

MEMORIES

BY H. E. L. PORTER

IN my youth I was a voracious reader of all kinds of mountain literature, good, bad and indifferent, and in the course of my reading I made a collection of extracts, which appealed to my sense of the humorous or ridiculous. It included some laughter-provoking gibes at our venerable Club: 'Unfortunate is the man, who in exploring mountaineering follows the rules and regulations laid down by theoretical but inexperienced amateurs of certain Alpine Institutions. A practical mountaineer has nothing to learn from such misleading publications.' 'The constant suggestions to provide oneself with all sorts of expensive and cumbersome tools, axes, alpenstocks and other impedimenta are merely to swell the pockets of advertisers rather than safeguard the lives of intending mountaineers.' 'Personally, and I am speaking from a somewhat extensive experience, I owe my success and the lack of serious accidents in any of my mountaineering expeditions absolutely to the using none of the appliances recommended by the Alpine Club.'¹ What a contrast to the apocalyptic illusions entertained by Mr. F. A. Collins: 'The regular course in mountain-climbing required by the British Alpine Club is suggestive of the requirements in some University before the conferring of a degree. The training begins with a definite amount of rock and crag climbing among cliffs and mountains at home. Excellent preliminary experience is to be gained in Scotland. After satisfying the Club requirements by this preliminary course, the students of climbing next turn to the Swiss Alps for advance work. After passing this experience to the satisfaction of the Club examiners a course in climbing is taken in the Caucasus. Next in turn the student climbs in the southern alps. His European experience is now complete, and he must travel to New Zealand for special work. This acquired, he in turn climbs the mountains of Siberia. At the end of this term he is qualified to essay the climbing of the Himalayas, which forms so to speak the post-graduate course in mountaineering.'²

Magazine stories occasionally added gems of the first water to my museum: 'He was a splendid climber, they were told, but no courage, no cleverness could avail to save him, when the first guide fell so

¹ H. S. Landor, *Tibet and Nepal*, pp. 6-7.

² F. A. Collins, *Mountain Climbing*, p. 77.

suddenly into a crevasse. "But some of the party were saved?" Dr. Kennedy said. "Yes, through the courage and devotion of the second guide, who followed M. Boudinot. He it was who cut the rope and saved the rest of the party." A leader-writer in *The Times* once gave vent to the same odd idea of legitimate self-defence in peril: 'The pound may be likened to an experienced alpine climber on a steep slope, who has been dragged out of his foothold by his heavier and less experienced fellows, and has somehow managed to sever the rope which bound him to his fellows and to find a way that leads back to the hut, while the others are wandering blindly in search of the Baedeker route. His position is perilous but by no means desperate. He has to pick his path with circumspection, but with luck he may yet reach the hut first.'³

A curious hybrid, called the *Climbers' Pocket Book*, supplied me with some good material. It purported to give good advice to would-be climbers on medical and other matters. Here are some specimens: 'There is a method of meeting a stone which will probably hit one, which only needs presence of mind for the adoption and will take off a great amount of the shock. Watch the stone most closely by looking over one shoulder, not facing it with the body.' From what harrowing experience of the author, I wonder, does this recommendation emanate?: 'The sudden madness of a member of the party might seriously endanger the lives of all the rest. It would be exceedingly dangerous to attempt to produce unconsciousness by blows on the head. He should be outwitted and coerced.' He also gives a long list of Don'ts, in the concoction of which he surely underrates the intelligence of his readers: 'Don't forget the direction of the crevasses points the road. Don't allow form to minimise safety. Don't forget level snow hides crevasses. Don't forget the Bergschrunds when descending. Don't jump over a crevasse. Don't take more than five ever.' This last oracular remark leaves one in doubt if he refers to the optimum number of a party or the maximum number of drinks compatible with safety.

My final extract takes pride of place in my esteem as the very worst description of a mountain ever penned by man: 'The Matterhorn is one of the most impressive mountains in the world on account of its apparent obelisk; and the summit is as exposed as any summit. The mountains around seem very fierce, and the precipices most vertical. The position is similar to being up in a balloon, just like standing up in the air, and next to Mont Blanc it is as good a mountain, from which to see the mountain system of the Alps, as one can imagine.'⁴

My prologue is intended to illustrate a lighter side of climbing forty

³ *The Times*, October 22, 1931.

