

PIC SANS NOM (3,914 M.), DAUPHINÉ

By J. M. HARTOG

DESPITE, or perhaps because of, the flood of alpine literature, most parties in the Alps these days rely on the guide-book for information. For those who visit the Dauphiné, the *GHM Guide du Massif des Écrins*¹ is exceptionally helpful. It contains one feature of merit to which attention should be directed: a recommended and classified list of climbs. This is drawn up sensibly and concentrates attention on twenty-eight expeditions out of nearly 1400 routes recorded. Of these twenty-eight, three are on the Pic Sans Nom, while no other mountain has more than two. The purpose of this article is to summarise or supplement the literature in a critical review.

Early History

From a distance it is not easy to distinguish the mountain, and its early anonymity must simply have been due to this reason. It was christened in 1861 by Edward Whymper,² who had previously confused it with the Pelvoux: 'although it is considerably higher than the Wetterhorn or Monte Viso, it has no name; we called it the Pic Sans Nom.' Three years later he saw it from the Écrins and thought it one of the grandest of the Dauphiné peaks. The first ascent was made in 1877 by the dull East face, which is now the ordinary way off. No one else seems to have been attracted to the Pic until the 'twenties, when the brothers Vernet pioneered the first of their three big climbs on it.

General Description

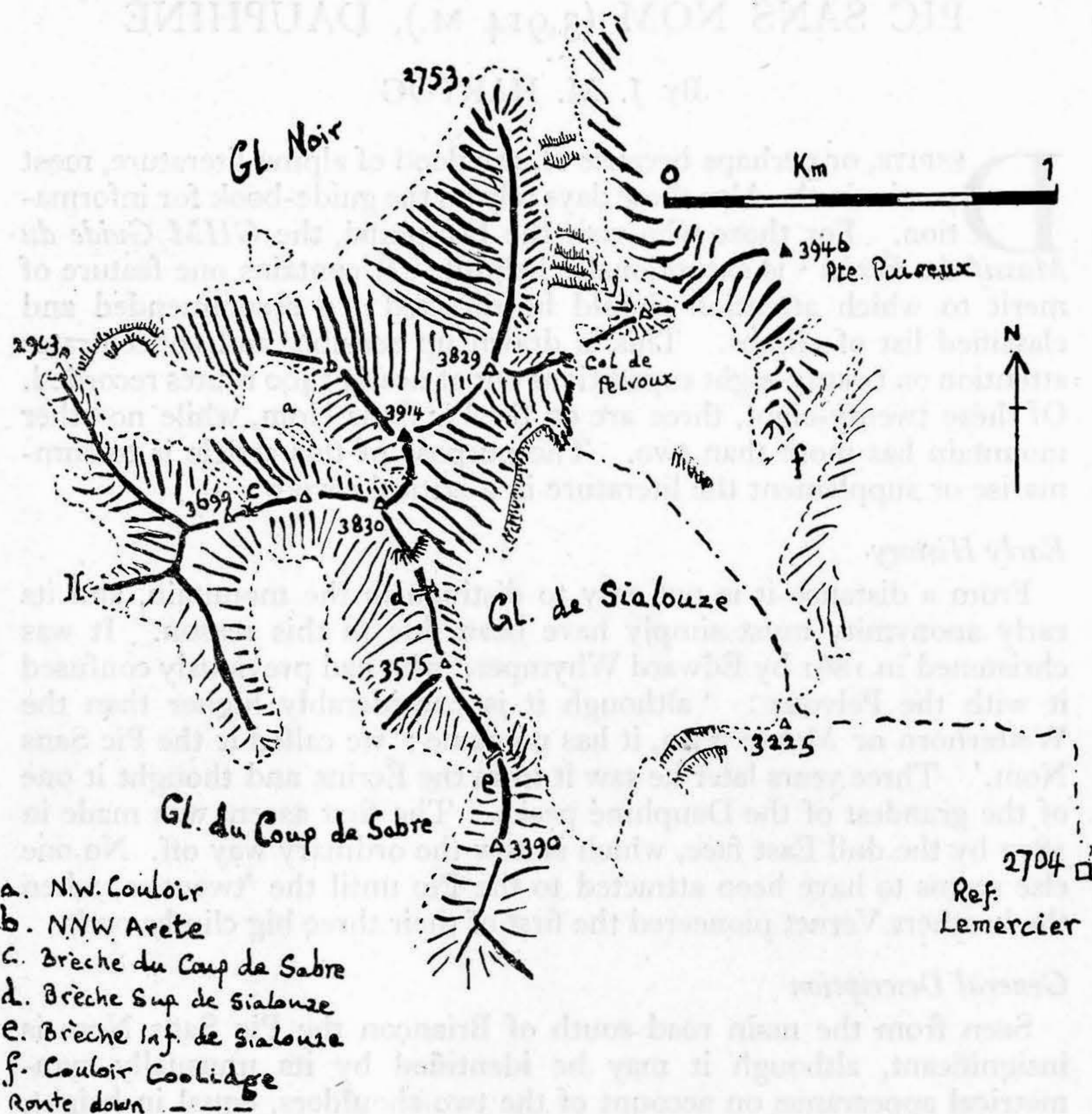
Seen from the main road south of Briançon the Pic Sans Nom is insignificant, although it may be identified by its unusually symmetrical appearance on account of the two shoulders, equal in height, north-east and south-west of the summit. Looking up the Vallouise, the dominating feature is the Pelvoux with a large snowy plateau on its top.

