

A FIRST VISIT TO CHAMONIX

BY C. W. F. NOYCE

MR. WINTHROP YOUNG speaks somewhere of a fairy godmother and her wand playing a decisive part in his Alpine career. It was in a somewhat similar way that I was ushered for the first time into the very unfairylike glamour of Chamonix, in August of 1938, with intent to meet and climb with Armand Charlet. I had come from Grindelwald, and there some magnificent climbs, good weather, and perhaps the flattering manners of Swiss hotel proprietors had put me in that placid state of fitness and conscious superiority which make the climber generally insufferable. The fineness of the Oberland peaks had done little to dispel the illusion that he who had climbed them was a match for a mere Aiguille. In consequence, it was against my will that I was overawed by the elaborate professionalism of Chamonix, by the École des Hautes Montagnes and the fantastic postcards (no Oberlander would dream of doing such *rappels*), and even by the overhanging appearance of the Aiguilles themselves. By the time I met Charlet, after loitering forlornly through the various shops, I was in a better, if more resentful, frame of mind to meet him for what he was, or what I thought he was.

It is always amusing to think oneself back to first impressions of a person. Armand at first sight appeared to me the acme of that Chamonism which I was beginning to dread: Karabiner, Kletterschuhe, smart white ski jacket, athletic knee-breeches (I wore old plus fours), tanned face and short hair, with an air of certainty about him.

I suggested attempting the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon. 'Si vous voulez'—and the mountain is dismissed. My baggage sorted, I just caught the Montenvers train, found Armand already arrived, drinking tea, and together we started for the Tour Rouge hut at the foot of our face. Somehow my pride had been tickled by him, and I made what may have been a mistake that day and the next behind him. Armand responds to pressure from the rear, and if you try to keep close to his heels he imagines that he is not going fast enough; as a matter of fact, I fear he wanted to make a record for the face anyway. Had I known it, I should have done all within my power to uphold the dignity of the best traditions . . . but I was young and didn't know it, so that I arrived at the hut panting. It is grandly situated against the Grépon rocks, with all the panorama of the Grandes Jorasses and Aiguille du Géant opposite. I slept soundly, a bit cramped but very satisfied. At 4.25 A.M. we were ready to start, rocks a bit cold, and our bodies clearly straining to be let loose on them. Armand just went straight up, paid little attention to my doings, and if the coils *did* get



Photo, Émile Gos, Lausanne.]

ARMAND CHARLET.

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slack between us—that merely meant that he must go a little faster. But there is something in an Englishman's self-esteem: I thought I was fit before, but soon realised, first, that any Oberland rock is of a quite different quality from granite, and further that my fitness (so I reasoned) was of endurance, not speed. But if Armand thought . . . and we went on. The rocks became harder, the angles slightly steeper after we crossed the couloir, but they were of that magnificent kind where a boot scrape stands for a great deal, and where a loose hold surprises one into utter inability to deal with it. We stopped at the Niche des Amis, gradually passed the Aiguille du Rocher, and as we rose Armand imperceptibly opened. That is perhaps the way with even a great guide; when he has gauged the capabilities of his colleague, heard him scrape, and seen how he goes, then he becomes more certain of him, one way or the other, and feels even that he can allow himself to become a partner. At any rate, without appearing to take any more notice of me, Armand opened up on the Aiguilles, the *rappels* from the Rocher, the reasons why Knubel's crack lower down was 'dangereux,' climbs we might do together. I compressed my lungs and breathed my replies as sedately as I could; pride still won—and we arrived below the final wall without mishap. Here Armand changed into Kletterschuhe for the last crack, but for me they were not, he said, necessary, and I myself foolishly hoped, now that I had survived the rest, to show even a guide what could be done in clinkers. But the final crack is far harder than any other passage on the climb, and it is often avoided. It was one of the few on which we moved quite definitely single, and with orthodox belays. I had some exciting moments watching; then I myself was struggling up, almost dazed by the amazing blueness and isolation of it all. But there were more important things to attend to than the beauty.

