

DAUPHINÉ AND MONT BLANC : 1939

BY F. S. SMYTHE

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IN 1939 J. M. L. Gavin and I agreed to climb together in the range of Mont Blanc. Gavin, however, suggested that we should spend the first week of our holiday in the Dauphiné Alps, an excellent idea as neither of us had previously visited this group.

We arrived at Grenoble on the morning of July 29. There was no motor bus to La Bérarde till the afternoon so we spent some time at a café watching the world go by, observing amongst other things members of the Cyclists' Touring Club who appeared to be having a pretty good time, after which we made our first ascent in Dauphiné by a *téléférique* to the fort above the town whence we enjoyed an extensive panorama of the neighbouring mountains.

The aged motor bus which conveyed us to La Bérarde was driven by a fat man of ordinary appearance who possessed a driving skill and temperament which would have turned the countenances of drivers in the Brooklands-Monthléry handicap pea-green with wondering envy.

Any impressions we had formed through perusal of mountaineering literature as to the remoteness and primitiveness of the Dauphiné Alps were quickly dispelled during the journey. The road linking Grenoble with Bourg d'Oisans resembled the Kingston by-pass during the rush hour, whilst Bourg d'Oisans probably contained as many persons to the square yard as the foreshores of Cliftonville and Hove.

The Val Vénéon, at the head of which is situated La Bérarde, is narrow with precipitous sides. Stunted pine trees derive scanty nourishment from the stony soil and torrents dash over fallen boulders. Gavin summed up our first impressions of Dauphiné when he said : ' It reminds me of a scene from *Dracula*, only the bats are missing.'

At various hamlets in the valley we stopped for refreshment, as a result of which our progress conformed more and more to the Brooklands-Monthléry tradition. The last five miles were

inappropriately the most dangerous. Here the road is serpentine in character and the drop from it often sheer. We took it flat out, cornering the bends with shrieking tyres. With profound relief we arrived safely at La Bérarde and stole a last look of awe at our driver, who had removed a cigarette stub from behind his ear and was puffing at it with an air of bored detachment.

The principal hotel at La Bérarde was filled with visitors but we managed to secure accommodation at the annexe. It was the kind of annexe where you dare not look under your bed and where, on descending to *petit déjeuner*, you find the *débris* of last night's dinner still on the table. The downright dirt, fleas and primitiveness of the past are to be preferred to the present transition period which is now taking place in Dauphiné as the result of tourism and the motor car.

We woke next morning to a thunderstorm, but the weather improved later and we set off on what Gavin assured me was an easy first day, the ascent of Les Bans. It is usual to spend the night at the Pilatte hut, but the tales we had heard of hut accommodation in Dauphiné had determined us to sleep out. Therefore we had provided ourselves with lightweight eiderdown sleeping-bags, and a bivouac tent weighing two pounds two ounces, designed to be supported at either end by ice-axes.

The Alpe de Carrelet charmed us. Is there a nobler view in Dauphiné than that of the Ailefroide's curtain of precipices seen across this emerald sward with its small dark pines? Beyond the alp we kept to the west side of the valley and contoured slopes bright with flowers; anemones, lilies, primulas and many other plants, including spring-blooming species, the season being unusually late.

For our bivouac place we chose an overhanging boulder about one hour's walk from the Pilatte hut. It was a novel experience for us both, the first Alpine bivouac we had made within the fuel line, and we stayed up late by a fire of juniper. There was no need to sleep in the tent and we used it as a cover to our sleeping-bags.

The night was passed in fair comfort and we were away shortly after dawn. An hour later we came to the Pilatte hut. Purely out of inquisitiveness Gavin opened the door while I stood peering over his shoulder. Next moment he staggered back, pulling to the door as he did so. I have never been in a submarine unable to rise from the bed of the sea, but I should imagine that the experience must approximate closely to a night spent in the Pilatte hut. Gavin adequately expressed our feelings when he turned to me and said in a voice vibrant with emotion, 'Thank God we bivouacked, Frank.'

Having ascended the crevassed Pilatte Glacier we arrived at the foot of an ice slope which ends in the east ridge of Les Bans. A party ahead of us had already crossed the bergschrund and cut steps up the slope, but we avoided their route in favour of an easier line to the left close to the Col de la Pilatte. There was no hurry and we waited until the other party had descended, then climbed the rocks of the east ridge—face is more descriptive—to the summit of Les Bans. Unhappily our appreciation of the view was spoilt by severe headaches, probably due to altitude and sun glare. These headaches improved as we descended and by the time we reached La Bérarde we were almost persuaded that we had enjoyed the climb.