From the Écrins the Pic is more easily recognised as a separate mountain. The very steep North face, rising 1,000 m. from the Glacier Noir, forms part of that great wall stretching from the Ailefroide to the Pelvoux, which is as fine a rock barrier as any truly connected ridge in the Alps. The Coup de Sabre is a narrow 250-m. gash in this ridge, and the climb up from it is one of the major rock

¹ Devies and Laloue, *Guide du Massif des Écrins*, 1951, Paris (Arthaud), 2nd Edition, Vols. 1 and 2.

² Whymper, *Scrambles amongst the Alps*, 1871, London, 1st Edition, pp. 39 and 205.

routes of the Dauphiné—it is the West arête of the Pic Sans Nom. Not far away the North face is broken by the icy North-west couloir, which rises to the main ridge in the gap between the summit and the South-west shoulder.



PIC SANS NOM (after Vernet—by permission).

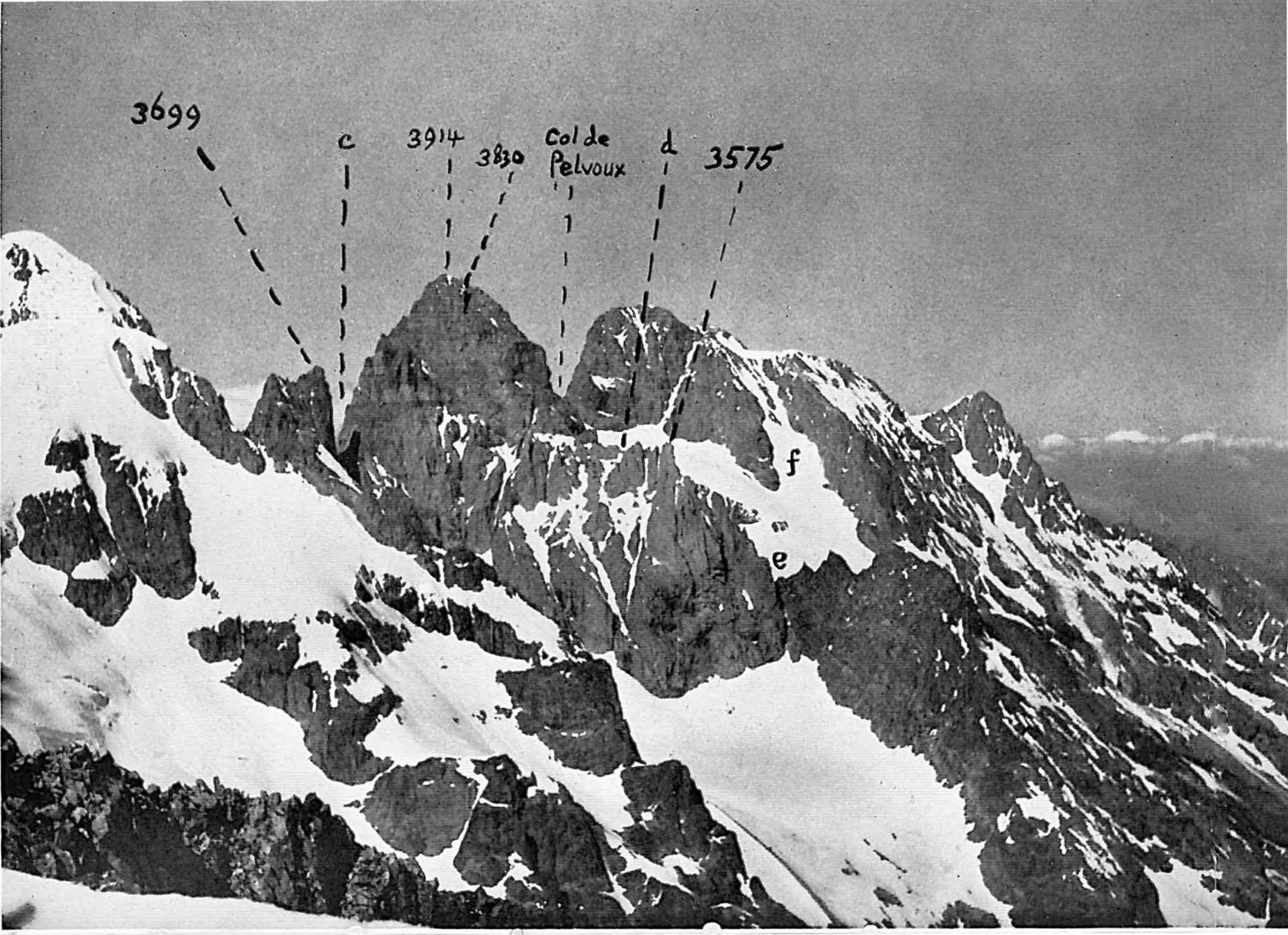
The variety and contrast of character make the mountain rather like an acquaintance who combines outstandingly attractive points with quite repellent traits. This will be seen from what follows. I say little about views from the mountain since these can be worked out from its height and position on a map.

Access

1. From the south. The Lemerrier hut, unguarded, but in good condition, is easily reached from the hamlet of Ailefroide by an alp just above the tree-line, covered with flowers of many sorts and a delight to the eye, even at the end of a long day. From here one starts for the

NORTH FACE OF PIC SANS NOM FROM GLACIER NOIR.