⁴ Samuel Turner: *My Climbing Adventures in Four Continents*, p. 36.

to fifty years ago, where writers, either through ignorance, naïveté, or self-conceit aroused quite unintended mirth in their readers. With the enormous increase of Clubs and Journals and general competence in the modern climbing world this lighter side seems to me to have almost vanished. Writers do not seem to give themselves away as they used to do, so that of late years my collection has languished for want of new material. I proceed now to the more serious aspect of that distant age by recalling some of my early guideless seasons, before the piton and karabiner, the Prusik knot and the running belay, the duvet jacket and the Zdarsky sack had revolutionised the whole method and outlook of the ambitious mountaineer.

I will begin in 1912, when George Mallory invited Hugh Pope and me to join him in the Alps. George had profited from an apprenticeship of several seasons under R. L. G. Irving and one with Geoffrey Young, and was already remarkably efficient in every branch of the sport. He had also developed a wonderful eye for possible new routes on great mountains, which he was eager to translate from dreams into realities. It was Hugh's first season in the Alps, my first guideless season and George's first as leader of a party. We started with ten days of intensive effort at Arolla, doing Pigne d'Arolla by the face and the long ridge of the Douves Blanches among other things. It was a bad season, and when we moved on to the Alp Bricolla with designs on a new route up the West face of the Dent Blanche devised by George, no major peak at Zermatt had been climbed for a fortnight. This face consists of the face proper and a shallow scoop at the head of the Ferpècle glacier separated by a steep bluff of dark red rock. This bluff, which from the silence of the guide-book seemed to be virgin, was George's objective. It proved to be a 700 ft. wall, split by a series of chimneys in very fair condition, up which Hugh led us with his usual inimitable grace. The angle eased off above and without much deviation from our line we struck the summit ridge some ten minutes from the top after eight hours' climbing. We abseiled down the First Gendarme, and soon after struck the tracks of a Zermatt party, who had been forced to retreat. These led us pleasurably down the Wandfluh, and we reached Zermatt after a seventeen-hour day. There was an amusing sequel to this climb. George, already a junior member of the Club, inserted a modest note about it in the JOURNAL. Our pride in our achievement was duly deflated, when in the next number the great Douglas Freshfield ridiculed our idea that we had trodden new ground. He himself with three friends and two guides had taken almost exactly the same line in 1867, but as they had failed to reach the summit for lack of time, he had kept silence about it, because 'at that time young climbers were shy of recording a variation which resulted in a failure.' Chastened by the frown of the mighty, we yet wondered of what known

route ours was a variation, and if we were guilty of presumption in recording a success.

In 1913 I accompanied Raymond Bicknell to Chamonix, my first visit to an attractive village, very different to the bustling town of today. Raymond was a forceful and original character, unique in having been elected to the Club on a purely Norwegian qualification. A master of ice-craft, his massive build prevented him excelling on rock, but by dint of constant practice he was able to follow anywhere without wasting time, an invaluable asset on an Alpine ridge. Whereas George Mallory's enthusiasm was directed mainly to new routes, Raymond's preference was for routes of merit, which had not become popular, especially if there was no record of an ascent by amateurs. Our first climb, the Aiguille du Plan by Fontaine's route up the West face, was a typical choice. It was not popular among the local guides, having a reputation for stonefall, which after previous inspection we decided was not necessarily justified. There was a guided French party just ahead of us at the start, with whom we played Box and Cox all day on slightly different lines. On our return to the Montanvert, Simond, the manager, asked Raymond to write an account of the climb for the local paper. One sentence he wrote ran: 'No stones were observed to fall throughout the day.' The account appeared in due course, with the negative omitted! We next attacked the Aiguille Verte by the Moine ridge, but had to retire close to the summit owing to the atrocious condition of the final stretch. It was one of those tantalising seasons, which always promise to be fine only to deceive at the crucial moment. Rather than idle in huts we decided to walk round Mont Blanc, so we traversed the dreary wastes of the Col de Miage to Val Veni and Courmayeur, arriving with a minimum of wardrobe, weary and bedraggled, to be welcomed like princes at the palatial Bertolini's. Next day we plodded through relentless rain-cloud to the Jorasses hut, finding it by a miracle just as the last light faded. Inside was a large and totally unexpected stack of firewood, a gift of the gods. It had been brought up the day before, as we found out at Lavachey next day, by a party who could not muster a single match between them. Wet through as we were we had few qualms of conscience about using it. On the morrow, still in rain, we crossed Col Ferret to La Fouly, where the sun came out so benignly as to lure us into an impromptu bivouac high up on the slopes of Mont Dolent with designs on the Neuvaz glacier route. All in vain. By dawn, after we had done 1,500 ft. more by lantern, the rain teemed down and drove us down the valley and up to Champex. Thence we crossed Col du Tour by compass in thick cloud and so returned to Montanvert after six days' wandering, during which we had seldom been dry and had hardly met a living soul outside the valleys.