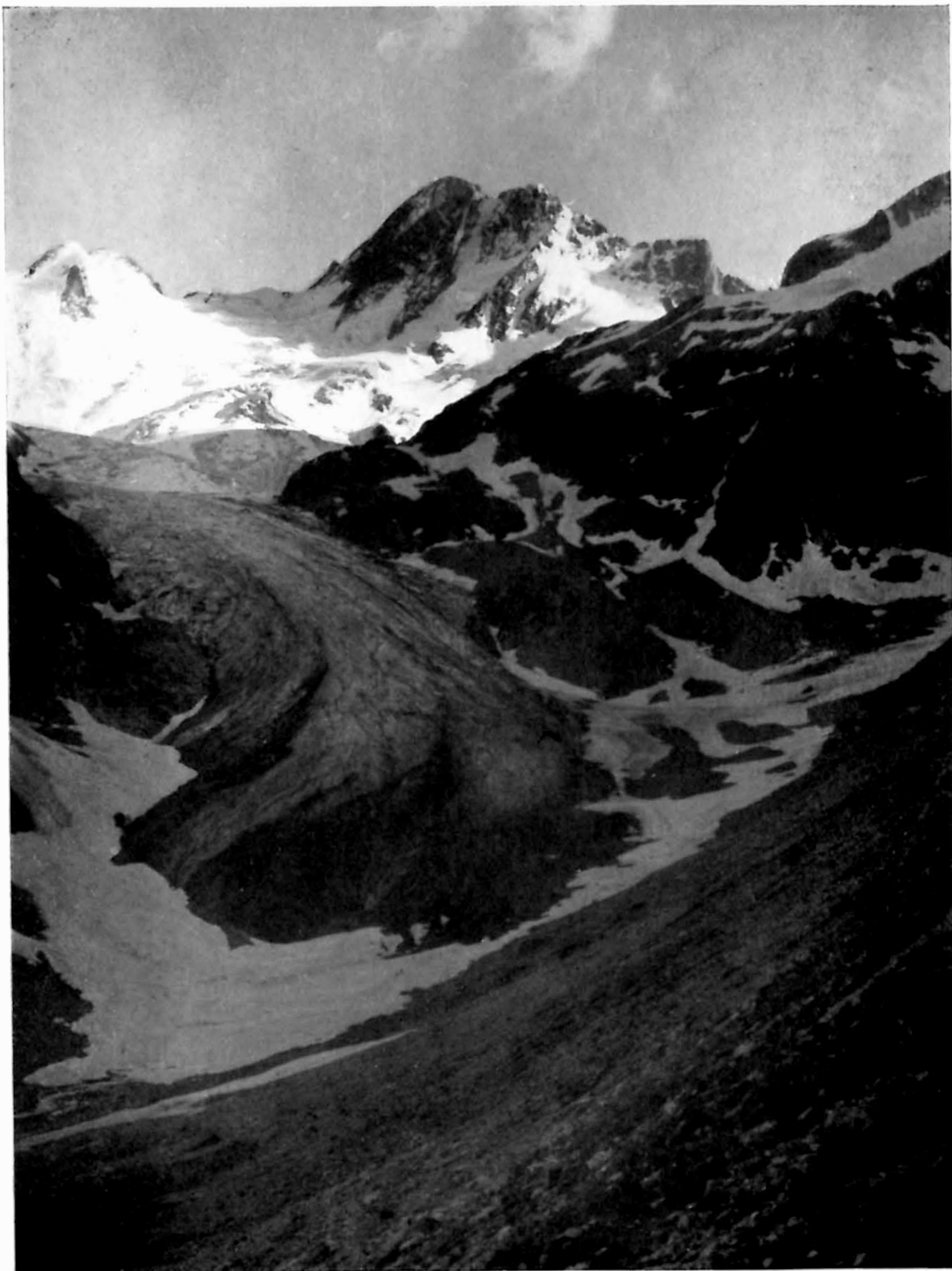
Our next ascent was a traverse of the Ecrins via the south face from the Col des Avalanches. The Temple-Ecrins hut had been destroyed by an avalanche, so we pitched our bivouac tent on gentian-studded slopes below the site. Here the remains of the hut provided us with plenty of fuel; as Gavin remarked, 'it's an ill avalanche that blows nobody any wood.'

It was a perfect evening as we cooked our supper, but the gastronomic operations were attended by tragedy. We had with us some dried apricots and Gavin conceived the brilliant idea of soaking them in water and heating them up. All went well until an incautious movement tipped the saucepan and its contents into the fire. However, we agreed that the apricots retrieved from the ashes were excellent.

Mist formed at sundown but dissolved when the moon rose revealing vistas of mountain, glacier and snowfield, including a vision of the Ecrins high up in the stars. We sat long by a great fire enjoying that peace and contentment which is to be found in the company of burning timber on a hillside.

This time we had only the tent. It proved cramped and uncomfortable, and presently we emerged from its dew-soaked folds to spend the rest of the night by the fire in a manner recognisable by all Englishmen, that is, roasted in front and frozen in the back.

At 2.30 A.M., feeling like imperfectly grilled chops, we breakfasted and shortly before 3.30 set off for our climb. Plain sailing over frozen snow brought us to the Col des Avalanches. Unfortunately two parties were ahead of us, and as they were occupied in dislodging stones we had to wait an hour in chilling shadow at the foot of the face. When we were able to continue we assumed with no justification whatsoever that those in front of us knew the route and wasted another hour in attempting to climb the wrong chimney. Our guide, Coolidge, seemed to



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

LES BANS, AT SUNRISE.

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us vague, and when after reaching the top of the initial series of chimneys it said 'bear right' we were foolish enough to obey instead of going straight ahead. What decided us were tracks in snow leading up into a couloir : we assumed that as the parties ahead of us had gone wrong in the first place it was probable that they had gone wrong again. It was a case of the second degree.

The next two hours were spent in intricate work on steep and exposed rocks in which the only noteworthy discovery was the high Alpine forget-me-not (*Eritrichium nanum*) which we had already noted on the Col des Avalanches, cushions of sky-blue blooms peeping out from the crags at a height of about 12,000 ft.

Finally we retired baffled and were seriously contemplating retreat when we saw and heard one of the other parties descending. We then realised that we must follow the gully and climb out of it to the right by means of a fixed cable. This we did, encountering en route the party who told us that they had lost the way. For some inscrutable reason they were roping down the fixed cable. The rocks were easy and we went quickly ahead, bearing diagonally to the right into an ice-filled couloir. We crossed this and then ascended a rib on the far side. Here again we went wrong. We should have continued to traverse, but we elected to follow the rib. This forced us back into the couloir we had crossed and involved us in a nasty piece of slab climbing. This was the last serious difficulty and a long rock rib and then snow led us up to the summit rocks. It was 3.15 P.M. when we gained the west ridge between Pic Lory and the summit, feeling not a little ashamed of ourselves for our blunders.

The brightness of the morning had gone out. As we stood, a few hailstones fell with dry rustling whispers. This determined us to descend at once and an hour later we were on the Col des Ecrins, just as the thunderstorm broke on the Ecrins doubtless under the impression that we were still there. Fortunately it did not discover our whereabouts, otherwise the descent of the fixed steel cables to the Glacier de la Bonne Pierre would have been analogous to the descent of a lightning conductor. This storm was the precursor of bad weather and after two days of uncomfortable boredom at La Bérarde we screwed up sufficient courage to endure the return motor journey to Grenoble, and from that city travelled to Chamonix.