3699

c

3914

3830

Col de
Pelvoux

d

3575

f

e

PIC SANS NOM AND PELVOUX FROM COL DE L'AILEIROIDE. THE HEIGHTS AND

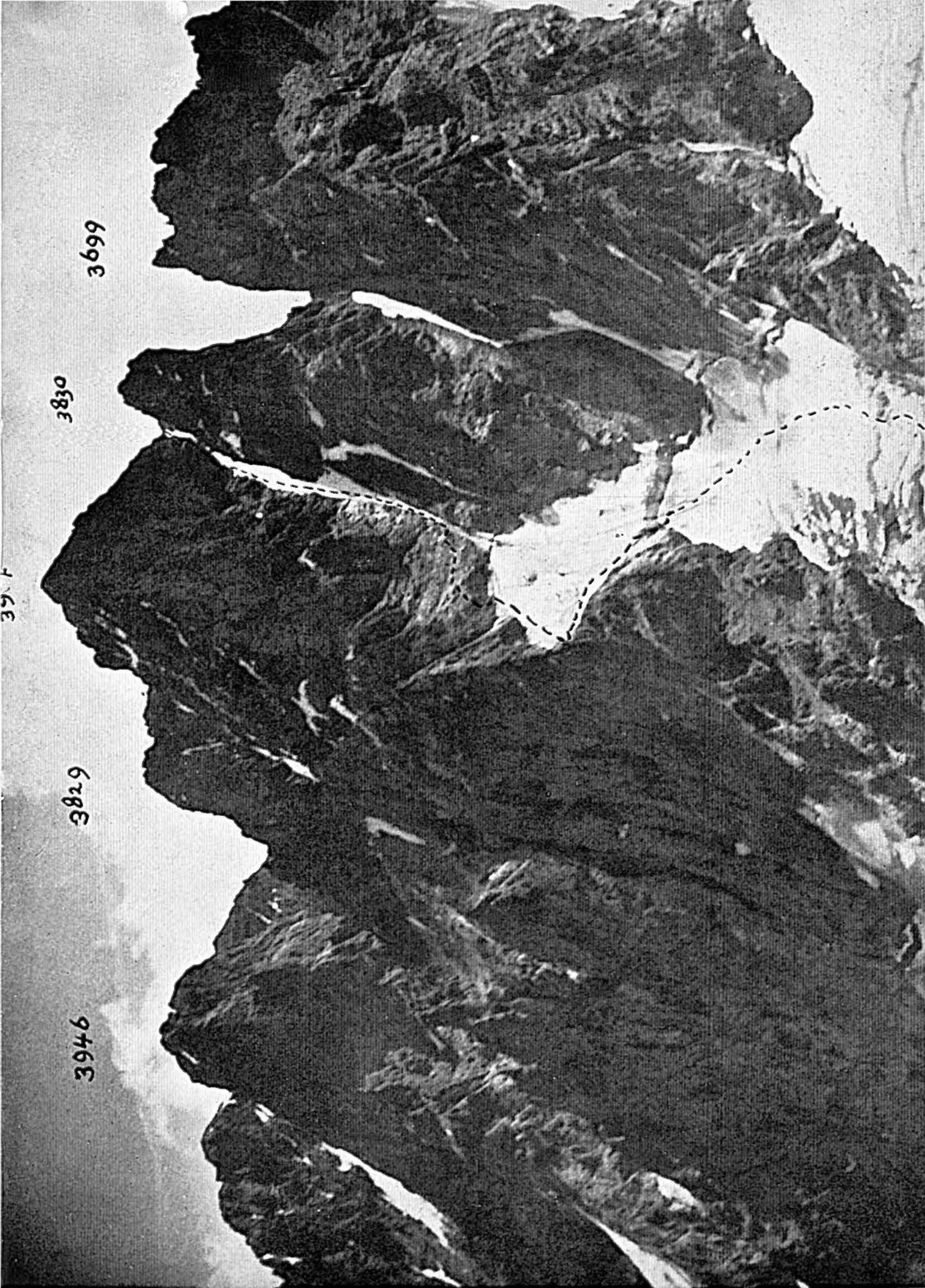
LETTERS CORRESPOND TO THE SKETCH MAP.

c. Brèche du Coup de Sabre.

d. Brèche Sup. de Sialouze.

e. Brèche Inf. de Sialouze.

f. Couloir Coolidge.

