



Photo, G. Gugliemina.

FROM SUMMIT OF PIC LUIGI AMEDEO.

LE COL DIT INFRANCHISSABLE.

By R. W. LLOYD.

(Read before the Alpine Club, March 4, 1924.)

THERE is one drawback to retaining year after year the services of a great guide such as Joseph Pollinger is universally admitted to be, and that is one must be constantly on the look-out for expeditions worthy of him. The harder they are, always within the limits of sound mountaineering, the better is he pleased. It has been my privilege to have witnessed some very finished work on his part, and some of our expeditions you have been good enough to permit me to describe from this desk.

Many of our expeditions belong to the Mont Blanc Group, which, to my mind, offers as difficult rock and ice climbs as will satisfy the most ambitious. The last expedition which I described was the ascent of the French side of the Col de Bionnassay. During our descent on the Italian side we had, right at our feet, the long and narrow gorge in the bed of which flows the Italian Miage Glacier. At the head of this glacier is the well-known Col de Miage, while three lateral glaciers descend to its left bank, up two of which lie the Dôme and Rocher du Mont Blanc routes to Mont Blanc. The right bank consists of one of the mightiest walls in the whole Alps, over which, so far, only one passage has been made. This col bears the somewhat anomalous name of Col Infranchissable, but, as it has been already crossed twice—in both cases by English parties, viz. by Mr. Eccles in 1870 and Mr. Milman in 1871, led in both cases by a famous Chamonix guide, Michel Payot, who died only the other day—some stickler for accuracy has tacked on the word *dit*, making it thus ‘Col *said to be* impassable.’ Such cols are certainly a diminishing number. The name alone is a defiance, and so, as we looked at the steep hanging couloir indicating the line of passage, I said to myself ‘There is a job for Joseph’; but as the others had ascended it, we would descend it. This was in 1919.

I will here leave my narrative for a moment and ask your permission to read the excellent description of this col by Mr. A. Milman, who made the second ascent with M. C. Payot in 1871 (‘A.J.’ v. 277–8).

' From the Head of the Glacier de Miage to Contamines, by the Col "Dit Infranchissable."

' Immediately upon the right or west as you descend from the Col de Miage to the base of the great ice-falls, an abrupt and formidable wall of rock rises precipitously from the Glacier de Miage, and separates it from the head of the Glacier de Trélatête, a narrow and broken arête of rock, which here and there gives place to an almost perpendicular couloir of snow, extends from the Aiguille de Miage on to the Aiguille de Trélatête, and forms the crest of this ridge or ice-shed. On the face of these wild precipices—strange as it may appear—a silver-mine (*argentifère*) bearing was worked for many years, chiefly by speculators from Cormayeur, until the smallness of the gain and the large loss of life among the miners, owing to constant avalanches and falling rocks, compelled its abandonment. All that is now left to mark the site of these strange operations are the crushed and broken remnants, at different levels, of three wooden cabins, with occasional strands of rope and iron rivets, by aid of which the men pursued their perilous occupation. Every trace of the dangerous track, that once just faintly indicated the direction which must be followed to reach the mines, has long been worn away, and the cabins themselves will probably soon disappear under the combined influence of storm and frost. The most elevated of these huts is perched at an enormous height above the glacier, and beyond it, as is believed, no one had ever ascended. Last year, however, Michel Clement Payot climbed to the summit with Mr. Eccles and descended on the other side down the whole length of the beautiful Glacier de Trélatête to Contamines. Payot made the passage again this season with myself and one of his younger brothers, Alphonse, who came with us as porter, and as I do not think that any account of the pass, which is a remarkably interesting one, has yet been given, a brief note of the expedition may be useful.

' We crossed the col from the chalets of Miage on September 16, and having descended on the southern side nearly to the bottom of the last steep ice-fall, crossed the glacier diagonally to the west, and then, by a rapid snow-slope and rocks, climbed for several hundred feet up to the second of the above-mentioned cabins. When Payot was there on a previous occasion, he had found it still entire, but winter storms had since done their work, and it was now a roofless ruin. With a little labour, a temporary shelter was soon



COL DIT INFRANCHISSABLE FROM ABOVE COL BIONNASSAY.