‘ Non era camminata di palagio
 La' v' eravam, ma natural burella
 Ch' avea mal suolo . . . ’¹

However, with a paroxysm and some support, I was there. Armand was annoyed at the failure of his first efforts in the crack, and for some time chastised himself with self-imposed silence. It was 7.35 A.M., and for two hours we lay idle.

Just before descending we watched two Englishmen roping down from the Great Gendarme. Something happened, and their ice-axes clattered down to the Nantillons Glacier. Armand, who had now begun to talk, and who, isolated upon the top of his beloved Grépon, could afford a more childish tone, began to chaff me over 'vos deux compatriotes.' But there was a sequel. We roped down from the top—this was a race too, for I still had not learned patience and I am not quick at roping-down—and down one other passage. Then at the glacier end

¹ 'No palace chimney was it there where we were, but a natural cranny which had bad ground . . . '—Dante, *Inferno*, XXXIV, 97–99.

Armand dropped his own axe, and the mockery ceased. We passed swiftly down the remaining moraines, and reached Montenvers at noon, scorched and very thirsty.

From the Grépon there is a good view over the Mer de Glace of the Aiguille Verte ridge, first the Drus, overlooking Montenvers, then the Verte itself, rising in three steps from the gap—Pic sans Nom, sharp and flinty, Aiguille sans Nom, the summit. Armand told me of a route he had made from the Charpoua Glacier up an ice couloir to the gap between Pic and Aiguille, then over the Aiguille and summit to descend by the Whymper couloir to the Couvercle. It was a fitting approach to the Verte; I had only a few days in hand and it seemed impudent to attack Mont Blanc himself without previous introduction to satellite snows. If the weather continued we could still carry out a great programme involving descent into Italy and return by another route. Armand was in favour of the Verte climb; it was 'une des plus belles courses du massif du Mont Blanc'; though that verdict may have been prejudiced. I was in favour, partly for the further reason that the conditions of the climb, as he said, might be uncertain, and uncertainty or unknown territory I had found to make for closer cooperation between guide and amateur—especially young amateur. So we proceeded to the Refuge Charlet, and nodded back at the Grépon.

It was during this Verte expedition that I began to understand more of him, helped by an increasing familiarity with his French. But the conversation was still one-sided, myself usually filling in the yesses. However, as we approached the Refuge I did realise that we were in for an unknown which I could share, for he turned and said: 'There may be some stones tomorrow, do not say in the hut where we are going.' This sounded true to the best spirit of the pioneers, and I kept silence. I had had misgivings now and then over the length and difficulty of the expedition—we were to stay at the Couvercle next night if necessary—but the stone peril was new to me. However, the night passed peaceably; we cooked on Armand's little Meta stove, and talked of the 'grandes courses.' Inevitably, I think, an efficient guide tends to concentrate on these and rather despise easier climbs; perhaps because he associates them with the type he has to pull, perhaps they simply bore him. Hans Brantschen in the Valais, when asked to do an easy climb in bad weather, is reported to have said: 'I do not like walks'; and that was something of Armand's attitude, though he has, I believe, been sometimes shaken out, and enjoyed it. Unfortunately I was only too keen on the great climbs, so that we talked of them happily. The air of superiority seemed to have vanished—or maybe I was admitted into partnership. I tried to live up to such a reflection. At any rate, I did not now feel ashamed of the old plus fours.