In sullen weather we ascended to the Trélatête hotel, arriving there shortly before more bad weather which put down a considerable quantity of new snow on the peaks. Two days later the weather cleared sufficiently for an ascent of Mont Tondu, a viewpoint situated at the westernmost end of the Mont Blanc

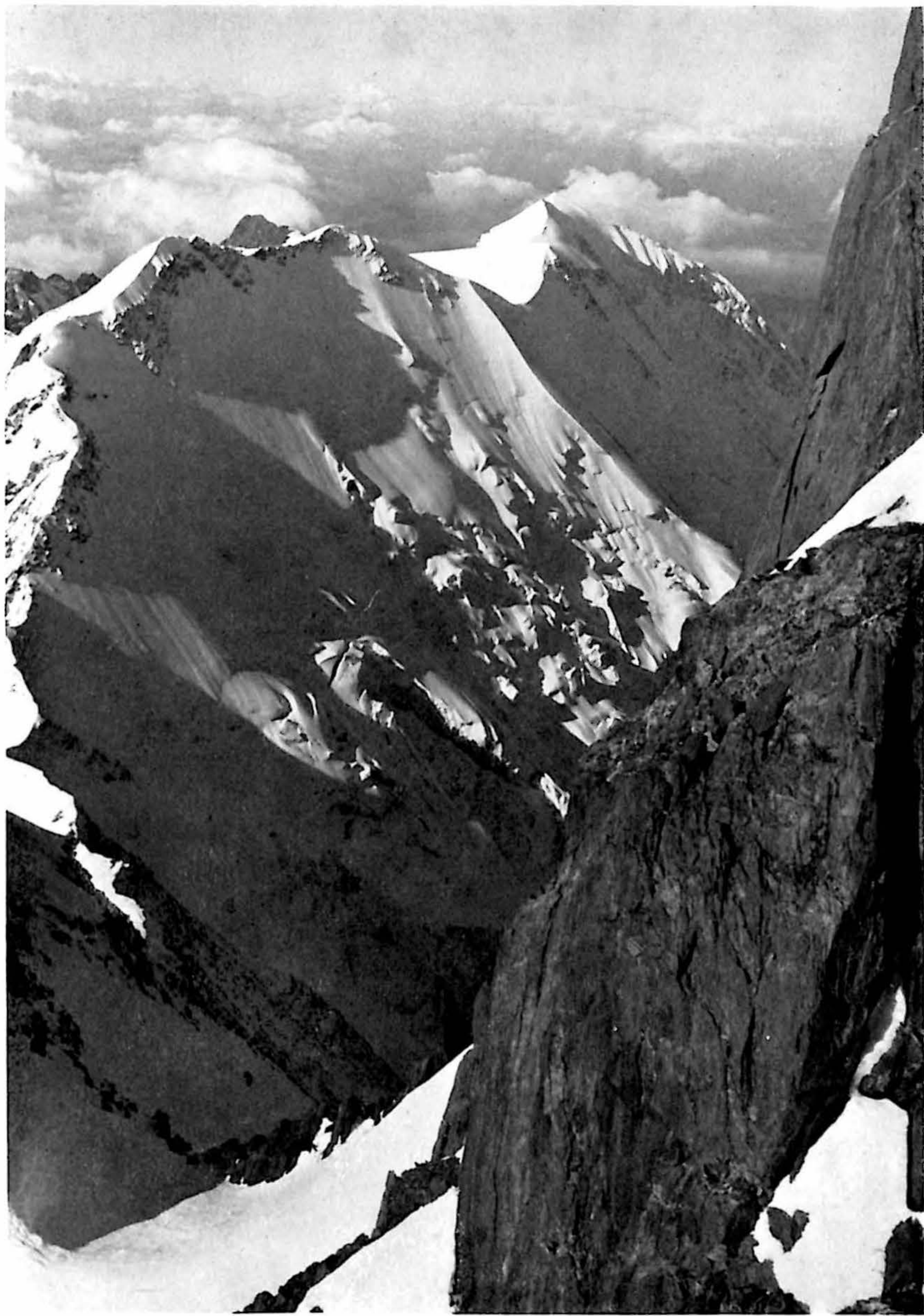
range. On it we found avalanche new snow and we walked along the ridge dislodging numerous slides. This is an intriguing diversion when undertaken from above, and wagers may be placed on the result, the winner of course being he whose avalanche is adjudged the first to shoot the bergschrund.

The weather then cleared up and continued brilliantly fine for the remainder of our holiday. Next day we trudged up the Trélatête Glacier to the Col Infranchissable, and climbed the Tête Carrée. This affords an extensive view of the south-west face of Mont Blanc from the Brouillard ridge to the Col du Dôme and Aiguille de Bionnassay, and the contrast between the serene blue hills south of Val Veni and the troubled mazes of this tremendous wall is completely satisfying. We were too lazy to climb the Aiguille de Trélatête as well, at least I was, and in any event the snow was becoming suspiciously soft by the time we descended. In broiling sun we toiled down the wastes of the Trélatête Glacier, our faces feeling like Christmas puddings covered in burning brandy, and it was with relief that we regained the side moraine with its hosts of *Ranunculus glacialis*.

The following day we left at dawn and leisurely mounted the Aiguille de Béranger, one of the easiest peaks of its height in the range of Mont Blanc. Various parties were being rushed off by guides and we paused awestruck to watch tourists of both sexes being dragged relentlessly down the snow slopes. From the Aiguille de Béranger a climb up icy snow in crampons brought us to the summit ridge of the Dôme de Miage, a beautiful snow promenade where we encountered a Swiss mountaineer and his guide who generously thrust upon us quantities of prunes.