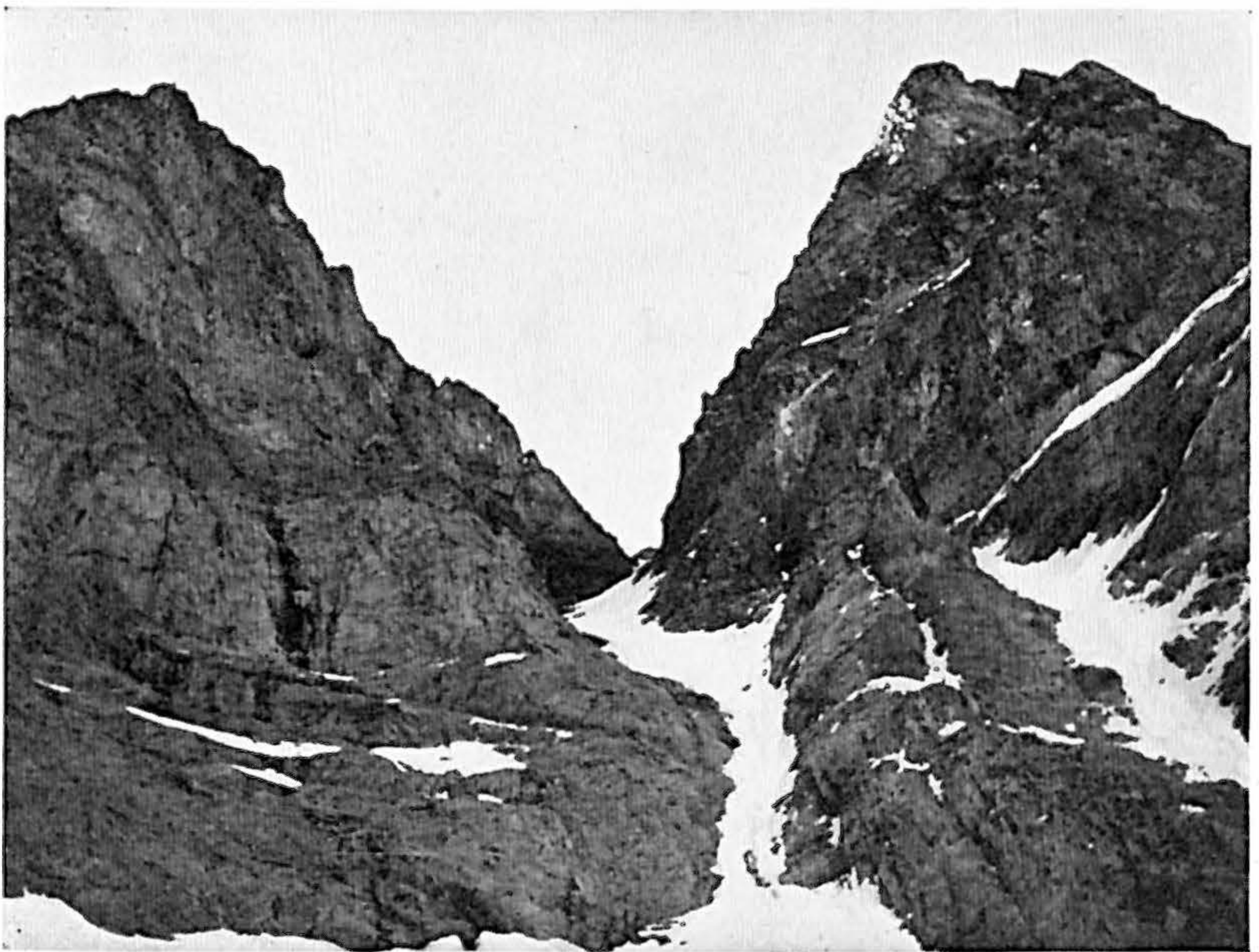


[Photo, W. J. H. Ellery.]

PIC SANS NOM FROM COL DE LA TEMPLE. ROUTE UP THE NORTH-WEST COULOIR IS MARKED. ON THE RIGHT IS THE COUP DE SABRE.



AILEFROIDE AND ARÊTE COSTE ROUGE SEEN FROM PIC SANS NOM.



LOOKING UP THE NORTH-WEST COULOIR (CAMERA TILTED). THE ICE LIES AT AN ANGLE OF 54° .

West arête and the Sialouze arête, and as well it is the natural objective of any party descending the East face.

The Sélé hut has been destroyed and is not yet replaced (1955).

2. From the north. The nearest hut is the Refuge Cézanne, reconstructed in 1955, from which it is $2\frac{3}{4}$ hours up the Glacier Noir to the foot of the North face of the Pic. There is a comfortable camping site on the lateral moraine below the Barre Blanche. I have spent the night on the upper plateau of the glacier opposite the North-west couloir on rocks which are hard and cold. There was water on the glacier.

It is said that a new C.A.F. hut is to be built on the Glacier Noir, and that will one day facilitate a number of ascents in the neighbourhood.

North Buttress

This is the edge of the North face overlooking the couloir leading to the Col du Pelvoux. It is 1,100 m. high and *très difficile*. The first ascent was made by the brothers Vernet, R. Leininger and J. Morin in August 1936 after waiting thirteen years to find it sufficiently free of verglas to justify the attempt. There is a harrowing account by Jean Vernet of negotiating a way across a slope of enormous boulders, each just in balance, but clearly dangerous to use for a sideways pull, as upsetting one might result in a fatal rock avalanche. This suggests the comparison in character with the Arête Coste Rouge made by Devies and Laloue,³ for on the latter climb I recall a similar place. Vernet and party made an intentional bivouac at 3,700 m. just below the crux (IV) on the fourth tower where some overhanging steps are surmounted to a platform by holds in cracks.⁴ A second ascent was made in 1944 by J. Franco and K. Gurékian, but no British party is known to have attempted the climb.

