

EDOUARD ORDINAIRE'S TWO ASCENTS OF MONT BLANC IN 1843¹

BY LE COMMANDANT E. GAILLARD, M.C.

THE Geneva paper *le Fédéral* of September 1, 1843, contains the following: 'On nous écrit de Chamonix: Nous venons d'être témoins de l'ascension du Mont Blanc la plus heureuse et la plus rapide qu'il soit possible d'exécuter. Vendredi, 25 du courant, le temps était magnifique, et tout faisait espérer un lendemain aussi beau. Le docteur Edouard Ordinaire, de Besançon, se décida à 11 heures du matin à tenter l'ascension; et M. Edouard Tairraz, l'un des fils du propriétaire de l'hôtel de Londres et d'Angleterre, où il était logé, voulut l'accompagner; à midi, le 25, la caravane, composée de treize personnes, partait du Prieuré; à h. 6½ du soir, elle arrivait aux Grands Mulets, qu'elle quittait le lendemain à h. 2½ du matin. On les vit monter par l'ancien chemin, exposé aux avalanches, et où trois guides du docteur Hamel furent engloutis en 1820. A h. 10½ M. Edouard Ordinaire, qui devançait les autres voyageurs avec deux de ses guides, arrivait au sommet, où le reste de la troupe le rejoignit quelque temps après. A h. 11 ¼, on la vit redescendre par le nouveau chemin, et à 7 heures du soir M. Edouard Ordinaire et ses compagnons recevaient les félicitations bien méritées de ceux qui les avaient suivis des yeux avec tant de plaisir et d'anxiété dans leur périlleuse entreprise.'

And only seven days later the same paper (on September 8, 1843), had a further notice:

'Une nouvelle ascension sur le sommet du Mont Blanc a eu lieu le 31 août. Le même médecin, M. Ordinaire, de Besançon, qui a fait sa première ascension peu de jours auparavant, a eu le courage de recommencer, le 30, cette aventureuse course avec un Anglais, M. George Nicholson, de Londres, et une nombreuse caravane. Vingt-sept personnes, compris les guides, ont de même atteint, le 31, sur les 9 heures du matin, la sommité de la plus haute montagne de l'Europe et ont opéré leur retour à Chamonix le même jour, sur les 9 heures du soir, sans avoir éprouvé aucun accident fâcheux.'

It is from these short paragraphs in this Geneva paper that we now know that Dr Ordinaire² of Besançon was the first tourist to make two ascents of Mont Blanc, and within five days of each other, a feat

¹ We are indebted to Mr. R. L. G. Irving for the translation of Commandant Gaillard's interesting paper.—*Editor*.

² Dr. Edouard Ordinaire, son of Dr Jean François Désiré Ordinaire, Professor of natural history, was born at Besançon in 1812. An opponent of the Empire, he was elected a deputy for le Doubs in 1869, then after the fall of the Empire was made prefect of le Doubs. He resigned at the beginning of February 1871 and was not re-elected deputy. He died on March 12, 1887, at Maisières, near Ornans (Doubs).

regarded at that time as a really heroic effort, which constituted a record ; and we are crazy over records in these days.

The tourist in question was 31, having been born in 1812. This double ascent of his within five days is sufficiently unusual to make us curious to know something more about him. Hence my researches, of which what follows is the result.

Edouard Ordinaire spent some ten days at Chamonix in August and September 1843. Before attempting Mont Blanc, he made a training expedition across the Col du Géant on August 21 and returned to Chamonix. On the 25th he went up to sleep at the Grands Mulets, where there was not then any hut, and climbed Mont Blanc next day. He rested on the 27th and on the 28th went to sleep at Pierre à Bérard and climbed the Buet next day, coming back via the Brévent on the 29th ; a fairly stiff day's going, especially at a time when people were proud to carve ' Montenvers ' and ' Flégère ' on their alpenstocks. He might well have taken a day off after this. Not a bit of it ! He set off for the Grands Mulets next day and—a thing hitherto unheard of for a tourist—a mere amateur—climbed again to the summit of Mont Blanc on the 31st.³ He was, we must acknowledge, a tough, enterprising mountaineer, with any amount of determination to keep going.