Photo by Captain Finch.

built up again, and a blazing fire, for which ample material was afforded by the timber of the deserted huts and outhouses, enabled us to pass the night with sufficient warmth, and as much comfort as a resting-place on bare planks admitted of. We started next morning at a few minutes after five, but a thick mist which long hung about the rocks, and filled the valley, rendered it at first somewhat difficult to preserve a true direction. The limits, however, within which the ascent is practicable are so narrow that it is not possible to diverge far without coming to a standstill. It must be made at some point between the cabin in which we had halted and a broad steep couloir filled with snow to the south of it, which could only have been crossed at imminent risk, owing to the falling rocks that raked it with a withering fire. All the night through we had heard the dull thud of the rolling masses as they bounded down and fell with a sharp crash on to the glacier below. It took us rather less than three hours to attain the summit, and during the whole of this time it was good hand-over-hand climbing. The danger consists in the utter disintegration of the rocks, which causes vast splinters to crumble to pieces as you touch them, and sometimes a large boulder which looked firm enough to support a house would break away, and once dislodged would fall in three or four terrific leaps on to the glacier many hundreds of feet beneath. With rocks in such a state, it is clear that caution is necessary, and it would probably be unsafe to be upon them except at an early hour of the day, and under favourable conditions of weather.

‘At about two-thirds of the way up, we came close to the last of the three cabins, and crossed over to examine it. It is now nearly choked with ice and snow, but, with the adjoining sheds, is of considerable size, and it is extraordinary how the materials for its construction can have been got up and into position.

‘We reached the col at 8 o’clock, and, the clouds lifting grandly off the mountains, had a splendid view. I imagine that the western face of Mont Blanc can from no other point be seen to such effect, and the outlook on that side is magnificently wild; while on the other, to the west, the Glacier de Trélatête, falling away from the arête on which we stood, winds between fine ranges of rock and snow, and sweeps in a graceful curve round a distant promontory of cliffs. The descent is quite without difficulty; three hours of pleasant walking brings you to the Pavillon de Trélatête. It is not easy

to find a distinctive name for the pass as that which would most accurately describe it. Col de Trélatête has been already twice appropriated. In some of the Swiss maps it is marked, probably on account of its evil reputation for falling rocks and avalanches, "infranchissable," but this designation is scarcely accurate, as it has now been crossed at any rate twice, though the name may be allowed to stand until a better one can be devised.'

In the subsequent fifty-two years, so far as I know, no other travellers have attempted the passage.

The year 1920 found us at Tré-la-Tête, but I had bad luck, spraining my ankle on the way back from the Dôme de Miage, thus spoiling our chance for that year.

In 1921 we again went to Tré-la-Tête from Chamonix, but, owing to the small amount of winter snow and the dry weather, we found a most unusual condition of ice instead of snow; in fact, when we went to climb the Aiguille des Glaciers the local guides advised us to take the usual easy route up the rocks on the left of the col, which they were in the habit of doing when the glacier was in bad condition. However, we rather fancied the glacier instead of the rocks, and took this way, finding to our cost that we had much step-cutting, and that it took much longer.

At that time we believed that it was necessary to descend by the actual, very steep, couloir on the Italian side of the Col Infranchissable, and rather hastily concluded that there was no other way.

We knew from our experiences of the snow on the Col des Glaciers and other places that this couloir must be impossible, and so we went after other climbs we had in view, leaving the col until another year.

In 1922 we again visited the hospitable little inn at Tré-la-Tête, which I may say, after four years' experience of its comforts and cuisine, is better than any other alpine inn at its altitude round Mt. Blanc. That year, as you all know, was a horribly bad year as far as weather was concerned, and the amount of new snow quite exceptional.

We, however, seized on one of the good days, and, finding the snow on the Glacier de Tré-la-Tête in good condition, had a very pleasant walk of five hours from the inn to the Col Infranchissable, feeling that, at last, things were in our favour.

We arrived at the col at 8 o'clock in the morning, and at once saw that the steep couloir by the side of which Mr. Eccles



PANORAMA SHOWING COL DIT INFRANCHISSABLE TAKEN FROM THE SUMMIT OF AIG. DE BIONNASSAY.