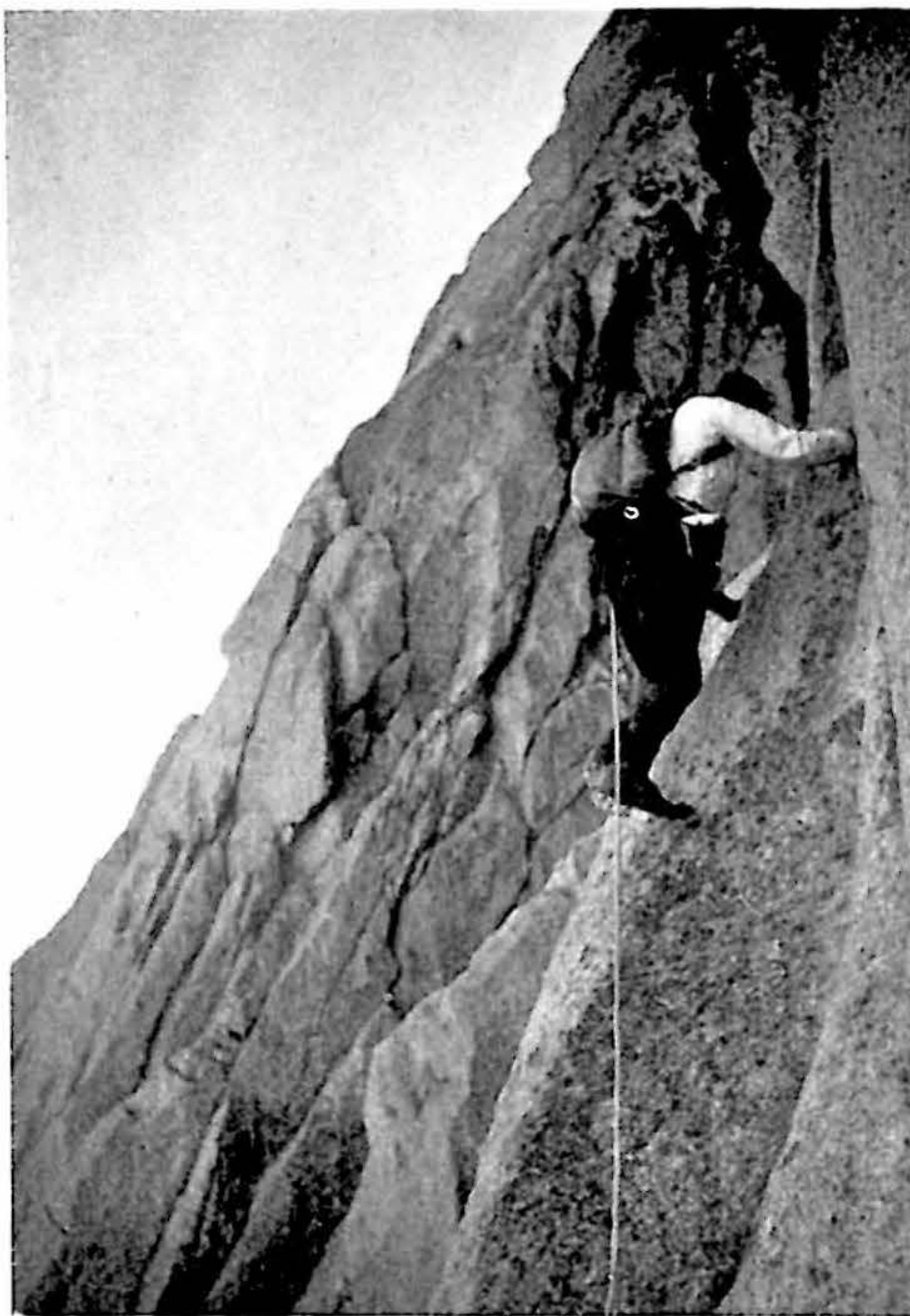
We started about 1.30 A.M., on a glorious night and with the hard Dru silhouettes ahead. Somehow our pace had adjusted itself, and we went ahead more easily, first over moraine, then flat glacier. At the corner of the glacier we left the Dru route, crossed a bergschrund

pass

and could roughly make out our couloir between the Pic and the main mass. There was a strange quietness among the cliffs ; and not a stone. Perhaps it was early. We continued upward, easily at first, digging picks into the soft ice to even out the effort. Our own stones were a nuisance ; for they lay about in the ice and it was impossible not to send some down. Higher up the couloir steepened, a few steps must be cut, but hardly enough to delay us. We got out on to the Aiguille sans Nom rocks just below the Brèche, and there halted in the dawn. Certainly the couloir had been kind, and we were now above danger. But it had been a slight nervous strain, and the warm look of the rocks above, enhanced by memories of Chamonix granite, was comforting.