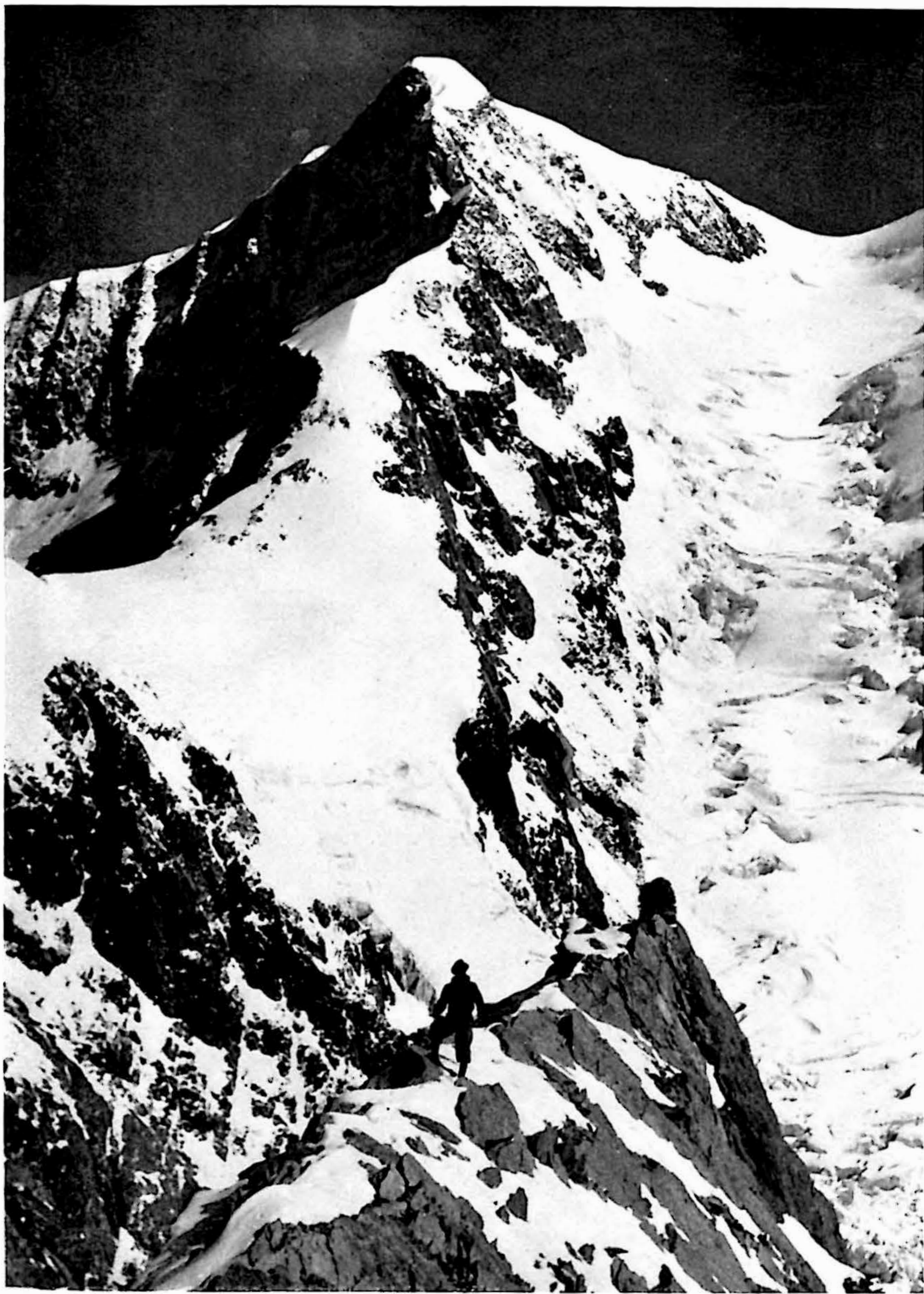
Continuing along the ridge we descended through powdery snow to the Col de Miage. We had some difficulty in finding the Refuge Durier, which was half buried in snow, and when we did we entered an apartment in which no self-respecting pig would willingly have taken up its abode. Remains of food green with age, a few filthy cooking utensils, blankets that smelt as though they had reposed for years in a medieval dungeon, the rusty remains of an unusable stove, such was the equipment in this palace of sybarites. We spent the rest of the afternoon collecting water from the roof and were rejoicing that we had the hut to ourselves when we heard voices and a little later three Frenchmen and a guide arrived, pleasant men who kindly insisted on our using their Primus cooking stove which was far more efficient than our lighter methylated cooker.

In spite of rising half an hour after the other party we got off first next morning and mounted without difficulty to the com-