THE ASCENT OF AUGUST 26, 1843

Our only knowledge of Dr Edouard Ordinaire's first ascent of Mont Blanc comes from two documents (1) the article in *le Fédéral* reproduced above ; (2) the following attestation of the Conseil d'Administration des Guides de Chamonix : ⁴

' Le Conseil d'Administration des Guides de la vallée de Chamonix, composée de MMrs. Balmat Auguste, syndic, Jean-Michel Cachat vice-syndic, Michel Favret guide-chef et Blanc Benoît secrétaire, certifie à qui il appartiendra, que Monsieur Edouard, fils de Mr Désiré Ordinaire, docteur en médecine de Besançon (France) est parti de Chamonix le vingt-cinq du mois d'août mil huit cent quarante trois, à midi, accompagné de Julien Simon guide, Victor Tissay, Michel Simon, Ambroise Cachat et Alexandre Cupelin, guides aspirants, pour faire l'ascension du Mont Blanc.

' Que le lendemain, après avoir passé la nuit au milieu des glaces des Grands Mulets, il a franchi tous les obstacles avec un courage étonnant et qu'il est parvenu à l'extrême sommité du Mont Blanc sur les dix heures et demie.

' Qu'à onze heures et quart, il a quitté la sommité et s'est rendu dans la même journée avec ses guides à Chamonix vers les sept heures du soir à la satisfaction de tout le peuple et des soussignés, qui ont vu et

³ See the *Bulletin* of the C.A.F. Section du Jura, 1880, in which Olivier Ordinaire, the doctor's son, recalls in a few lines his father's stay in the Chamonix valley 37 years before.

⁴ Communicated by the courtesy of Mme Boileau, great-great-niece of Dr. Edouard Ordinaire.

suivi avec lunette à longue vue l'ascension de Mr Ordinaire, ainsi qu'il appert d'en faire la preuve le cas échéant.

' Chamonix, le vingt-six août 1843

ont signé : Balmat, syndic

J. M. Cachat

Favret, guide chef

B. Blanc, secrétaire

Julien Simon, guide

Victor Tissay

Simon Michel

Michel Ambroise Cachat

Cupelin Alexandre.'

It is clear that Dr Ordinaire had five guides of his own. Since, according to the account in *le Fédéral*, the whole caravan, comprising the doctor's party and that of Edouard Tairraz, totalled 13 persons, it follows that the latter must have been accompanied by six others, guides or volunteers.

This was the thirty-sixth ascent⁵ of Mont Blanc (in 57 years), and it was the third French ascent (the first by H. de Tilly in 1834, the second by Henriette d'Angeville in 1838).

When Dr Edouard Ordinaire's son, Olivier, came to climb Mont Blanc in 1880, he was anxious to find out who had been his father's guides ; only two were still alive, Julien Simon, living at Les Houches and Victor Tissay, an old man of 70, almost blind, who had made 19 ascents of the great mountain.

He went to see the old man. The only information bearing on his father's ascent on August 26 which he gave was : ' There was not a cloud in the sky when we reached the top. We saw the Mediterranean, no doubt of that, like a blur on the horizon. Mr Edouard was delighted. Do you know he was the fifth Frenchman to make the ascent ? '

Precious little there, but enough to include two errors ; for we know the Mediterranean cannot be seen from Mont Blanc—no doubt of that—and that Dr Edouard Ordinaire was the third, not the fifth Frenchman to reach the top.

And Tissay added : ' As we came down, the doctor said to us, I can remember it as if it were yesterday : " They maintain the English are better climbers than we are, I'll show them ! How is it that after enjoying the marvellous view we have had up there, not a single person has seemed anxious to repeat the ascent. I mean to go back there before returning to France, which means this very week." '

It appears that the satisfaction of having achieved the ascent, then considered a difficult undertaking, the wonderful view Dr Ordinaire had had from the top, but above all the undertaking to do what no one had done before were the reasons for his desire to repeat his exploit.

⁵ [That is, the thirty-sixth *individual* ascent by a traveller—the figure given in Venance Payot's list. The *expedition*, according to the reckoning of H. F. Montagnier (*A. J.* 25., 633), was the twenty-fifth to reach the summit.—*Editor.*]

It should be noted that in this ascent of Dr Ordinaire's the whole combined party reached the summit by the Ancien Passage, which had been disused since 1820, the date of the Hamel catastrophe. This Ancien Passage, as we know, followed the strip of glacier above the Rochers Rouges. The descent was made by the new route, that is to say, by the Mur de la Côte and the Corridor.