Photo by H. Bregvault.

ascended, with its large cornice and bad snow, was quite impossible. We therefore decided to try the great face on its true right, but this was covered with new snow, and the small couloirs seaming it were in a most dangerous condition. The snow was in its most obnoxious state, having a thin *croûte* covering powder. We ventured a few yards down and tried here and there, but after an hour's examination we decided that the risk was much too great.

We reluctantly turned our faces homewards, and for the rest of the summer, like most people that year, did very little good climbing, our most interesting expedition being Castor from the Zwillingsjoch, which we got in on a fine Sunday during a flying visit to Zermatt. This is quite a good climb, and one that is not very often done, although, given decent snow and not too big a bergschrund, it presents no real difficulty. My friend, Mr. Sidney Young, joined me on this climb, and we had a very pleasant day, with a liberal amount of soft snow during the afternoon.

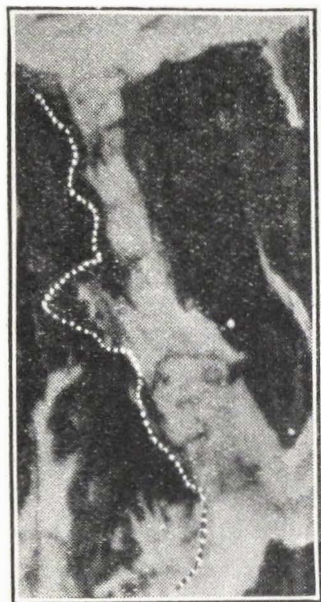
Early July 1923 found me for the first time at Bel Alp, where for a few days I indulged in the doubtful pleasure of training-walks to try and get fit—a more difficult matter as one grows older. The weather was excessively hot, and when we went to the Oberaletsch Hut it became bad in the night, so we had to abandon our idea of the Aletschhorn, and started instead at 7.30 in the morning for the Fusshorn. We had a fine day, but very bad snow, and I was quite tired out by the time we got back to Bel Alp.

A few days later, on a very hot afternoon, we again went to the Oberaletsch Hut for the Aletschhorn. The weather was bad in the evening, but cleared up later and we got off at 3 A.M. The snow was wretched, and as soft at 3 A.M. as we found it at 3 P.M. We had rather bad weather on the ridge, and three snow-storms; but, as it is not really difficult, we pushed on to the top, but had no view. We arrived at Bel Alp in the afternoon, just before a terrific storm. We went down to Brigue next day, where a little later I met Mr. Godley and Mr. Wherry on their way to Macugnaga to attend the funeral of Professor Ker.

Joseph and I reached Chamonix in bad weather, but it cleared next day. We thought it as well to give the snow time to harden, and did not leave for Tré-la-Tête until the 21st, arriving in the late afternoon.

The morning of July 22 was fine and, with high hopes, we left the inn at 2.50, arriving once more at the head of the

Col Infranchissable at shortly before 8 o'clock. We had a good look at the great couloir, but did not at all fancy it, so climbed the ridge towards the Tête Carrée to inspect the face on the true right of the great couloir, which face had made such a bad impression last year. To our surprise it was quite dry, save in the numerous narrow couloirs which seamed it. The more we looked at it the less we liked it. Stones were falling every few moments, particularly off the great face on our right, into another big snow couloir away to our right. This was most dangerous and could not be thought of. Some