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

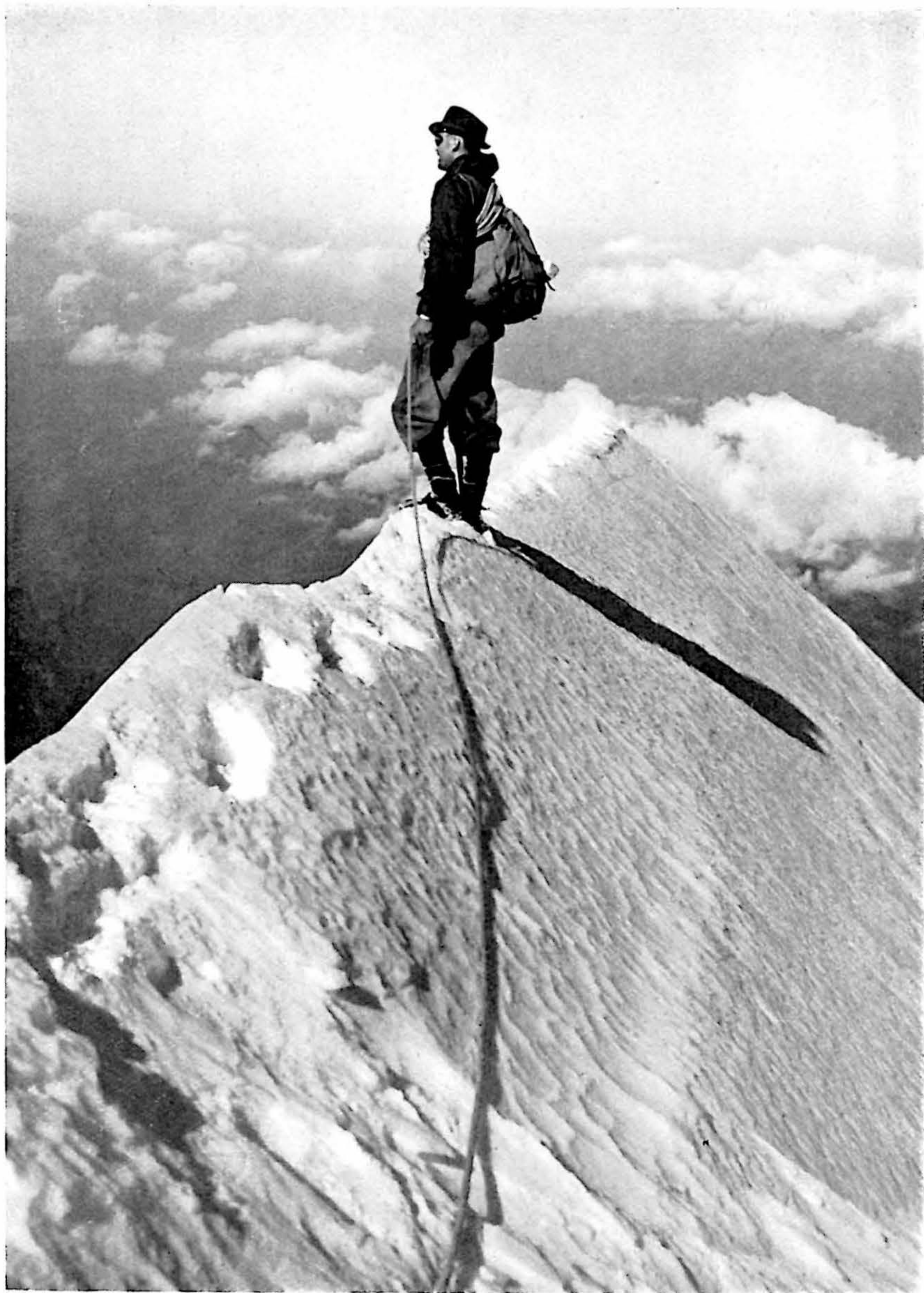
DÔME DE MIAGE, FROM S. RIDGE OF AIGUILLE DE BIONNASSAY.



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

AIGUILLE DE BIONNASSAY FROM COL INFRANCHISSABLE.

[To face p. 16.]



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

SUMMIT OF AIGUILLE DE BIONNASSAY.



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

AIGUILLE DE BIONNASSAY FROM THE E.



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

DESCENDING THE AIGUILLE DE BIONNASSAY.

[To face p. 17.]

mencement of the steep rock step in the south ridge of the Aiguille de Bionnassay. Here we traversed on to the south-east face, preferring this to the sunless south-west side of the ridge up which the route lies for the most part. Ascending diagonally, we crossed some slabby ribs, then mounted more directly over hard snow. Step-cutting was necessary in an icy gully, after which more hard snow led to a point on the south ridge near its termination in the final snow slopes of the peak. We had gained considerably on the French party who had followed the orthodox route, but except in good snow conditions our variation is not to be recommended.

The wave-like crest of the Aiguille de Bionnassay is a fitting culmination to a beautiful mountain. We could have stayed a long time on the fragile unearthly edge, but snow conditions demanded an early descent to the Col de Bionnassay. The sun was shining with such power that the snow was already soft on the slope descending towards the Italian Glacier de Bionnassay and this slope was ice throughout the length of the ridge. Huge cornices, some of the largest I have seen anywhere, made it essential to traverse far below the crest, so that the route lay continuously over soft snow a few inches in depth resting on ice. A guided party of two ladies who had ascended by the west ridge was in front of us.

The ladies were obviously inexperienced. The rope between them drooped in melancholy loops and they carried their ice-axes in their outside hands while they leant in and clutched at the slope with their inside hands. We were certain that had the nearest lady slipped the guide, who could obtain no firm belay with his axe, could not have held his party. Their plight, for it was nothing less, prompted an offer by us to tie on, but this was curtly refused, I believe because the guide thought it was prompted by our personal fears. It might interest him to know that we were profoundly relieved at his refusal !

Eventually all three parties reached the Col de Bionnassay safely. An easy ascent and we joined the Dôme route. The weather was perfect. Scarcely a breath stirred on Mont Blanc that day and we lounged up the Dôme du Goûter conscious that the peaceful atmosphere and supreme tranquillity were such as we were unlikely to experience on Mont Blanc for many seasons.

The Vallot hut with its befouled environs came as a disagreeable anticlimax, but a guardian was installed there and we drank quantities of a pale-coloured liquid reheated for the occasion. This we learned was tea and, as we subsequently discovered, was valued at almost its weight in francs.

The French party arrived later. They were all exhausted and told us that it was their first climb of the season. But despite his exhaustion one of them suffered from recurring and violent nightmares, and I who was next to him had little or no sleep.

Next morning we followed the usual groove to the top of Mont Blanc. The weather was superlatively good and the view over masses of fleecy clouds more beautiful than any I have previously seen from the mountain. In such circumstances it is unfair to malign Mont Blanc as a belvedere. Too high it may be, but the sense of isolation is unlike that experienced on any other Alpine summit, whilst the downward leap of the vision into the Aosta valley is Himalayan in scope.

A walk down wind-compacted snow brought us to the Col de la Brenva and we turned off to follow the Brenva route. The descent through the séracs was soon accomplished, and a well-trodden staircase brought us down to the ice ridge in about fifty minutes from the col or one and a quarter hours from the summit of Mont Blanc. Having traversed the ice ridge, which was sensational but easy, we followed the track down the south-east face, first over steep soft snow and then down an ice gully, an unpleasant place streaming with water, and finally, by a long traverse, in places disagreeable owing to soft snow, to the Col Moore. The slog across the head of the Brenva Glacier was hard work ; at every step we went in almost to the knees, and we were glad to reach the Col de la Fourche. There is now a bivouac hut here, and we met a Frenchman guided by Armand Charlet who was bound for the Sentinelle Rouge 1928 route on the Brenva face.

The descent from the Col de la Fourche to the Glacier du Géant involved us in the hardest work of the day, for the slope was ice and running with water. Step-cutting was necessary throughout the whole of its length. It terminated with a flying leap over the bergschrund to secure which Gavin, exercising the resources of his profession, cut a huge ice bollard as a belay for the rope, a sculptural as well as an engineering triumph.