THE ASCENT OF AUGUST 31, 1843

According to the paragraph in *le Fédéral* of September 8, quoted at the beginning of this article, the caravan of 27 persons which climbed Mont Blanc on August 31, 1843—up till then the most numerous to reach the summit—included only two tourists, Dr Edouard Ordinaire, a Frenchman, and George Nicholson, an Englishman.

Actually, there were four tourists in this great cavalcade, the two mentioned by *le Fédéral* and two others, a Savoyard, the abbé Caux and a German, as the abbé rightly calls him, who was none other than the Neuchâtel gentleman, Henri Jacot—for the King of Prussia was still at that time Prince of Neuchâtel.

In his list of ascents of Mont Blanc, Stephen d'Arve⁶ gives the names of those taking part in this ascent of August 31 as the lawyer Nicholson, Englishman, the abbé Caux, Savoyard, and V. Payot a Savoyard naturalist, while he gives the name of Henri Jacob (*sic*) of Neuchâtel as having made the ascent on September 30. The caravan for August 31 should be corrected to read: the abbé Caux, Nicholson, Ordinaire and Jacot, but not Payot.

The abbé G. Caux, who was curé of Chamonix at this time, has left us a description of this ascent;⁷ it is, indeed, the only document to which we can refer for particulars, the other three tourists having left no account of the expedition.⁸ Unfortunately, the abbé is very sparing of factual information; he does not give the name of *l'Allemand*, and even his own identity is disguised under the initials G. C. and the description 'Savoyard.' All he says is: 'We were four travellers, an Englishman, a Frenchman, a German and myself.' In the course of his story he mentions the names of Nicholson and Ordinaire. And he adds: each of us travellers had several guides and each guide had his

⁶ *Les Fastes du Mont Blanc*, p. 327.

⁷ *Ascension au Mont Blanc faite en 1843 de compagnie avec M. Nicholson, av^t. Anglais et M. Ordinaire méd. français. Par M. G. C. savoisien, contenant quelques détails sur une précédente tentative d'ascension par l'auteur seul.* Bonneville, imprimerie d'Alexandre Chavis 1844. This small octavo pamphlet of 15 pages is unobtainable now. As far as I know, there is only one copy, in the library of Mr. R. W. Lloyd in London, and it is thanks to the extreme kindness of its fortunate possessor that I was able to obtain a typescript copy of this extremely rare pamphlet, and take from it the information that appears here in the account of Dr Ordinaire's second ascent. I should like to express again here my deep gratitude to Mr. Lloyd.

⁸ Dr Ordinaire's descendants have been kind enough to go through their ancestor's papers to see whether they contained anything about his ascents of Mont Blanc in 1843, but all they found was the attestation by the Conseil d'Administration des Guides de Chamonix, reproduced in these pages.

porter ; in addition, some ten young people joined us as volunteers, bringing the numbers of our caravan up to twenty-nine.' ⁹

This imposing caravan left Chamonix on August 30 to sleep at the Grands Mulets, where it arrived at 4.30 without any difficulty and without excessive toil. The leading guide was Joseph Couttet 'surnommé le capitaine du Mont Blanc à cause des nombreuses ascensions qu'il y a faites.' ¹⁰ We do not know the names of the other members of the caravan except those of certain guides and volunteers mentioned by the abbé in his account. ¹¹ Moreover the abbé says very little about his fellow climbers.

'Les guides déposèrent leurs provisions, allumèrent un petit feu, et pendant qu'ils faisaient leurs préparatifs pour notre bivouac, je me retirai à l'écart derrière une pierre, pour réciter, à l'aide de mon bréviaire, l'office du jour.'

The evening, however, found the party in high spirits. 'La joie régnait dans tous les cœurs. . . . Un guide, en sortant les bouteilles des havresacs, en cassa deux ; aussitôt Mr Nicholson de s'écrier : Guide, prenez garde, ne cassez pas le vin, car l'on ne peut pas dire ici, "garçon, garçon, apporte, apporte." Un peu plus tard, lorsque les guides nous eurent préparé un lit, c'est-à-dire lorsqu'ils eurent étendu sur la dure quelques peaux de mouton, il voulut d'abord aller éprouver sa nouvelle couche, mais à peine s'y fut-il étendu, qu'il se mit à crier : "Guide, guide, apporte des pierres un peu plus molles, celles-ci cassent les côtes."'