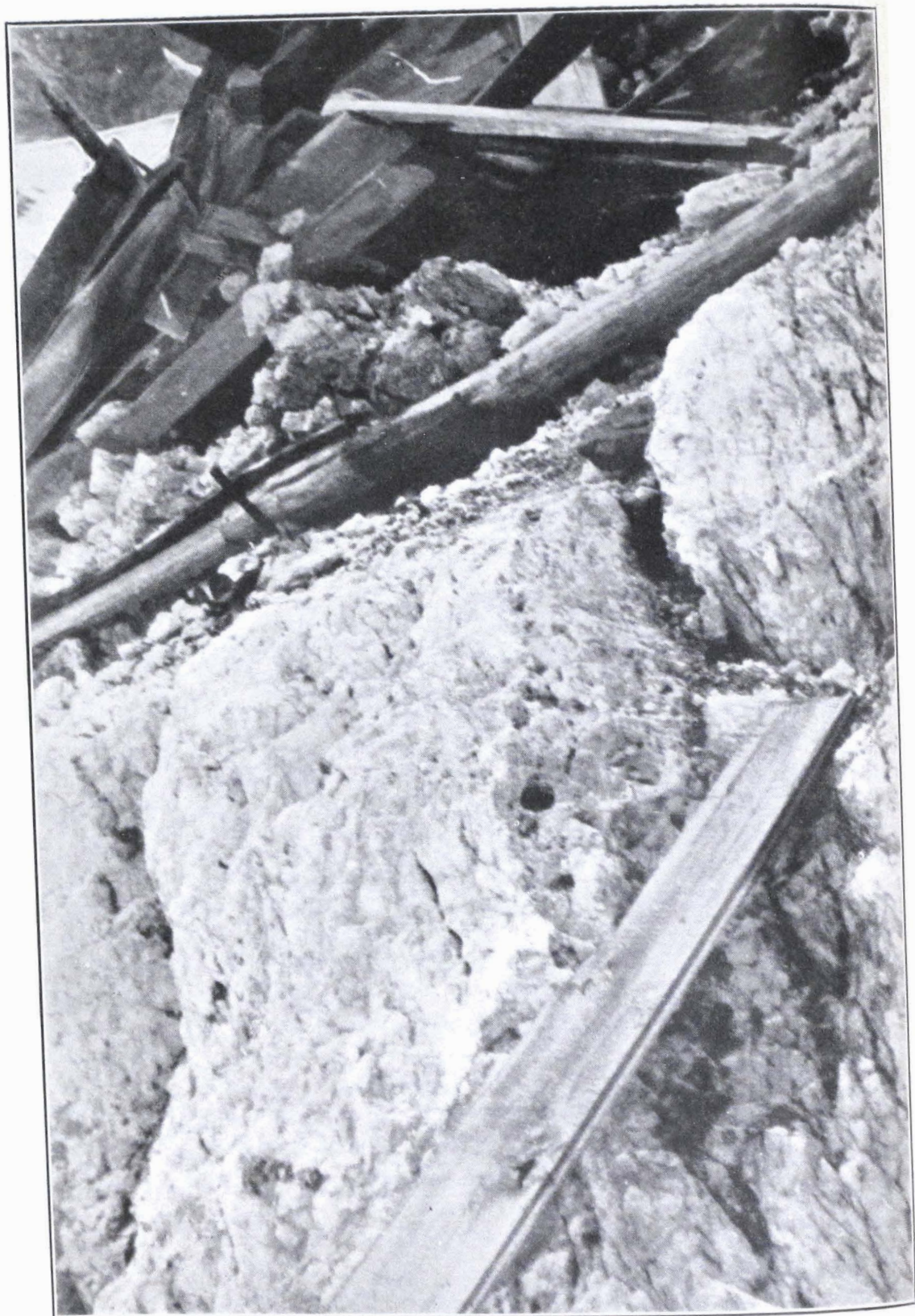


of these showers actually swept across a great part of the face, and, if we were forced anywhere near the right of the face, the danger from stones would be very great. After an hour's discussion and prospecting, we agreed to descend the face as far as we could see, and remount if things were too bad. We decided on no account to face the other big couloir on the right. This was a good resolution, easier made at the top than kept lower down.

We spied a small rib on the face, about 30 to 40 yards from the great couloir. This seemed to afford at least some protection from stones, so we climbed round the col and started our descent practically in the middle of the face between the great couloir and the other couloir to our right. Very soon our rib petered out, and we had to cross a small couloir and go to the left. We kept as much as possible on the steep rocks and knife-edge of this side of the small couloir, but were often compelled to go into it owing to the steepness and slabbiness of the rocks. On the other side of the ridge was the great main snow couloir of the col.

After a little over an hour of travelling as fast as we were able, we found our rib broke off in a great precipice, and the little couloir ran through a horrid deep gulley also appearing to end in a cut-off; anyway, no sane person would have travelled down to see.