They were disappointingly cold ; the couloir had been hard labour, with only occasional coldnesses, but here we moved one at a time a good deal, and there was ice in many of the cracks which had to be grasped or chipped. Once or twice we missed the route ; its details are not obvious, but a line of least resistance almost directly up the buttress from a point just short of the Brèche would, I should think, do pretty well if one did not already know it. With Armand we had to find the original ; and the higher we went the more exhilarating, without undue tension, it grew, till the buttress merged into a broad ridge, ridge to spikes, spikes to one defiant, absurd splinter, the Pointe Petigax, summit of the Aiguille sans Nom. But it is no summit to linger on, difficult even to get past. Some cocooning on my part with the rope, some shouting on Armand's, and the rest of the ridge was holiday, in the sun and with only the white cone of the Verte summit above. Gradually we topped it, and the whole grand line of the Valais peaks came slowly into view. We sat down and ate. The time was about 8 A.M., I believe, but I am not sure.

Why we did not descend by the Moine ridge instead of the obviously mistaken Whymper couloir is still a mystery. There was time, and it would have been interesting and would have obviated the stone risk. But I believe it is another characteristic of guides, even the liveliest, that when the day's summit is attained, the route proposed conquered, their thoughts tend to fly valleyward and they desire no better than the quickest way down. No one of the three guides with whom I have climbed has actually suggested a continuation on the summit ; the Trade Union perhaps would not permit it. In this case I had not thought of the Moine as a possibility, so talked on unconcerned of other districts and climbs, basking in the sweet summit mood. The Eiger Nordwand had been climbed some days previously, and I had watched on the first day from Grindelwald. 'Cela—ce n'est pas une ascension, c'est la guerre !' was Armand's phrase—perhaps a relevant comment now. He considered the Grandes Jorasses face climb unjustifiable too, though I think with a sneaking feeling of envy. Yet no, it was not 'une belle course,' it was not for the mountaineer. The mountaineer's part was to explore, to make new routes and visit new districts—and his own routes and times he had tabulated in a small notebook



Photo, C. W. F. Noyce.]

ON THE AIGUILLE SANS NOM.



Photo, C. W. F. Noyce.]

FROM THE DÔME DU GOÛTER, TOWARDS THE COL DU MIDI AND AIGUILLE VERTE.

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Photo, C. W. F. Noyce.]

VIEW FROM THE AIGUILLE VERTE, LOOKING E.



Photo, C. W. F. Noyce.]

AIGUILLE VERTE, FROM THE GRÉPON.

carried always with him—but to ironmonger, no! And there we agreed till it was time to descend.

The Whymper couloir threw very few stones at us, but it seemed a poor place, and on the lower slopes it became hot and sticky. We reached the Couvercle at 11 A.M. and had a great meal; then down, more lazily, over the glacier. Halfway across we halted by a *moulin*, and listened to the water deep below. It was a strange sensation to hear it bubbling in confinement far down, while we who listened could look round and see the glacier and the blue sky and the shining peaks from which we came. And yet if it came to bubbles, wasn't the glacier itself a bubble, set in a frozen drainpipe from the snows, or the whole mountain range for that matter, if you took a long view, a frothy excrescence on the earth's surface, to be used by man for his plaything?

‘The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them.’

Yes, and we are thankful for it, even in awe of them a little, and ready at times to worship them.