On the way to the Col du Géant we encountered about fifteen sweating Germans all bound for the bivouac hut on the Col de la Fourche, and we trembled for the fate of the French party as the hut holds only about four persons in comfort. We also met a disconsolate Italian who asked us whether we had seen a friend of his who had gone off on a walk ; we replied that we had met with two parties on the Brenva, which reply seemed to satisfy him.

The Torino hut was crowded out and we sat and steamed in our wet clothes for an hour or more before it was possible to secure accommodation in a dormitory. This dormitory slept some fifty

persons and for ventilation had one window about four feet square. The night was the nearest approach to hell that I have experienced, even in an Alpine hut.

Next morning we managed to get up the rocks below the Dent du Géant before the hordes sent the stones flying, and spent a delightful hour or so on the Rochefort ridge, which exceeded in acuteness the Brenva ice ridge. But a Via Splendida ends in a Via Dolorosa, for the Aiguille de Rochefort is a disagreeable ruin of a peak, unpleasant and dangerous to climb. On the way back at midday we observed two specks above the final buttress of the Sentinelle Rouge route and were rejoiced to know that Armand Charlet and his *Monsieur* had survived to make their climb. We then descended to Courmayeur. On the way down I sprained my ankle which seriously impeded my agility on the motor-infested road into the village.

Unfortunately our visit coincided with the Italian equivalent to a bank holiday, but we managed to secure beds at the Albergo Savoia. As we had been travelling light our appearance was doubtless a trifle unsavoury, and we were put thoroughly and conclusively in our places by two English ladies also staying there, in much the same way as Mr. Winthrop Young was on the summit of the Weisshorn.¹ I suspect that these two ladies were occupied between their holidays with the teaching of the young.

Next day we were glad to leave crowded Courmayeur, but to our disgust found that the Val Veni resembled Hampstead Heath on August Bank Holiday. There appeared to be everything from accordions to performing monkeys. In addition to my sprained ankle which was considerably swollen, I had contracted a chill, so we were compelled to spend the night at the Purtud hotel, instead of the Gamba hut, though we had no cause to regret this as it is a delightful little place.

Continuing by easy stages, we arrived next day at the Gamba hut, just as a large party of tourists was leaving. In the absence of the hut-keeper they had broken into the kitchen and rifled the stores of food and drink. When the hut-keeper returned later, accompanied by his mother, an old woman who had carried up an enormous load from the valley, we soon exculpated ourselves on the strength of our nationality, but two parties of Germans came in for some sharp questioning. The leader of one of these parties, a commander of Alpine troops, generously insisted on giving us his surplus food. This had been brought from Germany, and its excellent quality hardly bore out the tales of semi-starvation in that country. One party of three Germans

¹ A. J. 23. 262.

was bound for the Innominata route and the other party of four for the Péteret. Both left next morning for their respective bivouacs, whilst we followed later, intending merely to reconnoitre the former route as far as the Col du Fresnay.

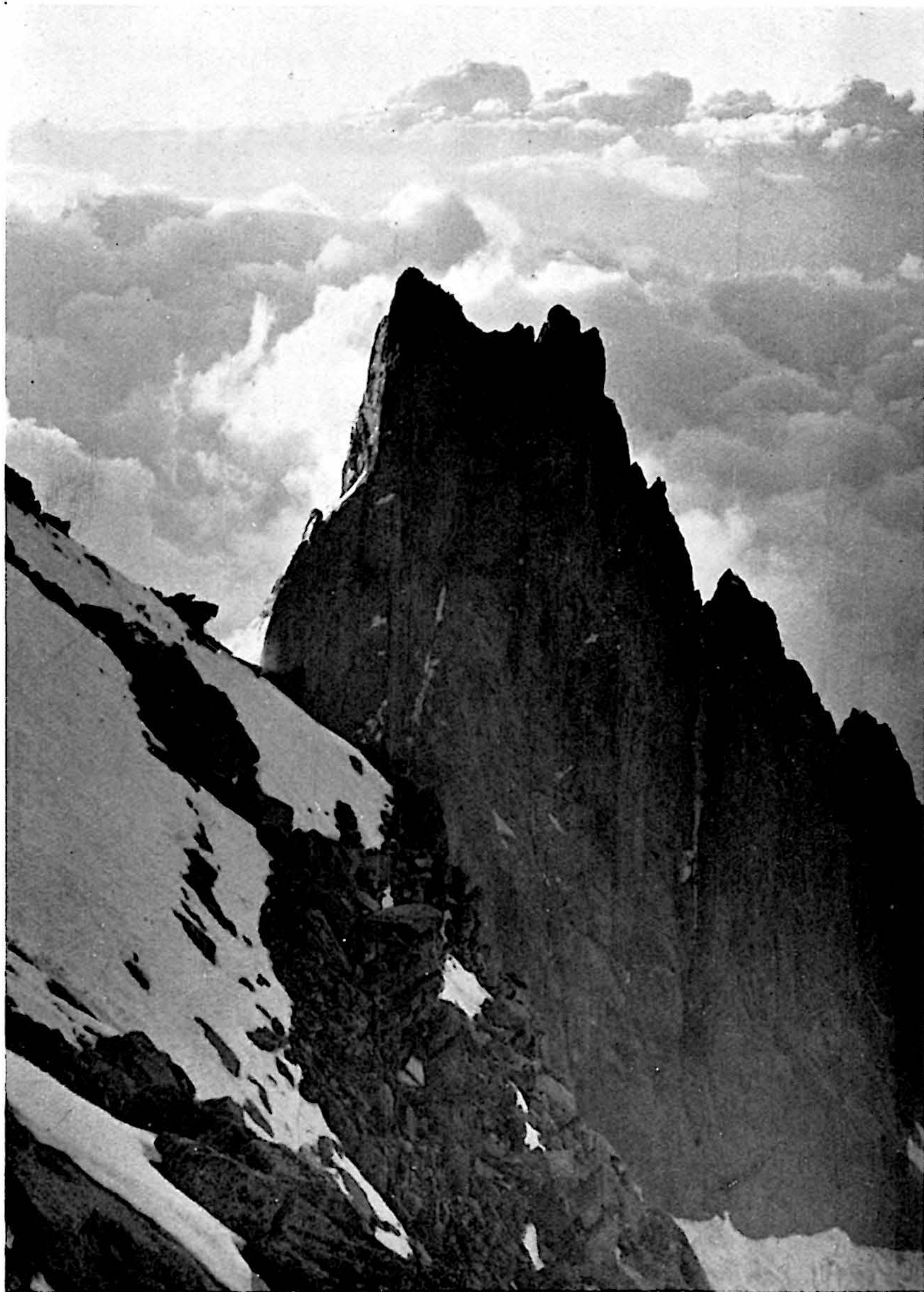
The Germans had recommended as a short cut that we should follow the Châtelet Glacier, then cross the south-west ridge of the Innominata to the Brouillard Glacier. There is no difficulty about this route, but after following it and traversing the ridge to the Brouillard Glacier we decided that it would be easier in the dark to follow the Brouillard Glacier all the way. We reached the Col du Fresnay without difficulty and after mounting the ridge a few yards towards Pic Eccles returned to the Gamba hut. We spent the remainder of the day resting preparatory to the climb, as it was our intention to carry it through without a bivouac.

