

TWO DAYS ON MONT POURRI¹

BY MICHAEL ROBERTS

NINE peaks in twelve days: quite enough to justify an idle morning. I shuffled down the street in my espadrilles, looked at the barometer (which was as steady as a rock—in fact steadier than most of the rocks in these parts) and wondered where I should take an apéritif. My rucksack was packed, the nylon rope neatly coiled up, everything was ready for the after-lunch 'bus and a quick visit to the Dauphiné. Yesterday had been pleasant enough on the Granta Parei, the summit rocks agreeably airy and untidy, but my friends had now left and there was no reason to stay longer in Val d'Isère. Anyway with all these new hôtels, Val d'Isère wasn't the place it had been fifteen years ago.

'I'm Abbatt.' Of course he was Abbatt: I hadn't noticed the businesslike little figure in climbing boots and grey flannels coming up the road!

'Of course you are. Where's Hughes?'

'Gone home. Decided he'd seen enough of Courmayeur and the South face.'

'Well, what about a Cinzano?'

Once installed in *le Bar dans le Foin* we exchanged notes; Abbatt had two more days, what should he do? 'The complete traverse of the Pourri' I said, throwing the Dauphiné overboard.

'But my crampons are down at Bourg.'

'We'll shift headquarters.'

And so, after lunch, we took the 'bus down to Bourg S. Maurice and I devoted an hour or so to getting my boots mended and buying ingredients for soup. Next day we were back up at Tignes in time for a late lunch at the Sassiére. I had an odd feeling that I owned the place: after all, I'd known it long before the present proprietor took it over from the Bertolis. How many meals, summer, winter and Easter, had I eaten in this upstairs dining-room in the years before the war? And one March I'd written half a book on Newton in the chintz-covered bar downstairs. I could remember, too, when the old legend: *Grand Hôtel des Touristes chez Révial Florentin* showed through the faded paint on the butt-end of the building. 'This loathsome den' it had

¹ We are indebted to Mrs. Michael Roberts for permission to publish this charming narrative, which was found amongst the papers of her late husband. Its atmosphere and the action are nearly timeless—the story might almost have been written for *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers* by one of those early pioneers, whose travels in this district so fascinated Michael Roberts. But a date may sometimes tell a reader that he or she was in sight, or almost in sight, of the scene of action at the very time; and in so doing, dates may evoke a deeper sympathy, and a curious feeling of companionship. Therein lies their magic. In the present case, the days of action were those from the second to the fourth of August in 1947.—Editor.

been in Conway's time. And now no one would own it much longer ; there would be no more crowded and riotous dinners upstairs, no more late breakfasts at the little tables just outside the front door : as soon as the dam was completed, the waters would rise ; Rimmer's shop would vanish, and the Post Office, the churchyard, the little War Memorial and all the tumbledown little stone houses where in winter the cattle champed and steamed beside their hosts and owners. No wonder the Tignards cursed the government and occasionally blew up a transformer.

Perhaps these reflections were induced by the second bottle of very passable *vin ordinaire* ; but I soon forgot them on the track up to the Lac de Tignes. How much steeper the track was in winter ! How exhausting the first time in the season ! And then, plodding up night after night to the hôtel beside the lake, it would become easier and easier, until at last one didn't notice it at all. To-day it was as pleasant as one could wish—as pleasant as any path can be, with crampons dangling from a fairly heavy rucksack, and sweat dripping off the end of one's nose at every step. We overtook one or two parties of tourists, and where the path begins to level off, we bore away to the right.

Perhaps I ought to explain that this wasn't the first time we had set out to traverse the Pourri. Anyone who knows the Tarentaise must be attracted by the climb, which is obviously the best thing in the district. The Pourri is one of those tent-shaped mountains with about a mile and a half of rocky ridge between its two peaks. The northern peak is the true summit (3,788 m.) : the southern is the snow-capped Dôme de la Sache (3,611 m.). Between the two, the ridge sags down to the Brèche Puiseux, and the usual way up to the Pourri is to climb up to the Brèche from the Glacier Sud de la Gurra and then follow the main ridge up to the summit. Last year, Janet and I had beguiled Abbatt and Hughes into joining us in an attempt on both peaks. Perhaps we took the climb too lightheartedly : at any rate, I induced the party to attack the S. face of the Dôme much too far to the right, on the grounds that it offered a more sporting route than the easy rocks to the left. Abbatt got us out of the difficulties in which I had landed us, but it was 2 o'clock of a threatening afternoon by the time we reached the Brèche, and without a word we had decided that the fun had gone on long enough. One way and another—a recent rock-fall below the Brèche, a troublesome glacier, a bridge swept away at the foot of the Croupe de Caroley and another on the path down to La Gurra—we had taken seven hours to reach the road.