The attack on ‘le grand Mont Blanc’ himself was to be a fine affair, a fit end to the season. It is hard to learn that it is more artistic, on a first visit, to leave the monarch and taste him only in his underlings, and finally to approach him more appropriately after a season or two. Yet I cannot even now regret it; for my chances of winning him again have probably decreased, and I had enjoyed him well then.

We set off after lunch from Montenvers, passed the Requin hut and wound through the icefalls of the Géant Glacier to its upper snows. The weather, from being cloudless, became dark and confused, and produced a strange effect of loneliness, there in the snow basin of Mont Blanc, with the flat plain set off by the circuit of gloomy, mist-shrouded cliffs. We reached the Col de la Fourche bivouac in worsening weather, and at 2 A.M. next morning it seemed worse still. From the round tin elephant-hut that is the bivouac we could look down on the Brenva Glacier through the clouds; it was not good enough, we continued our sleep. At 10 A.M. a decision had to be reached. We had not enough food to wait till next day, and neither of us wanted to retreat to the Torino. We hesitated. At 11.0 came the absurd, much hoped-for suggestion from Armand, flung off casually and with hardly an appearance of guilt, that we should at least look at the Brenva ridge—even if we didn't get to the top of Mont Blanc one could cut across to the Grand Mulets, etc. By 11.30 we were off, the sun now trying weakly to melt the snow still further for us with a belated beam.

The effect of having to descend about a thousand feet at something like noon with the whole of Mont Blanc still to climb was disheartening. But I had not realised how high we already were. The glacier was crossed, and we waded up to the Col Moore, shunning the bergschrund. Of the ridge proper all that remains in memory is a rapid scramble,

with occasional wading. The terrors of the ice arête itself disappeared, when one was up to one's knees in it, so that it was a pleasure to reach the harder stuff of the séracs, and to have steps to cut. We got through them first time. I had long since ceased to regard Armand as a being suited only to Aiguilles, but his ice technique here, and his general mountaineering ability during the whole of this climb increased my respect enormously. For we were wrapped in mist, and very soon a mild blizzard descended, blotting out everything. At last the Col de la Brenva, and then the long grind to the summit. I had suspected all along that the Grands Mulets alternative was not for us; and Armand had probably never remotely intended that it should be. At 3 P.M. we were on top, grandly isolated among dark, scuttling mists. With a swoop we had descended to the Vallot Observatory, which we entered illegally for food before continuing more leisurely to the Aiguille du Goûter hut and tea amid a vast section of the Swiss Alpine Club, newly ascended and undaunted by the weather. The descent had been absurdly quick, an anticlimax almost after the great assault.

That night was the most uncomfortable I have ever spent. It was amusing to note how Armand's pre-eminence was recognised by the other guides and the hut keepers. His word was law. Yet even he could not very well appropriate more than our due share of bunk—which we were lucky to get—and we lay and sweated while the majority piled up on the floor and sang to keep out draughts. The most memorable of our bedfellows were three American University students, who asked Armand how long it would take to reach the summit. He said three hours. They looked at one another, very tough in their Rugby sweaters and ski caps. 'Right,' said one, 'in two and a quarter hours we're on top of that mountain.'

We had the pleasure of watching them off next morning, fairly late as it was very cold and much snow had fallen. For ourselves, now that our plan of descending into Italy had been ruined, we spent the day in the hut, in the hope that by tomorrow it would have cleared sufficiently for us to traverse back from the summit by way of Mont Maudit and the Col du Midi. Fairly soon some parties returned, the remainder having descended to the Grands Mulets. Nobody, not even the Americans, had been able to reach the top because of the cold and wind and fresh snow. We were indeed lucky to have got over the day before, but it was sad for them, especially after the discomforts they had endured in the night. Next day we were lucky again, for it dawned bright and cold, and the snow was stiff enough not to inconvenience walking. It was interesting to retrace our steps, for me at any rate, and see all that I had missed before. At the top we were surprised by a voice, and found a scientific Frenchman who, with his wife, had dug himself into the snow and lived the past week upon the top of Mont Blanc studying conditions. He had, he said, slept through most of the storm and had kept perfectly warm—in fact, he recommended the idea to us. It might be amusing, but from the point of view of

climbing perhaps laborious to have to make the ascent at the end of each day.