At midnight, the caravan set off by the light of four lanterns ; at 2.0 it was crossing the Petit Plateau ; at 3.0 it reached the Grand Plateau, at its lower end, where the Ancien Passage and the then new route (the 'Corridor') diverge. Here the temperature was -8° C. ; and here the sight of the crevasse which had engulfed some of the Hamel party cast a momentary gloom over them. 'Mais nous lâsâmes avec plaisir ce séjour d'horreurs pour gravir une pente très rapide, et, après une lieue faite en zig-zag, nous arrivâmes à l'entrée du Poirchoz.' This is the first mention we have of this term ; no doubt it refers to the Corridor, which is entered beyond the *Montées* which lead up to it.

In fact, shortly after, the caravan reached the foot of the Mur de la Côte, whose inclinations the abbé estimates at 48° . It was at this point of the ascent that two of the volunteers had attacks of sickness and gave up.

'Enfin, après beaucoup de peines, nous parvînmes à la pente qui conduit immédiatement à la cime . . .'

⁹ *Le Fédéral* says that 27 persons reached the summit of Mont Blanc that day, which is not a contradiction of the abbé Caux's account, for he tells us that two fell out at the Corridor through illness.

¹⁰ The phrases reproduced here in the original French are taken from the abbé Caux's account.

¹¹ Ambroise Simond, Edouard Simon, Jean et Jacques Dévouassoux, Joseph Tairraz. These are the only guides named by the abbé. Probably they were his own guides, for it is quite likely that Dr Ordinaire would have taken the same guides as on his ascent on August 26.

' M. Ordinaire, qui s'était toujours bien ménagé, et qui, n'ayant jamais été des premiers pour fouler la neige, était, par cette raison, moins fatigué que les autres,' was the first to reach the top as he had been before on August 26. The abbé thereupon remarked to Nicholson: ' N'êtes-vous point peiné que le docteur arrive avant vous ? " Oh non ! pourvu que j'y parvienne ; c'est un Français." '

The abbé followed close up behind the doctor, and by half past eight the whole party was on the summit. There, the doctor went up to the abbé and said: ' Êtes-vous malade ? vous êtes si blême.' ' Si vous pouviez vous voir vous-même,' replied the abbé, ' vous ne feriez pas cette question.' As for Nicholson he was sound asleep. The abbé woke him. ' Here, have something to drink !' and while he was putting out his hand for the abbé to fill his glass, he fell asleep again.

The descent went quickly and merrily. By 9.0 that evening all were back in Chamonix. The abbé Caux was happy, but specially happy that the long ascent was over ; he showed, indeed, no great enthusiasm for mountains, and he ends his account with this sentence: ' Depuis l'âge de quatorze ans je nourrissais le projet de faire cette ascension, maintenant je suis satisfait ; je n'y retournerai plus, la peine dépasse trop le plaisir.'

That was certainly not the view of his companion the doctor, who, for his part, was quite delighted to have done what he undertook to do—to have reached the summit of Mont Blanc twice within five days—and who, assuredly would have been only too pleased to go back to it.

For this man had the root of the matter in him.

NOTE: A news paragraph in *The Times* of September 8, 1843, described Dr. Ordinaire's first ascent and may have been slightly condensed from that in *le Fédéral* of September 1. J. D. Forbes, who arrived in Chamonix a few days after Ordinaire's second ascent, was evidently impressed by the doctor's achievements and referred to them later: ' The only tourist who has been more than once on the summit of Mont Blanc is M. Ordinaire, a medical man, we believe, of Besançon, who ascended twice *within a week* [Forbes' italics] in the summer of 1843 ; and in the interval, if we recollect rightly, performed several other fatiguing excursions. His object was merely amusement or " distraction " ' (*Quarterly Review*, vol. 101, No. 202, April 1857, footnote on p. 319). The two paragraphs from *le Fédéral* of September 1 and 8 were reprinted in the *Alpine Journal* in 1916 by the late H. F. Montagnier, who also dealt with the question of the amateurs who took part in the expeditions (*A.J.* 30. pp. 130-133). It is not quite correct to say that the Ancien Passage ' had been disused since 1820, the date of the Hamel catastrophe.' It was in fact used in the ascents of Clissold (1822), Jackson (1823), and Clark and Sherwill (1825) ; and it was only after the first ascent by the Corridor route by Fellows and Hawes in 1827, that the Ancien Passage fell out of use. The new way had been suggested by Dr. M.-G. Paccard in 1823 as a means of avoiding the dangers which beset the Ancien Passage in bad states of the snow and had brought about the ' Hamel ' accident in 1820.—*Editor*.