By the time we had reached the little inn at Les Brévières we had been out nineteen hours. Too tired to eat, we sat sleepily round a table, drinking beer and lemonade. From sheer inertia, I read a local paper lying on the table. 'Anybody like a nice game of cards ?' asked Abbatt, shuffling an imaginary pack. Obviously he was not the man to refuse a second attempt ; and this year, as we walked across the meadow to the Marais chalets, we were both serenely confident. Last year's mistakes wouldn't be repeated.



Photo, H. V. Hughes.]

TIGNES—BEFORE THE FLOOD.
The Dôme de la Sache and Mont Pourri are seen on the skyline.

[To face p. 148.]

The Marais chalets had *not* been a mistake : on the contrary, they were an admirable discovery. Last year, I had argued that since Mr. and Mrs. King had slept there in 1853, we ought to be able to sleep there in 1946. My companions had been sceptical (too many narratives of ascents of the Pourri begin with an evening spent searching for a non-existent hut), but the jugs of cream had converted them. Now, as Abbatt and I arrived, the head cowman greeted us as old friends. Of course we could sleep up in the loft again, and how had we got on last year ? Wasn't there a storm late that afternoon ? As he asked his questions he went on with the mysteries of cheese-making. By and by, as we sat down outside to eat a light meal of chocolate, apricots and Ryvita, he came out and offered us a big warm jug of whey. A little later he produced cheese—or should one call it curds ? When William Mathews, with Jean-Baptiste and Michel Croz, put up at the Marais chalets in 1861, he found there ' excellent mountain quarters ' and like ourselves he was offered ' the seductive product named fleurette, brousse, or niedl.'² We smoked our pipes and looked across the valley at the Sassièrè, dark and bare of snow this year, and the Tsanteleina, beautiful as ever.

The Marais chalets are on a level grassy shelf, facing eastwards, five hundred metres above the valley of the Isère. They are on the road to nowhere, and visitors are rare. The lush pastures are starred with gentians and silberdistel ; little runnels of clear water irrigate the rich soil ; and always, away to the north, there is the great S. Face of Mont Blanc.

But the sun sets early behind the rocks that lead up to the Aiguille Percée and the Dôme de la Sache, and although, with hands in pockets and coat collars turned up, we lingered for a time to watch the sunlight on the hills across the valley, we were soon driven indoors.

In the little inner room we were made free of the stove, the stack of firewood and the box of shavings. Cooking pots were placed at our disposal. Abbatt fetched water and laid the table : he nearly dropped a knife through a hole in the floor down to the pig-sty beneath. I made a substantial soup of peas, beans, tomatoes, bully-beef and bouillon Kub : it was so thick that when it finally boiled its temperature was about 200° C. Determined to have no hanky-panky this year, we put everything ready for breakfast in a corner. One last look at the cloudless sky, with the moon climbing steadily in the S.E., and we mounted the ladder to our beds in the hay. This is a serious step at Le Marais, for the ladder can only be set up over the doorway from the cheesemaking-room to the inner cubby-hole which contains the cowherds' cupboard-like bunks. Once you are up, the ladder is removed, and there you are until 3 A.M.

The head cowman had given us a fine collection of old coats, flourbags and bits of tarpaulin, and we slept fairly well until the appointed hour. Then we sat on the edge of our platform and waited for the ladder. Flashing the torch down among the collection of cheese-making

² P.P.G., II (2), 392.

implements below in the hope of finding a practicable line of descent, I caught sight of the chalet clock : 3.5 was the hour it recorded. Abbatt swore that it was only 2.40 by his watch. I maintained that the men were moving about down below and would set up the ladder in a minute or two. So they did, and we shook ourselves and put on our boots. Abbatt, who has a tough skin which will stand that sort of thing, went out to the trough and gave his face a brief wash. Filling the saucepan for morning tea, I admired the glitter of moonlight in the stream of water falling from the little conduit : it looked for all the world like a parabola of pale fire.

