were the chief features of the place; though I had five or ten bad minutes when we came to the top of one of the rock walls, of which the books had warned us, and did not at first see our way down. There was of course no danger; but one did not want to take the ladies up again. However, an easy way turned up after a little seeking; and thenceforward there was nothing but sheer boredom of moraine and stone-shoots and rubble-covered turf, until we struck the Romanche, just below the point where it leaves the glacier to curl round the base of the Chamoissière, back to the Chalet de l'Alpe. The party

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broke up at the finish, for parts of it were tiring, and got home in sections between 6.20 and 7.45.

Two days later it broke up more definitely. Some of the sacks and bags were put on shepherd-back and crossed over with the ladies by the 'Sentier des Crevasses,' the track that winds along the steep hillside facing the E. end of the Meije group, to the Col du Lautaret. A few hours earlier—at 5.10 A.M.—the men had started for La Bérarde, the Ecrins, and the Meije. We took the ordinary route, the Col du Clot des Cavales, and were greatly helped by the improvements in the track that have been made, on both sides of the ridge, during the last year or two. Dropping into the notorious Vallon des Etançons, we met Jean-Baptiste Rodier, whom we had commissioned by letter to find good men for us, on his way up to the Promontoire hut. He had found Dévouassoud Gaspard and Pierre Richard, who were to meet us at La Bérarde. I think I ought to record, to the credit of Dauphiné, that I did not find the Vallon des Etançons so insufferably stony or the site of La Bérarde so bare and barren as the books had led me to expect. There are some grassy levels in the Vallon, full of the scent of juniper, that I for one found very attractive. Perhaps it was by comparison with the rather windy and treeless pastures of the alp of Villard d'Arène, where we had spent nearly a week before crossing the Clot des Cavales. As for La Bérarde itself, with its little patchwork fields, its few pines and birches and dwarf alders, it seemed positively a woodland haunt. We got down among the houses between 11.30 and 12, and rushed away at once to bathe in the Vénéon, at a place where a big projecting rock makes one of those swinging backwaters where one can sit in the milky water without too great risk of being ground among the stones, and where a jolly bit of wood—birch, if I remember right—made a pleasant shade from the sun.

After lunch and some idle sleep on the grass and tea, we started for a late afternoon stroll to the Carrelet hut, along by the Vénéon, 'deepening its voice with the deepening of the night,' while the last of the daylight fell on the rocky mass of the Ailefroide and the equally splendid snow and ice clad mass of Les Bans. Some say the Carrelet hut is too low, but I cannot agree. True, it is but an hour and a half above La Bérarde, is practically in the valley bottom, and still among the pines. But those of us who have had the ill-luck to be born into the days of high huts may be thankful when we are forced and are able, now and again, to make our climbs from the pines, up through all the mountain zones, and down

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through them all to the pines once more. At any rate, as I look back over the not very many seasons of my climbing experience, three climbs seem to stand out above the rest, not in point of difficulty, but because of their completeness and the lasting satisfaction that the memory of them yields. They are all of this class—the Grivola from Cogne, the Dent d'Hérens from Prarayé, and now the Ecrins.

We rolled off the sleeping shelf in the Carrelet at about 12.45, and at 1.30 scrambled across the stream that runs below it and up into the woods. We were five men and two lanterns, going rather harder than I liked up some sort of steep track among the trees. There remain in my mind the usual blurred and sleepy memories—of strides up over big stones, brushings against low boughs, places where the track was sandy, places where it was gravelly, shifting lights, the sound of water, of breathing, of feet, of a word now and again about the pace or about the sweat. Then more air, an easier slope, the turf of an alp underfoot, a looming of the Ecrins far ahead under the stars: we were above the first line of valley bluffs. After that, moraine for an hour or so. When we got on to the edge of the Glacier du Vallon, under the cliffs of the Pic Coolidge, the stars were paling, and there was a band of faint blue above the peaks behind us, shading upwards into pink. In the cold grey light that comes before the dawn we stopped to rope. A little to our right lay a fan of *débris* at the foot of the rocks. While the men fumbled with their rope, which had got into a discreditable mess, there came a grumbling roar above the cliffs, and then a spout of stones over them. The men ran and tripped me up in their rope coils, and I fell and hurt my thumb. Their defence was that one or more stones dropped close to us, but as I saw none I remained for a time sceptical and rather cross.

At 5.0 we stopped to eat under the rocks of the Fifre, and about 6.0 the level sunlight struck us through the Col des Avalanches. Far away below lines of blue grey hills stood up against it. The rocks of the peak itself were in wonderful condition, the chimneys and gullies dry and clean. I think I am strictly correct in saying that we never set foot on snow or ice between leaving the névé at the Col des Avalanches and striking the final ridge at the head of the snow gully that runs down between the Pic Lory and the main summit. Certainly we crossed no glacier, and, as I have said, I never saw one. At the time I did not know that there ought to be one. Comparing our route subsequently with the books, I can only suppose that we crossed where the glacier normally

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is to the rock rib on the right of the snow gully, and that while on that rib I neglected to look about for the glacier or its site. A stone was the main cause of this reprehensible omission, for as we were crossing to the rock rib aforesaid we heard the stones coming down and hurried; but I was last on the rope, and failed to cross the fire zone in time. Fortunately the stone had lost some of its pace by cannoning on the rocks just above me. Also it hit me very nearly where one is meant to be hit, and so did no great damage. But until we got on to the summit ridge my attention was all given to hand-holds, foot-holds, and the bruised part of my person. The ridge was in excellent order—a walk for the most part—and we got to the highest point at 8.25. The views were so good and the day so fine that we stayed there until 9.50.