The weather was misty when we rose soon after midnight and the stars shone feebly. We followed a line of cairns prepared the previous day, and soon reached the Brouillard Glacier. The snow was well frozen, and less than three hours after leaving the hut we stood on the Col du Fresnay above the mist which stretched in all directions. The sun rose as we mounted towards Pic Eccles, and the mist sea was lit up in a vast luminous blanket of vapour, covering all but the highest peaks of the Grivola and Gran Paradiso.

The steep snow ridge immediately above the Col du Fresnay soon merged into the south face of Pic Eccles. Where it did so we traversed to the west, but were brought up short by apparently impracticable cliffs falling to the uppermost bay of the Brouillard Glacier. We retraced our steps a short distance, then climbed up rocks and snow to the south-west edge of Pic Eccles. We followed this without much difficulty until within 100 ft. of the summit of that peak where further progress was barred by vertical rocks. To circumvent these I descended to the east, traversed a shallow groove and mounted until I was above the wall. Gavin then came up the latter directly—a most strenuous climb involving a 'lay back' which he accomplished with little assistance on my part.

From the summit of Pic Eccles we saw the German party less than half an hour ahead of us. The advantage of bivouacking had been eliminated by a late start, possibly due to a cold night, and we felt we had scored by spending a comfortable night at the Gamba hut.

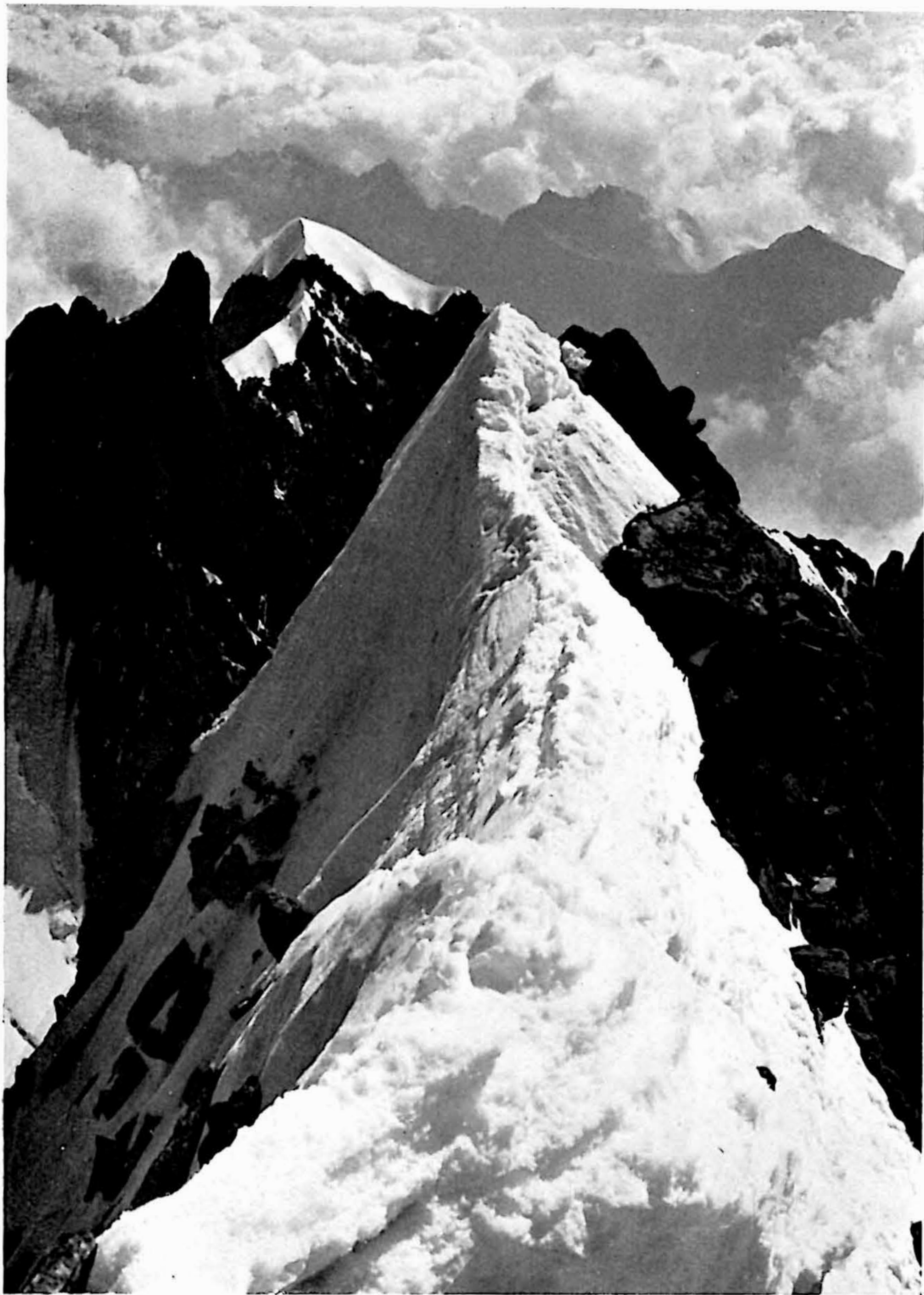
Our breakfast halt was spun out to an hour before we continued with the climb. The scene alone warranted this: the immense



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

AIGUILLE NOIRE DE PÉTERET, FROM COL DU FRESNAY.