The cowmen had their work to do, and we too had no time to spare. At 3.30 (by Abbatt's watch) we set off—a good hour earlier than last year. On the way round the shelf and up the Sachette Glen we maintained our lead. At times we were in the shadow of the rocks, but there is a path much of the way, and before we were half-way up the glen the day began to dawn. At first, the twilight was confusing, humps looked like hollows, hollows like humps. Then the moon-shadows lost their firm edges, and light began to seep into the darker corners of the glen. Before long, it was broad daylight, and as we descended a little to the untidy rocky bed of the Sachette we saw the sunlight strike the corniced summit of the Dôme.

Last year, from the point where one leaves the route to the Col de la Sache and turns up to the right, towards the southern wall of the Dôme, there had been good hard snow at a gentle angle. This year, the underlying rocks were exposed : an untidy mass of tombstones, dog-kennels, travelling trunks and grand pianos. We skipped along fairly happily, and began to gain height. We passed the point where we had had a second breakfast last year. A little higher we stopped to drink some coffee from Abbatt's thermos and to fill the water bottle. Then up to the left, by a rather tiresome slope of brittle scree lying on downward tilted slabs. Somewhere hereabouts we put on the rope. The scree led us to the top of a ridge that climbs northwards to the Dôme des Platières and then turns E. to the Dôme de la Sache. There was no need at all for the rope at this point, but I don't think we bothered to take it off.

By now, it was 7.30 A.M., and we were at 3,300 m. We had been keeping a up fairly steady 300 m. an hour : nothing to complain about, but nothing to boast of either. It had been thirsty work, climbing that scree, and we made a brief halt for a drink and a smoke. Westward, the great wall of the Grand Casse looked as impressive and forbidding as ever. It was shameful, I reflected, that I had been up that admirable mountain three times, and never once by the N. face (as it happened, I put the matter right a week later, when I went up with Robert Amiez and M. Dubois). Where, precisely, *was* the N. face climb ?

It is curious how interesting and insistent problems such as these crop up whenever one halts : it's as if the body knew that the will wouldn't listen to a simple plea for a really long halt, but may be beguiled into forgetting to start. Have you ever heard a woman rather

desperately talking to stave off a critical moment? It's cunning to catch one's own mind trying to delude itself. The fact is, that the human mind is very complicated indeed. Freud made a good beginning distinguishing between the Ego and the Id ; but really, the mind isn't just a matter of two or three entities : it's more like the French Chamber of Deputies, with any number of groups and factions all plotting to prevent the wretched government from getting anything done. And you don't have to go below the conscious level, either.

This interesting train of thought wasn't allowed to get very far : we were on our way again, and in half an hour we were traversing under the lower peak to strike the ridge where it begins to climb towards the Dôme. The rocks here were immeasurably easier than those we had climbed on our more direct ascent last year, and we made good time. On the ridge itself, we slowed down a little. Much of it ought to have been an easy snow-slope, but again we found untidy stacks of loose rock ; and when at last we came upon snow, the northern side was icy and the southern sagged over the cliff on our right in a most expressive manner.

We kept well down the ice-slope, but when at 9.30 we reached the summit, I found that the cornice was only two or three feet thick at this point and that the major portion had broken off weeks ago. Immediately beneath it, there was a little rocky shelf, and here, out of the wind and in full sunlight, I made myself comfortable and refilled the water-bottle from the trickling icicles. Abbatt stayed on the top, belaying me securely and passing down instalments of a second or third breakfast. It was a magnificent morning, and away to the S. the peaks of the Maurienne reminded us of fine mornings at the Evettes or the Averole in the years before the war. Now the 'Evettes hut was a charred ruin, and the Averole an empty shell.