We debated what to do. We were much too far down to think of returning, so determined to cross to our right more to the middle of the face. We were not very happy about it, as we had hoped to get down by the rib we were on into the



THE SILVER MINE.

Photo by R. W. Lloyd.

much less dangerous-looking great main snow couloir on our left, which is the one Mr. Milman declined to have dealings with, whereas we were now being forced over to the other bad snow couloir on the right, which now seemed the only way off. We crossed the small couloir in which we were, safely, taking the greatest care and moving only one at a time, and then were pleased to soon find ourselves on a level with, and close to, the old silver mine, which we had seen from above and of which Sir Edward Davidson had told me. We soon reached this and sat down on the little rock platform in front, safe from stones for the time being. We had taken an hour and ten minutes, travelling fast.

The mine is a small tunnel, now filled with ice, and there is still a certain amount of woodwork debris about, such as we were sitting upon. Whereas the mine itself is on one side of the great couloir, the huts which sheltered the miners are on the other side, as near the mine the face is too swept by avalanches for any buildings to stand, so that the unfortunate workmen must have had to cross the couloir daily to their work.

We emptied a bottle and placed a record in it, and hope the next visitor may find it.

We were rather a silent party at lunch, as our failure to stick to the rib and edge of the great couloir on our left appeared to leave us no alternative but the very unpleasant face and the other bad couloir on the right, where it would have been too much to expect to escape without damage.

Our porter Lager climbed up to look into the mine gallery while Joseph and I discussed the situation, agreeing that it was not pleasant. Near us I thought I saw some faint sign of an old track, and pointed it out to Joseph. We wondered if this could be another way, which we could not see, leading down the steep face, avoiding the great couloir. The miners, so someone had told Joseph, used a fixed wire by which they went up and down; and, indeed, we saw the remnants of old wire.

We moved off about 11 o'clock by the old track, which in places had quite disappeared but in others had been cut out of the solid rock, and had evidently once been very heavily roped judging by the big pitons which, although they must have been put in many years ago, were as good as ever. No fragments of ropes remained. This track, to our relief, after descending sharply, doubled back to the great snow couloir on the left about level with the ruins of the upper hut, on the

other side of the couloir, which I think Mr. Milman referred to as being in ruins in 1871. The couloir he describes as 'only to be crossed at imminent risk, owing to falling rocks that raked it with a withering fire.' We had, however, to take to it for a little distance, keeping as close as possible to the side and travelling as fast as we could, then back to the rocks, bearing again a little to the right and then to the left and eventually coming to the snow at the foot of the arête at the mouth of the great snow couloir. It was quite easy to get off the rocks on to the steep snow at their foot, which, however, was covered with stones, as it received the widened-out end of the big couloir and the stones that swept on to the face, and was very black.

We had now to decide whether to traverse above the bergschrund to the left, so as to cross the big snow couloir on our left, and so reach the arête on which are the ruins of the old hut where the previous parties slept. This, though steep, did not seem difficult, and the risk of stones was nothing like so bad as in the couloir on our right. However, we noticed that there appeared to be a bridge over the bergschrund at the foot of the couloir to our right almost below us, and, on the whole, we should be exposed for a very much shorter time than by crossing the great main couloir on our left. We descended as quickly as possible and in a very short time were on the bridge, which was good, and with a little trouble crossed successfully and were running down the steep snow below, more than pleased that we were safely off our climb. It was 12.15. We had taken just over three hours thirty-five minutes for the descent, including a rest of thirty-five minutes.

Looking back upon it, it certainly had a very unattractive appearance. The parties in 1870 and 1871 both slept in the hut on the ridge forming the left proper bank of the great couloir, and then ascended by the rocks, so Payot had informed us.

On our line, apart from the risk of danger from stones, although the face is very steep, there is no real difficulty. All the same, I do not think it will ever become the fashionable route to Courmayeur.

We rested for a time and then proceeded leisurely to the Visaille inn, arriving in the rain. We had a most excellent dinner and a good night.