North Face Direct

This 1,000-m. wall, *extrêmement difficile*, was climbed by George and Russenberger⁵ in 1950 with two bivouacs, the ascent being a triumph in the face of difficulties. In the first place a storm came on and covered the upper part of the cliff in verglas; then while the leader was in the middle of an ice slope, a whole ledge of rock dropped from above, injuring him by direct hits and causing him to come off. Two pitons *d'assurance* had been used at the bottom of this ice pitch, because the first one inserted did not appear to be secure. At the time of the fall the second piton pulled out: presumably it took most strain. The climb does not seem to have been repeated.

North-north-west Arête

At least two parties have ascended this 950-m. arête, which forms the true right-hand retaining edge of the great North-west couloir, till it

³ Devies and Laloue, *Guide du Massif des Écrins*, 1951, Paris (Arthaud), 2nd Edition, Vols. 1 and 2.

⁴ J. Vernet, *Au Cœur des Alpes*, 1951, Paris (Arthaud).

⁵ L. George, *Alpinisme*, 1951, pp. 157-69.

steepens, and then turned away to join the North-face Direct route near the site of the George accident (see above). Although avoiding the difficulties and objective dangers on the lower part of the North face, there remains the risk of stonefall and verglas higher up. To avoid both requires luck as well as judgement.

North-west Couloir

This is one of the best ice climbs of the massif and its first ascent in 1925 was marked by a scene unique in alpine history.⁶ Lagarde, de Ségogne and Dalloz by chance met the brothers Vernet at Ailefroide one afternoon in the summer of 1925. Secretly both parties were intent on the couloir, though neither was prepared to disclose their objective. For both it would be the first climb of the season. There took place a diplomatic exchange of intentions for the morrow, which were given respectively as a training climb on the Pelvoux, and the Brèche du Coup de Sabre.

De Ségogne and party set off at 8.0 P.M., two hours ahead of the Vernets, and next morning took to the true left (west) side of the couloir on *verglacé* rocks and steep ice. They chose this side from study of photographs. The brothers followed, with increasing amazement at the crampon tracks on the Glacier Noir, but continued, keeping to the right (east) side of the couloir, which their reconnaissance the previous summer had showed to be less steep. The upper rimaye they turned by straightforward rocks, and found themselves at the bottom of 350 m. of ice rising at an average angle of 54°.

10.0 A.M. saw the two ropes level, the Vernets entranced by watching their rivals prancing in crampons up the great ice slope, a sight rarely seen by a quite separate party at close quarters. After some thirty minutes of climbing in parallel, exchanging verbal courtesies without recriminations, the parties amalgamated for the rest of the day, on the Vernets' side with Lagarde leading. The same amalgamated party (less Dalloz) made the second ascent of the Mayer-Dibona route up the Arête Coste Rouge a week later.

On July 18, 1955, with Richard Hobhouse I followed the Vernet route, starting up the ledges of séracs by which the Glacier Nord du Coup de Sabre falls 100 m. to the Glacier Noir. We crossed the lower rimaye by the avalanche cone below the *rigole* and had second breakfast on a rocky platform at the base of the North-north-west arête, from which we had a good view up the couloir. Luckily for us the lower half of the couloir was feasible in crampons without steps, but higher up, where the sun must have melted the surface, we had 60 m. continuous cutting. About half-way up we were caught in a small shower of stones falling free from the cliff above. It is very hard to spot accurately pieces dropping through the air in such circumstances, and avoiding action is almost impossible. We were both hit by fragments, and Hobhouse was badly bruised on the knee. Fortunately the sun does not reach the East wall of the couloir till midday and we were

⁶ de Ségogne, *La Montagne*, 1925, pp. 313-19.

soon out of danger. For the final 80 m. before the angle eased off we took to steep, and not entirely solid, rocks on the East side which allowed more rapid progress. Our times were: Glacier Noir, 05.40; Top of couloir, 13.30; Summit of Pic, 15.00.