When we started off again, at 10.5, we were still more than an hour ahead of the 1946 time-table. The way now led due N., down to the Brèche. Gaillard gives two hours from the Brèche to the Dôme, and as the descent is less than a hundred metres, one can't really expect to save much time in the reverse direction. We soon found that we weren't going to save any time at all. The first little descent was a fairly gentle slope of ice, which was easy enough in crampons ; then there was a slight rise, and after that the fun began. The ridge at this point is fairly narrow, with a steep wall of ice running down to the Glacier de la Martine on the right and a slope of bad rock running down to the Glacier des Platières on the left. In a good season, the snow on the crest neatly fills the gaps between innumerable little rocky teeth, and gives one an easy means of circumventing three or four tottering and impressive gendarmes which bar the route. This year, the winter snowfall had been unusually light, and the exceptionally hot summer had melted the snow away from the rock, leaving bergschrunds anything from six inches to five yards wide. We soon came to a place where we wanted to pass a gendarme by traversing below it on the eastern side. Looking down to our right, we saw a bergschrund about

ten feet wide. Below the schrund, the slope descended steeply to the glacier. A jump did not appear to be a good bet. We surveyed the gendarme : to get on to it would be possible though difficult. Whether we could then get off it on to the ridge beyond was more doubtful. We went back a little, hoping to find a place where the schrund was narrower and the lower lip a little more hospitable. On the whole, it seemed to be worse. We returned to the gendarme and I crawled down underneath the point where it overhung the bergschrund. Abbatt paid out the rope carefully and I advanced on to a lump of frozen snow projecting beyond the upper lip of the schrund. It looked groggy, but was in fact quite solid. A jump, and I was across and rapidly scrambling along the lower edge to more level ground from which I could hold Abbatt. I was now more than halfway round the gendarme, and when Abbatt had crossed, I began to look for a means of regaining the ridge. This was not easy, for our schrund, which had started by being a mere gap between rock and ice, now developed into a true bergschrund, with ice on both sides. By keeping along the slope we ultimately reached a point at which the schrund appeared to be bridged. The bridge held, and a quick run up ten feet or so of ice landed me on the crest.

We had now passed our first obstacle (and wasted half an hour in doing it), but after a few yards on the level we found ourselves compelled to do the same sort of thing again. This would have been tiresome, if we'd been watching the clock, but as a matter of fact I enjoyed it ; and it amused me to find myself cutting steps and hand-holds in places where a year ago we had walked along a broad, level hogsback of firm snow. The last gendarme before the Brèche gave us more bother than most : at one point, the sacks had to be hauled up separately. By the time we reached the Brèche, we felt that we deserved a rest. At this point the ridge is like the top of the Roman Wall, and has a natural parapet on the right, and the ruins of another on the left. We looked down the slope of decayed rock and dirty ice which we had descended last year : it seemed to be maturing into a ripe old problem, very different from the easy scramble I remembered ten years before.

However, our immediate business was to continue along the ridge : somehow or other, we had taken four hours from the Dôme (it had seemed like three, at most) and there was no time to be wasted. In front of us rose a considerable rocky tower, beyond which the ridge rose steeply to the summit, still half a mile away. We turned the tower on the left : this was a mistake, for we were forced further and further down the W. slope and we could have saved the best part of half an hour by tackling the tower directly. We were now, however, on the last lap. The rock was relatively good and convenient little ledges on the E. side of the ridge enabled us to advance fairly rapidly. Tempted by one of these bicycle tracks, we missed the point at which we ought to have returned to the ridge and found ourselves scrabbling about rather awkwardly in a place in which the only danger was that of



Photo, H. V. Hughes.]

MONT POURRI FROM THE SOUTH.

sending a neat one-ton cube down on No. 2. By choosing parallel routes we avoided any such mishap, and returned to the ridge at the point at which it really begins to rise quite steeply. Indeed, the summit rocks, eight hundred feet above, seem to be almost vertically overhead, and a prominent red tower about halfway up seems to be positively overhanging. 'It is not surprising that some parties have turned back on seeing this, for its appearance is certainly appalling' wrote W. N. Ling³ when he and Harold Raeburn did the traverse in 1907.

The general angle is not, however, really more than 45° . The rock is sound and we found nothing that presented any difficulty. Our hard work from the Dôme to the Brèche, however, was beginning to have its effect. The bit of step-cutting had jarred a wrist I'd sprained the previous week; and my imbecility in not bringing a spare pair of socks meant that I had to endure the discomfort of loose boots. This didn't matter much as Abbatt was now leading (he usually does lead on rock: I am kept in reserve for occasions when we need what Ball calls 'a practised ice-man'). But even Abbatt showed a certain lack of sprightliness. He went up, and he went on going up, but he didn't seem to be hurrying on to the summit of a world's desire, or anything of that sort. Abbatt is not the sort of man to admire the view or tie up his bootlace or ask if we're really on the right route, but I formed the impression that if anything really interesting had happened, such as a plague of locusts or a volcanic eruption of Mont Blanc, he would have stopped to draw my attention to the matter. Personally, I was on the look out for something of that sort.