Next morning it had cleared, and we left in good time to walk leisurely over the Col de la Seigne, lunching near the top and reaching Les Mottets in five to six hours, being joined

on the way by a French gentleman and his two guides, who had come over the Col du Géant. We stayed the night here, and, leaving at six o'clock next morning, arrived at our old friend, le Col du Mont Tondue, in three hours' easy going, and reached our quarters at the Pavillon de Tré-la-Tête in an hour and a half in good time for lunch.

Les Mottets is a place to be avoided. We had a wretched dinner—in fact, hardly anything but some thin soup and the head and bones of a rabbit, so we went to bed hungry. The guides fared no better and did not even get a blanket to cover them on the so-called beds. Their complaints were loud and deep next morning. The bill, however, was enormous. The same amount would have kept us two or three days at Tré-la-Tête.

On the 25th the weather was not good, but on the 26th, although it looked still threatening, we started at 3 A.M. for the Aiguille de Tré-la-Tête. We travelled fast, reaching the foot in four hours, and the top two and a half hours later, Joseph cutting almost all the way. The wind on the arête was very bad, and it was as much as we could do to stick on. We turned the moment we were all on the top and hastened down, the gale increasing rapidly. Once on the glacier it was easy going, as we were protected from the wind, so we walked over to the col and had a good look at the route we had made a few days before. It did not look at all inviting. We returned leisurely to the inn for lunch, and later in the day arrived at our old quarters at Chamonix under Couttet's hospitable roof, having had a very fine week carrying out climbs we had been after for some years.

The next few days were spent in attempts on the Blaitière. On the second occasion the ridge was reached but we were driven back by atrocious weather.

The morning of the 7th found us on the way to the Tour Noire, accompanied by Mr. Belcher with his excellent guide, Siegfried Burgener. We ascended the usual way, descending by the N.E. arête, a very nice climb, to the upper Col de la Tour Noire, and thence by a rib of loose rocks as far as we could; whence Burgener cut steps across the couloir on to the lower rocks of the Aiguille de la Neuvaz, descending these to the snow above the bergschrund, traversing along the top of this to the right to a bridge, and thence on to the Glacier des Améthystes. This is a really nice climb and makes what is otherwise rather a grind into a really good day.

By this time Chamonix was excessively full, all the huts

were crammed, and the Couvercle had as many as a dozen or more people sleeping outside. What the inside must have been like is easily imagined. The proprietor at Montanvers was very considerate to me, and used, when I telephoned him the day before going there, to keep me a room, so our next climb was from there. During the day he had no less than fifty applications for my room and the place was crowded. I had the pleasure of meeting and dining with my friends, Sir George and Lady Morse, who were spending a fortnight there with their energetic daughter, who did some very fine climbing, including the traverse of the Drus.

Our objective was the Périades, which is somewhat of a grind, but compensated for by the fine piece of rock-climbing up the last aiguille, which is no doubt well known to members of the Club. The big slab and the traverse alongside the 2-inch ledge, with the perpendicular rock-face in front of one, into the final chimney is worth the long walk. Coming down the chimney on to the ledge is an even more delicate matter, and requires care and balance.