West Arête

By all accounts this route, 450 m. high, is outstanding in the Dauphiné on account of its sustained hard (*très difficile*) climbing on sound, clean granite. Five years elapsed between the Vernets' preliminary explorations, when they identified the key passage, and the return of Jean Vernet with Pierre Allain, J. Leininger and J. Charignon in 1934 to achieve it. The same party inaugurated the South face of the Meije Direct the following week, which is similar in character though considerably longer, and on a mountain much harder to get off. The Meije route has recently been in vogue, while the West arête has been neglected.

Starting from the Brèche du Coup de Sabre, the way is sometimes on one side of the arête, sometimes on the other, and clearly a most enjoyable way up the mountain. At the top, one joins the North-west couloir and the South arête routes for prolonged scrambling to the main summit, which lies well back and remains invisible till shortly before one reaches it.

Arête de Sialouze and South Arête

The traverse of the Pic Sans Nom over the Aiguille de Sialouze is becoming a classic for British parties; its appeal is due to familiar virtues. The route is a natural one, without escapes; the rock is rough granite and on the whole good; the formation is varied, providing slabs, *dièdres*, chimneys, arêtes and rappels; the up-and-down type of ridge with eight main gendarmes ensures maintenance of interest and change of local scenery. Graded higher on the first ascent, it is now considered *difficile*, and can be confidently recommended to those accustomed to 'severes' in the British Isles as nowhere unduly taxing their efforts.

John Hobhouse and I reached the Brèche Inférieure de Sialouze on August 4, 1953, and were delighted by the ridge, for which the guide-book's instructions are quite adequate. The hardest moves (IV) are probably up the *dièdre* before the chief summit (3,575 m.), and surmounting the overhanging chockstone on the gendarme past the summit. The great slab lower down requires balance, but no more.

From the Brèche Supérieure one can make four rappels, some free, back down to the Glacier de Sialouze. We preferred to continue up the mountain, and found a change in character of rock as one mounts the South arête. At first this rises in a succession of easy slabs to an overhanging cliff which is turned on the right by a ledge at its base (with a large detached block) leading to a delicate corner (IV). This is the only pitch on the arête, and the couloir which follows is full of debris so typical of the East face. The top of this couloir is also the top of

the North-west couloir which comes up from the far side of the ridge. Our times were : Brèche Inf. de Sialouze, 07.30 ; Aiguille de Sialouze, 12.00 ; Brèche Sup. de Sialouze, 13.30 ; Summit of Pic, 15.00.

East Face

Owing to lack of features the guide-book is difficult to follow in its description, especially for those whose first experience of the face is its descent. One of the keywords, '*corniche*,' must be translated 'ledge' (and incidentally the French for a cliff road is *route en corniche*).

The first time I came down the Pic it seemed the broken upper rocks, covered everywhere by small debris which went shooting off down the steep broken face in cascades, were quite the most unpleasant slope I had ever been on. Below the rocky section a series of snowfields run across the mountain, abutting the top of a band of cliff 20-30 m. high which borders the glacier.

From the summit cairn one descends a couloir on the face immediately below, narrowing about 70 m. down where there is a rocky drop of 3 m. Thirty metres further down, it is possible to start a long traverse left (north-east) across a series of subsidiary ribs, ledges and gullies, descending to the largest snowfield on the face, which is seen well below and to the left. From the lower left (north-east) corner of this snowfield commences a horizontal traverse (cairn) directly above the band of cliffs, going towards the Col du Pelvoux. After crossing three minor couloirs, the descent lies over the top of a small rock buttress to the well-marked upper left arm of 'Y' couloir. This arm is crossed to a ledge under the cliff by means of which the snowy bed of the right-hand arm of the 'Y' is gained, and followed down to the glacier.

Below the initial couloir the face is so broken that there is no definite route until one starts the horizontal traverse above the bottom cliffs.

Time (without halts) from the summit to the Lemerrier hut : $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 hours (afternoon snow on glacier).