The descent by Mont Maudit and Mont Blanc du Tacul is largely a blank, save that I remember how I enjoyed it, in spite of labours and cursings in deep melting snow at some points, and I remember some fine ice gargoyles on a face just short of the Col du Midi. An English party which came the same way and which had been recommended by Armand to follow our tracks, told me afterwards of their fears that he might resort to his reputed habit of roping down off the gargoyles to save time, and so bunker them, as it were, or force them to a long *détour*. From the Col du Midi we hurried down, in worsening weather again, *ran* (to my horror) through the crevasses of the Géant icefall, and arrived at Montenvers in weak sunshine. But we looked at the clouds. 'That,' said Armand, 'is the end of the season for some time.' And so it was.

I have, in this article, concentrated more on the social and perhaps more frivolous sides of the visit, in particular on my relations with Armand Charlet, and less on the technical aspects and the beauties of the district. I have done this simply in the hope of giving my impressions truthfully of those days. They were in a sense impressions of him even more than of the peaks. It may be further that I was too breathless about it, and gulped where I should have sipped, so that the resultant choking which appears in these pages is a fair summary of my state of mind. Perhaps I was too preoccupied on climbing days with my relations with Armand, with chances of getting up, and with my own dignity to absorb as much of the mountains as I might have done. It is true also that Armand does tend to drop into the guide's habit of getting up and down as quickly as possible and then lying at the bottom. But as far as lying at the bottom and off days gave me length of time for forming impressions of the hills, they were these. The Chamonix district is completely unlike any other, both in the fact of the dominating mass of Mont Blanc and the tendency of everything else to assume the upright and pointed position. This means that there are, in a sense, two worlds: one sharp as a Chinese landscape, which, fierce and lovely as it is, seems at times a little artificial, hard and almost unnatural both to climb and to look at; the other a terrific wilderness of vast snowfields and precipices on a Himalayan scale, great and wonderful and yet to the newcomer who is thrust into it uncomfortably bewildering too. In neither of these worlds did I feel as easily at home as in the Valais or Oberland—the only others I know; there among a friendly brotherhood no peak is allowed to dominate to the exclusion of rivals, nor is the stranger thrust so immediately *in medias res* as amongst the Aiguilles. And yet the Mont Blanc chain is possibly more fascinating than any other, more various at any rate in the methods of approach, with greater mountaineering involved on some of its faces. And it perhaps retains, more than any other, the lure of the unknown and the unconquerable.

Armand, to some extent, reflects the district to which he belongs. My visit gave me the beginnings of an all-round impression of both. First the fantastic splendour of the Aiguilles, and the corresponding 'Aiguillism' which I thought I saw in Chamonix and in him. Then, by way of the Verte to Mont Blanc—through beauty to grandeur—and a growing admiration for Armand in the struggles with each. It would perhaps have been better from some points of view to have taken him to a district he did not know; the Verte, for instance, he confessed that he had climbed thirty-three times, thirteen of them by new routes of his own. I might, in another district, have had more share of the difficulties of route finding, inhabitants, rock climbing and the rest. Yet it would be hard to dissociate Armand from Mont Blanc. And what I lost one way I have gained in another, in the picture I have of him and of the peaks we climbed; of his real kindness and attention as well as his skill, and his fits of pardonable vanity and temper. In ten days, after the first bewilderment, I felt I had got to know and appreciate something of Mont Blanc; I should now feel more confident in his company, guide or no guide. And besides that there is the pleasure of having met and known somebody, even for a short time, who could blend with his surroundings, could reflect and at the same time, in a sense, overcome them. A poor sense, perhaps, the physical. Yet it is sometimes tempting to think there are few better.