[To face p. 18.]



Photo, F. S. Smythe.

PIC ECCLES, WITH AIGUILLE BLANCHE DE PÉTERET IN BACKGROUND.

dark battlements of the Péteret silhouetted against the mist, the elliptical sweep of the ever lovely Grivola, and behind, the precipices of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, pillared and buttressed with red protogenic rock.

The Col Eccles was gained by an acute snow ridge. Then came broken rocks to the foot of a steep crack by means of which a step in the ridge is climbed. This crack is strenuous, and as my ankle and chill were causing me some inconvenience I was thankful to see Gavin lead it in great style. Another and less difficult step was surmounted after a strenuous climb. We now came to a shoulder where the ridge proper ends in the precipices of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur. Further direct advance is impracticable, and the climber is forced to the west across disagreeably loose rocks to the edge of a wide couloir which cleaves deeply into the face. The route divides here. The first party, Messrs. Courtauld and Oliver, with Henri and Adolphe Rey and Adolf Aufdenblatten, continued the traverse and crossed the couloir to the rocks on the west side, then climbed straight up a rib. The second party, Signori G. F. and G. B. Gugliermi and F. Ravelli, climbed the rocks on the east side and crossed the couloir at its head to join the Courtauld-Oliver route.

There was no question which route we must follow. The couloir was raining stones. They fell every few seconds and it was apparent that we must traverse it as high as possible. We had by now almost caught up with the Germans, but had to wait fully half an hour owing to the stones they were dislodging. When we were able to pop our heads round a corner we saw that they were attempting to cross the couloir at a point about halfway up it. The leader cut a dozen or more steps, but so many stones were falling that he presently desisted and returned to his companions. The party then continued to mount the slabs at the side of the couloir, whilst we followed slowly.

They came at length to the head of the couloir and proceeded to cut across it. The going here was easier and less exposed to stones and half an hour later they were across. Meanwhile we had waited on the slabs for a time, I some distance above Gavin. We were just preparing to advance when I heard a shout of 'Vorsicht!' and next moment a mass of icicles dislodged by the sun from the cliffs above hit the rocks above me. I just had time to duck and avoid the larger fragments, and only a few of the smaller struck me sharp raps about the head and body. This falling icicle danger was a very real danger in the conditions of hot days and cold nights persisting on Mont Blanc at that period, and icicles twenty or thirty feet long clung to the rocks of Mont

Blanc de Courmayeur, the result apparently of a single night's frost.

A rope length sufficed for the passage of the couloir. The rocks on the west side were steep but not difficult, and we followed the Germans up an ill-defined buttress, then made diagonally to the left into the head of a minor and disagreeably loose couloir. This led up to a neck linking the final slopes leading up to the Brouillard ridge with an outstanding buttress. The neck was defended by a curiously formed snow mass bulging awkwardly outwards; we edged round it and found the Germans ensconced in a corner resting. There was no room for us, but as we passed they generously offered us various delicacies of which their rucksacks seemed full. We accepted gratefully and a little higher halted on some rocks, the only halting place with any pretensions to comfort we had seen since leaving Pic Eccles. It was our first rest for several hours and we sat contentedly in the sun admiring the stupendous fall of the great mountainside beneath us. Our principal impression was that the Innominata route, while possessing no single outstanding difficulty, is yet continuously difficult, steep and exposed.

The Brouillard ridge appeared deceptively near, but we were to find that between two and three hours were required to reach it. This was due to an agglomeration of waterlogged snow and hailstones resting upon ice. Although this was seldom less than a foot in depth practically every step had to be cut. Meanwhile the Germans following behind had frequently to stand firm against the snow slides we were unable to avoid dislodging. It was arduous work in a broiling sun and it was with profound thankfulness that we reached the Brouillard ridge not far from the point where its rocky section ends in the summit snows of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur.

The air here was keen and invigorating and after a short halt we made our way over Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, arriving on Mont Blanc at about 6 P.M. We had hoped to descend to Chamonix, or at least the Grands Mulets, but too much time had been wasted on the climb and we had to content ourselves with another night at the Vallot hut. Yet any disappointment at missing the fleshpots was counteracted by the privilege of witnessing sunset from Mont Blanc, and as we descended the Bosses arête we trod a celestial pathway of pure gold.

That night we slept in the new all-metal Vallot hut. Whatever the merits or demerits of a hut of this type, the fact stands out that metal is a cold unfriendly substance as compared with wood. In justice to the designer it must be stated that the hut

was not then completely finished, but even having regard to this the night we spent in it resembled a night spent in a refrigerator buried at the North Pole. The climber enters in a furtive, uncomfortable Mephistophelean manner through a trap-door. Once in the hut he cannot see outside or note the weather because the windows are of frosted glass. He eats his food off a metal table while sitting on a metal seat. The only non-metallic articles in the hut would appear to be the blankets. Possibly the construction of a metal blanket baffled the ingenious designer.

Next morning we descended to Chamonix, passing en route a large ice avalanche that had fallen athwart the Grand Plateau covering the ordinary route for some distance. The weather was deteriorating and lurid thunderclouds were gathering on the northern hills. The storm broke soon after we arrived in the valley. We had intended to spend a further two or three days in the district, but the perfect experiences of the past fortnight determined us not to risk an anticlimax; the still, peaceful, sunny days on Mont Blanc were too good to spoil. And so, on the spur of the moment, we left that evening for England. Had we known that war was to break out a fortnight later we would have remained in the mountains till the last possible moment.