A direct descent on the N. face was out of the question, for the schrund this year was huge and the slopes were icy. So we took the alternative route, along the N.E. arête and then down and across the face just beneath it, keeping as far as possible to the rocks and only being occasionally forced to cross a gully. For this one was glad; for the gullies were full of hard white ice, with a high glaze, of a kind that I have seldom met. However there were steps in them, another party having been up that way, and I imagine that the difficulties of the route were at their minimum. Still it needs careful climbing, so that we took about an hour and forty minutes from the summit to the snow above the Brèche des Ecrins. There was no true schrund there and no difficulties on the névé. Exactly at noon we halted for a drink at the top of the Col des Ecrins. At 12.20 we started down the rock-wall of the gully, and at 1.30 we halted again to drink and look about us on the floor of the Glacier de la Bonne Pierre. The view of the Ecrins from that side is stupendous, as all who have seen it well know. The summit is hidden; but the cap of the Dôme de Neige rises with a perfectly pure outline, above 4,000 to 5,000 feet of precipitous walls and pinnacles of red rock, which, so far as I know, no one has ever tried to climb.

After this last halt we ran down to La Bérarde, and got in at three o'clock.

There remained two more possible climbing days and the Meije. We had taken the Ecrins first, because we had fallen out of love with the Meije somewhat, while at La Grave. It is not exactly hackneyed, but it was certainly frequented in 1906. Dévouassoud Gaspard said he thought it had been

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traversed five-and-twenty times before we went; and I have no doubt he was within the mark. Very soon, I fear, it may have to become the scene of duffer-hoisting—if it has not already fallen to that depth. I myself saw some one lowered rather like a sack of potatoes, by Joseph Turc and his son, down into the Brèche Zsigmondy, and heard his shrill protestations that he was assuredly going to fall, as he was hoisted up the other side. The tongue in which he called I will no more mention than Gilbert would mention the name of the discontented sugar-broker who 'waltzed from his abode in Fulham Road, through Brompton to the city;' for he gave me champagne before the lowering began, and I feel I have betrayed my salt enough already.

When we got to the Chatelleret hut, the day after the Ecrins, a queer film of cloud had spread over the sky and the wind blew in spiteful jets. Then the film touched the Meije and made it look hateful, as a little rain fell from the low grey roof. It is never beautiful on that side; the ridge lacks a proper culminating point and the Glacier Carré is to my mind unsightly. Our men suggested a night at the Chatelleret, as we were bound to get to the high road next day, and the weather looked as if it might rob us of the Meije. So we boulder-scrambled and made soup and tea. As we ate and drank, the film broke in the S., rolled up to the N., and left the sky clear. Gaspard proposed that we should push on to the Promontoire hut at once. We agreed with clamour. He led us off about 7.0 o'clock, at full speed, and full of soup and ham, uphill over the stones. Until about 8.0 we managed to do without the lanterns. Then we lit up on the slabs under the Etançons glacier, and had a glorious half-hour getting over the uneven ice by lantern light. A broken glacier has a monstrous and distorted look by night. It fascinated me so much, that I sat and watched it for some time, after we got up to the hut, and before we turned in.

The weather had rearranged itself completely when we started at 3.30 next morning. Everything was in our favour—firm dry rock, no wind, the party in good condition—magnificent views away to the S., as one waited for one's turn to move whilst working up the great red and yellow wall above the Promontory and the big Couloir. Assuredly the climb deserves all that has been said of it. We halted for twenty minutes at the Pyramide Duhamel, where the Promontory abuts on the wall, and again at the left-hand bottom corner—if that is a legitimate mountaineering phrase—of the Glacier

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THE RIDGE OF THE MEIJE.

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Carré. By ten minutes past seven we were on the top, and we stayed there nearly an hour. The views had been magnificent from the Ecrins two days earlier; but from the Meije they were, I think, the finest summit views I have ever had. About the foreground and the nearer distances there was nothing uncommon, only the clear outlines and strong, sharp shadows. The long distances were what attracted us. In the W. the sky was partly filmed over. Northward and eastward and southward every valley from us to Mont Blanc, Monte Rosa, and Monte Viso, was full of thin blue vapour, the shadows and mists of the morning, and in a few valleys —notably about Mont Blanc itself—small masses of low cumulus were lying at rest.

After that, down the wall into the Breach and along the ridge to the top of the Central Summit, the Finger of God. So many parties had been that way before that there was a well-cut staircase on the ice slope from the lowest rocks beyond the summit to the névé above the Rocher de l'Aigle. I suppose it saved us an hour or two, but it reminded me too much of a similar thing on the easy way up the Jungfrau to be entirely welcome. We spent one of the saved hours idling and photographing at the Rocher de l'Aigle; jumped a crevasse or two on the upper part of the Tabuchet Glacier; crossed the ridge of the Bec de l'Homme; ran down into the forest of Villard d'Arène, and were on the high road at 3.30. As it was early we felt bound to walk the four or five miles uphill from Villard d'Arène to the Lautaret hotel, but the walk was a bore.

Two days later I was swinging downhill on the front bench of a *char-à-bancs*, watching the Meije change shape as we moved along its base; and when we passed noisily into the long, cool, lighted tunnels through which the road runs, fancying myself on De Quincey's mail coach as it galloped through the aisles of his dream cathedral. Then the trees became more varied and the sun hotter. Some of the hillsides were turning red and gold. In time we came to Bourg d'Oisans in its long rock-walled basin, and thence we slipped down in the evening on the noisy little steam tram, through the village streets, the new power stations along the Romanche, and a flaming sunset to Vizille. And so to bed and the end of the season.

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