Nothing happened however. We went up the red tower, and up the rocks beyond. The route here was obvious, and the trail of scratches on the rocks showed that few parties had any use for variants at this point: one simply keeps as close as possible to the crest. Suddenly the scratches led into a narrow chimney and vanished. The sides were smooth and vertical: they showed not the faintest sign of a bootnail. The back of the chimney was equally unrewarding. We were both puzzled, rather than worried. How *had* the other parties got up? Despairing of a solution we climbed the chimney by the help of a chockstone at the back. On top, the scratches began again. It was very odd.

Soon after this we passed the first 'false summit'; then the second. I say soon, but we had arrived at that stage when one sets one's thoughts on some point ahead and says 'When I reach the triangular stone I'll be a quarter of the way up to that slab: when I reach the slab I'll be a tenth of the way to the top' and so on. I can't say the summit burst on me as a glorious surprise. The slope eased off, we walked up a few yards of scree and loose rock as one might walk up to the top of Gable or the Glyders, and there we were. In front there was a little bank of snow two or three feet higher than the rock, but that was all. I was surprised to find bare and level rock so near to what I remembered as a sharp snow-peak.

³ A.J., 24. 483.

We sat down and ate sardines. It was nearly six o'clock, and already the air felt chilly. I looked round and registered the scene for subsequent emotional response. Mont Blanc, Grand Combin, Monte Rosa, the Paradiso, the Levannas, Monte Viso and the Dauphiné. All the regular customers. More important for the moment, the route down the W. ridge appeared to be in good condition. Nice bare ice, at a moderate angle, with no treacherous layer of slush. At 6.30 we put on our crampons and began the descent, moving one at a time.

The responsibility for route-finding was now mine, and as usual this banished any thought of tiredness. A dozen rope-lengths and we had reached the shoulder. A sharp turn to the right took us off the ridge and down towards the Glacier des Roches. One or two crevasses had to be circumvented, and then we had a straightforward descent of 300 metres down to the level glacier. Again we were delayed by open crevasses (and at 7 o'clock of an August evening we had no great taste for sad-looking snow-bridges). The stonefalls from the Pourri itself and from the ridge connecting the Pourri and the Mont Thuria warned us to keep well out to the left. Keeping to a northwesterly direction, we crossed the glacier and arrived at the lowest point of the rock-ridge in front. As I remembered it, when I came up from la Gurra with the curé in 1936, the step from the rock to the glacier was easy and practically level. Not a bit of it. We found ourselves about a hundred feet below the ridge, and the first forty or fifty feet consisted of smooth tilted slabs of bad rock, with no holds but a fair supply of gravel and dust calculated to reduce friction to a minimum. Abbatt led up with admirable tact and caution, but it was slow work.

We took half an hour over these tedious slabs. The light was not going to last much longer. Fortunately, the upper half was composed of solid blocks set at a steeper angle, and offered plenty of positive holds. We emerged on to the Col (Occidental) des Roches (3,330 m.) Immediately in front of us, a bank of snow rose gently to a height of some fifteen feet: there was no gap between the snow and the rock. We were still wearing our crampons and I set off straight away over the hump of snow. Within a few yards of the top of the hump there was a crevasse. This was irritating, but I found a way round it and started down the slope towards the Grand Col. This was 400 m. below us, and two kilometres away, but once we were there we would be off the glacier, and the rest (we hoped) would be an easy walk down to Bourg S. Maurice.

Whether we really expected to get to Bourg S. Maurice that night, I don't know. We didn't have long to think about it. I went down the snow-slope, prodding carefully. I brought Abbatt down and went on again. Darkness was gathering. The Grand Col was no longer clearly visible. And there, immediately below me, was the biggest crevasse we had yet met. So far as I could see it stretched away half a mile to the left and the same distance to the right. It did not appear to be bridged. The snow on which I was standing was not in good condition, and might shoot into the crevasse at any moment.

'Damn!' I said.

'We're going back to those rocks,' said Abbatt.