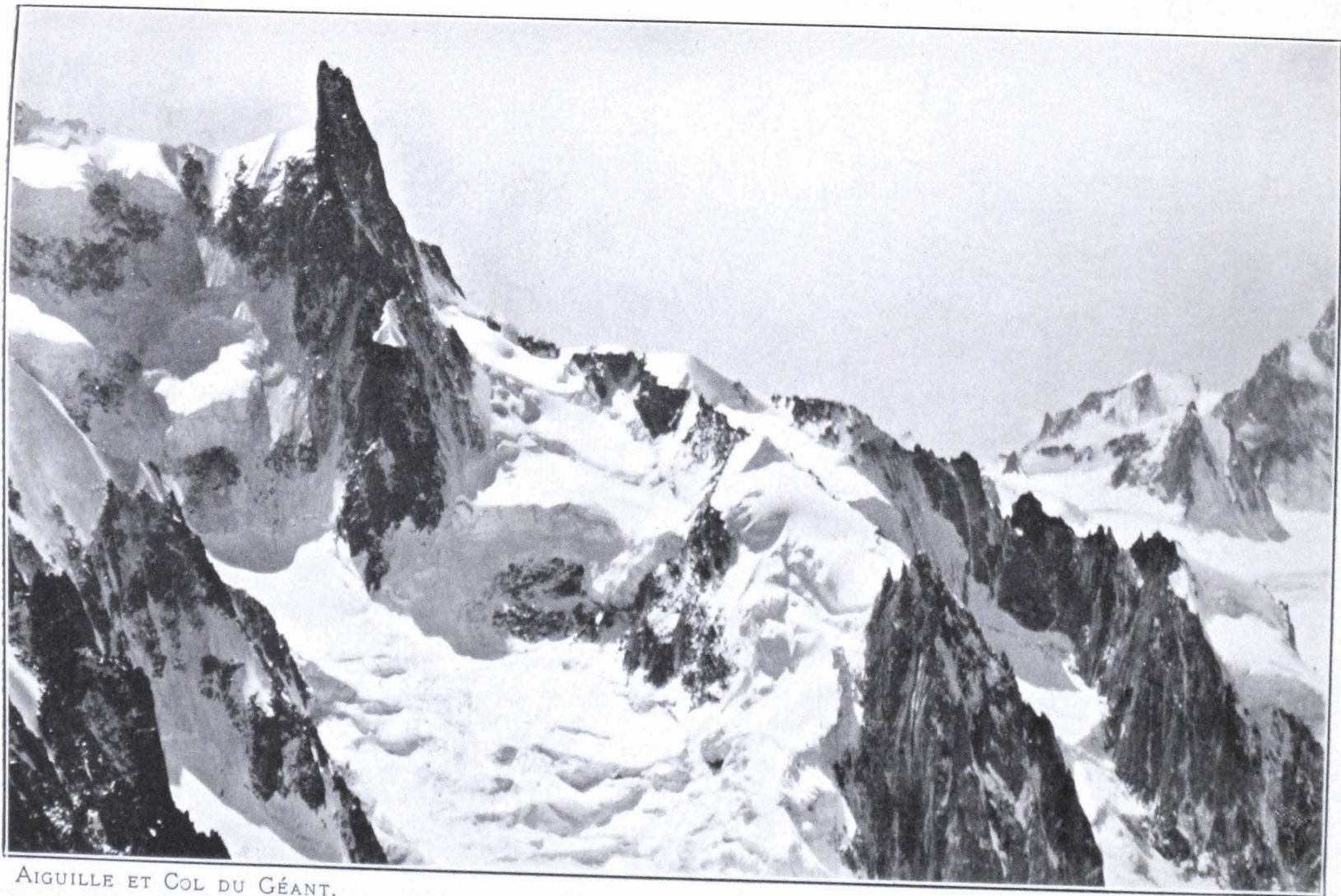
We descended by the Glacier du Mont Mallet, finding it much crevassed, but were assisted somewhat by the tracks left by the sack in which the unfortunate Austrian who had been killed on Mt. Mallet a few days before had been brought down.

It was an excellent day, and we quite enjoyed the climb. The huts were so full that I decided, for our last expedition, to have an easy day. We slept at La Flégère on a mattress, as the place was crammed, and in the morning made the ascent of the exceedingly interesting little-rock L'Index. This is quite a good little climb, requiring care, but with no particular difficulty. Generally the guides place a rope across the big slab, although it is not really necessary. Any of our members who want an easy day at Chamonix should try L'Index.

I am greatly indebted to my friends, Mr. Howard Priestman, Mr. Spencer, and Capt. Finch, who have kindly supplied me with photographs, and also to Signor Gugliermi for the fine slide of the face of the col.

I must also express my gratitude to Captain Farrar, who has kindly read over my paper and given me other assistance.

I am afraid I have taken up your time this evening, telling you of climbs many of you know. Please blame the person who is really responsible for my being here at all—the Hon. Secretary.



AIGUILLE ET COL DU GÉANT.

Photo by Howard Priestman.



LES PÉRIADES AIGUILLE ROCHEFORT AND MONT MALLET.

Photo by Howard Priestman.