It is always pleasant to have a companion in whose appreciative mind one's idle remarks expand like Japanese flowers in water. We went back. In two minutes, it seemed, we were there. Eight-thirty. And suddenly there was nothing at all to do. Nothing to do for eight hours. We were obviously at the best part of the rock rib for our purpose. There was a certain amount of level ground, the little snow-hump on the N. would break the force of any really cold wind, and the big rocks scattered about ought to provide shelter from local draughts and breezes. Rather slowly, we untied the rope and took off our crampons. With my axe I scratched a big V on the damp snow slope in order to collect some water before it had time to freeze. We put on our spare clothes and then opened another tin of sardines and had supper. On the whole, we viewed the prospect of a night out with equanimity; fortunately I had told Madame at the Hostellerie du Petit S. Bernard that we might be away two nights, so no one would be worried about us. The weather, however, was none too promising: a few clouds had crept up after sunset, and although we could feel nothing, there was a faint sound suspiciously like the first drops of falling rain. We smoked our pipes. Abbatt took out a packet of Nescafé and suggested that it might be a good idea to put some into the water in his thermos. I argued against this, partly because I don't like Nescafé (I don't mind its taste, but I object to the name, which suggests that the flavour might be thought to resemble coffee), and partly because argument helps to keep one warm. Abbatt said that a touch of Nescafé would take the chill off the water. I doubted whether Nescafé would dissolve in ice-cold water anyway. Abbatt said it would. I suggested that in the morning we might find some rhododendron or juniper on the way down, and that we should save the Nescafé to make ourselves a hot drink. Abbatt said that there wasn't enough. It was quite clear that I was losing the argument, and after all, I wasn't compelled to drink the concoction if I didn't want to. I gave way with a good grace. Abbatt carefully undid his packet—it was empty.

Our next pastime was called Going to Sleep. We lay down on some nice flat stones, using our rucksacks as blankets, and lay still for quite fifteen seconds. Then we moved one or two stones that were not quite as flat as the others and tried again. I won on points, for although neither of us came within fifteen miles of sleep, I stayed still whereas Abbatt got up to find somewhere a little more sheltered. Ten minutes later, I got up too. Blundering about in the dark, I found a great block some fifteen feet long and six feet high. Parallel with it, on the side near the snow-ridge, there was another block, about four feet high. The ground in between was a bit lumpy, but at any rate one was sheltered from the wind. Again I spread my rucksack over my legs and lay down. This was just a test. I now sat up and smoked a pipe. Then I lay down again. Within thirty seconds I was feeling round for

some softer stones. A few drops of rain fell. In a poor-spirited way, Abbatt abandoned his more exposed lair in favour of a cubby-hole on the far side of my big rock. We could talk to one another through a gap beneath the block. Abbatt described other forced bivouacs which he had made : one on the Râteau, the other on the moraine on the way down from the Zinal Rothorn. We stood up and looked back across the Glacier des Roches to the summit of the Pourri, fifteen hundred feet above us. The rain had come to nothing, and I was relieved to see that the clouds seemed to be passing over. A faint glimmer in the sky showed that soon the moon would rise above the ridge. Meanwhile, the glacier bay we had crossed was as black as a black cow's gullet. Every two minutes stones fell from the N. ridge. Away to the west, the country was more open, but we could see no glimmer of lights.

'What's the time?' I asked. 'Ten minutes to midnight,' said Abbatt. This was good news. Nearly three and a half hours gone. Feeling in my pockets for a match, I found a bag of prunes and lump sugar. 'Have a prune.' I said. We had a prune; and, after a reasonable interval, smoked a pipe. We lay down and composed ourselves for sleep. It was now colder—probably just about freezing point. I got up and walked twenty yards to the point where we had left the rope. Then I came back. Abbatt fidgeted on his draughty couch : we filled up a few chinks with stones and lay down again. I tried reciting 'Where the remote Bermudas ride' to myself, and I calculated the square root of π to four places of decimals.⁵ It was very cold. 'Have a prune,' I said. We stood up and looked at the W. ridge of the Pourri : we tried to guess behind which of its rocky points the moon would rise. We lit our pipes again and remarked that the night wasn't as cold as it might have been. We ate another prune and a lump of sugar. Then we tried to sleep once more.

The next time we stood up, the moon was really rising above the ridge. Already there was the moonlight up on the Aiguille du St. Esprit, and we watched it creep down the snow-bank behind us. Little by little the moon rose clear of the ridge, but the angle of the ridge was too steep for it to light up the glacier basin at our feet, and there was no prospect of it lighting our route down the steep slope to the Glacier du Col. But the scene was impressive : the moonlight seemed to saturate the whole sky ; the rocky ridges were black and forbidding (stones were still falling every two or three minutes) ; but the deep glacier faintly reflected the light of the sky. We could just make out the crevasses we had so cautiously avoided on our descent. 'Bank Holiday morning,' said Abbatt thoughtfully.

The time was 2.10. Only another two and a half hours to go. Time enough to travel from Laroche to Paris by railway, or from London to Geneva by air. I thought of all the families in England who would be catching early trains to the country or the seaside : all sound asleep still. 'Have a prune,' I said.

I decided to picture every step of the climb down from the Pourri to

⁵ The answer was 1.7725.

the Brèche Puiseux. After all, I'd done it twice, so I ought to be able to recall it in detail. Suddenly I realised why there had been no boot-nail scratches in that little chimney: in any normal year it would be filled with snow. I could remember going up it with Janet in 1935.

At decent intervals we ate more prunes and more sugar, and smoked pipes. We gave up the pretence of trying to sleep, and alternately stood up and squatted down with our arms wrapped round our legs. I didn't feel tired, and I wasn't sleepy. In a dim sort of way I became insensitive to the passage of time. I was quite surprised when I stood up for the fifth or sixth time after the 2.10 inspection and saw the sky getting perceptibly paler in the E. We watched it for five or ten minutes, and agreed to wait for full daylight.

Suddenly we decided that it was time for breakfast. The night was over. I think we were both startled that it had passed so pleasantly. We ate prunes, chocolate and a little dry biscuit. Then, still spinning out each action as long as possible, we put on our crampons and roped up. I led up the little hummock of snow and down to last night's crevasse. When I saw it, I was glad not to have attempted it in semi-darkness and with the snow soft. A night spent dangling on the rope would have been uneasy, and the man holding the rope would scarcely have enjoyed himself. Now the snow was lightly frozen, and away to the right the crevasse seemed to be bridged, though the bridge looked a bit insecure. I got Abbatt to make himself fast about twenty feet above the upper edge of the crevasse: then I lay flat on my back and slid down the full length of the rope. The bridge held, and it was Abbatt's turn to slide down. Twice we repeated this manœuvre at other crevasses: we had to zigzag from one side of the glacier to the other to find suitable places. We hurried past some séracs, and at last we were on the dry glacier, with nothing but open crevasses between us and the Grand Col. They presented no difficulty, and at six o'clock we were on the Col eating our last tin of sardines. We felt very pleased with ourselves.

It was another perfect day—not a cloud in the sky—and as we struggled down the long descent of huge unstable blocks towards the pastures of the Pré St. Esprit we soon worked the chill out of our bones. Before long we took our coats off. The stones were tiresome, and we thought it odd that there was no path down from the Col. But certainly there *was* no path, and even when we reached comparatively level ground it was a long time before we found one. But the walk was pure delight. On our left, separating us from the Peisey valley, there was the rocky ridge running N. from the Aiguille Grive to the Pointe du Fond Blanc. On our right was the high blunt mass of the Aiguille Rouge. Between the two, the valley was green, and studded with little lakes. Behind us, the Sommet de Bellecôte seemed to fill the head of the valley, though in reality we were cut off from it by the valley that leads up from Peisey to the Col du Palet. The Bellecôte is an easy mountain: only its N. face is steep, and rotten, and tiresome; but now, with the sunlight on its snowy cap, it looked very handsome.

But the real view was in front : between its rocky walls our valley stretched away broad and level to the N. ; and there, directly in front of us, was the Aiguille des Glaciers, and Mont Blanc. A little to the left, W. of the Col du Bonhomme, was that curious single tower, the Pierre Menta, rising high above the surrounding hills. But it was Mont Blanc that caught the eye : Sovran Blanc, the highest and greatest of them all. Every ridge of the S. face showed up clearly, and it was fascinating to see the Péteret ridge in profile from the W. We paused to trace the route taken by Abbatt and Hughes from the Dôme hut the week before : I pointed out the route I had followed with Hughes years ago when we did the Dôme de Miage and the Bionnassay on our way to the Dôme du Gouter. We went on again, and then stopped for a moment fascinated by the reflection of Mont Blanc in one of the little lakes. Why does no one know this valley ? Why isn't it reckoned one of the great viewpoints ?

An hour or two later we began to learn the answer. The valley went on and on, descending a little now and then, but showing few signs of habitation and revealing no steady purposeful track. Time was getting on, and Abbatt wanted to be down in time to do some packing before lunch. Nothing, however, would induce us to alter our plans : for years I had wanted an excuse for walking down to Bourg S. Maurice through the Forêt de Malgovert, and this was obviously the occasion. Abbatt, too, did not relish the prospect of continuing down our valley when at last it began to plunge steeply down the last 3,000 ft. towards the Isère and the motor road. It would have been an anti-climax to end the expedition with an hour and a half's hard walking along a main road.

At the Chalets des Chavonnes, therefore, soon after we had reached the tree-line, we bore away to the left and followed a more or less level cart-track through the woods. Mile after mile it wandered round the hillside, crossing little streams and cutting through thickets of wild raspberry. The forest was quite silent : it belonged, like its name, to the world of fairy-story. Once we passed a clearing on the hillside, and saw children playing in green meadows far below, but still surrounded by trees. Then there was a hollow mossy trunk by the roadside, full of fresh water from a wayside spring : I bathed my wrists in it, like the traveller in Rilke's poem. Almost one expected to see a unicorn step out from the dark pines into the brilliant sunlight.

But my feet ached abominably : if only I had that extra pair of socks ! Imperceptibly, we began to quicken the pace. At last the road began to descend. Then came the first of the innumerable zigzags. Backwards and forwards the road went, a mile or so each way. At first we followed its course, walking on the grassy verge to spare our feet. Then we lost patience and began to take short cuts down steep little paths through the woods. We calculated that we would just be in by 12.30. Down we went, past isolated farm-houses and across the first open fields. I told Abbatt to go ahead, for I was in no hurry as long as I arrived in time for lunch. By the time I had reached the bridge

over the Isère he was out of sight. The last three or four hundred metres into Bourg seemed endless, but I had the energy to turn up from the station road towards the main street, meaning to buy grapes and peaches. I was surprised to find the shops shut. Passing the station, I saw that it was one o'clock. And then, at the Hostellerie, there was Abbatt already seated at table with a bottle of *vin rouge* and one of lemonade. I sat down and helped myself while ordering another of each. The *hors d'œuvre* arrived. 'What time do you make it?' I asked. 'Twelve thirty' said Abbatt.

The cowherds had been right.

BAD WEATHER AT CHAMONIX (I)

By D. L. BUSK

(Read before the Alpine Club, May 3, 1949.)

LAST Spring I received a letter from T. A. Brocklebank asking me to join an A.C. party in Switzerland, which would include Peter Lloyd, J. L. Longland and other eminent members. It was ten years since I had been on a rope and the idea of making a few climbs safely tied between Peter Lloyd and Longland appealed immensely, so I dashed off an acceptance, but before I posted it doubts assailed me. On re-reading Brocklebank's letter it became clear that far from being safeguarded in this manner, I was expected to lead beginners. I therefore sent off what is known in official circles as a 'courteous expression of regret,' pleading advancing age, lack of experience and family responsibilities.

It was therefore somewhat shamefacedly that on July 1 my wife and I drove into Les Praz de Chamonix for the worst four weeks of weather we have ever experienced. You will therefore hear precious little about climbing to-night.

During the war years the seasons seem to have been on the whole remarkably good and many members of the Club will remember the dangerous splendours of 1947. The winter of 1947/8 was unusually snowless at Chamonix and the glaciers very open. March and April were perfect, but in May bad weather set in and continued through June. Heavy snow fell, but as temperatures were high, bridges over crevasses were dangerously insecure and Armand Charlet warned me on my arrival that the greatest care would have to be exercised on all glaciers, which turned into penitential morasses after 10 A.M. (Actually he could safely have said 8 A.M.).

Throughout our stay there were never more than a couple of clear days, succeeded by rain and snow. During July the temperatures were generally high and it sometimes rained up to nearly 10,000 ft.,