In 1914, at the end of July, Raymond Bicknell, Claude Elliott and I, defying the lowering clouds of war, left London for Chamonix, spent a night at Lognan, failed on the Chardonnet with the added indignity of a long ride on an avalanche, and escaped with difficulty back to London, all in the course of four days.

And so to 1919, when George Mallory, Claude Elliott and I, all released from the tyranny of the war-machine and thirsting for the Alps, all supplied with brand-new passports (a horror that only Russia had required in pre-war days) crossed the Channel bound for Dauphiné and found ourselves almost to our own surprise in Chamonix instead. Supplies of all sorts, especially food, were very short, but the mountains were the same as ever. Our first expedition was a light-hearted but abortive attempt on the Requin as a training walk. The snow was soft, our new Frost rope very refractory and our physical condition below par, but we revelled in our pains. Next we proceeded to the Torino hut on the Col du Géant. On arrival we were hailed by a party of exuberant Italians, and an amusing dialogue ensued between them and George in fluent French. The Italians: 'Hurrah for the brave Americans, it was you and us who won the war!' George pretending to be pleased: 'Ah, you do us too much honour, the credit all belongs to you gallant Frenchmen!' The Italians saw the joke and bore no malice. Unfortunately Claude's troublesome knee had begun to creak on the way up and was in full revolt next day on the ascent to the Tour Ronde, from which George hoped to get a good view of the ribs above the head of the Brenva glacier for use on a future occasion. The knee was not amenable to reason and Claude reluctantly went home. Left to ourselves we resolved to investigate the Mer de Glace face of the Charmoz. George had been intrigued by a note in the *A.J.* describing an ascent by A. B. Thorold with Josef Pollinger and Rudolf Lochmatter in 1899, which concluded with the remark: 'Owing to falling stones the whole ascent is dangerous.' George could not see why a well-chosen route on this face should be any more subject to stonefall than the neighbouring Grépon and was eager to go and explore. Apart from Thorold the only attempt we knew of was that of R. W. Broadrick in 1901.⁵ No details of his line were available, but he had had to retreat when only 200 ft. from the top. We left Montanvert at 2.45, carrying only one sack with a minimum of food and clothing, one piton and 120 ft. of line in case of emergencies, in order to leave George unimpeded to cope with the difficulties, contoured round the shoulder onto the Trélaporte glacier, crossed it and traversed nondescript rock, till we came to a large cairn, which we imagined to be a landmark for Grépon parties. We then mounted a long chimney to the level of a great red tower away to our left and halted to study the

⁵ *A.J.* 21. 535.

splendid rock-face above us and decide on our route. Our objective, we agreed, must be a minor ridge rising out of a conspicuous red wall and eventually joining the main arête to the left of the pitiless slabs falling to the Aiguille de la République. We arrived at the base of the wall at 10.30, estimating that we had some 500 to 600 ft. still to make and all the major problems ahead of us. Here we had to traverse left into a chimney overlooking a great snow couloir, which we discovered later from Josef Pollinger himself was the route of the Thorold party till they escaped from it with difficulty in its higher reaches. It looked to us a death-trap, a most unlikely choice for sane men, so we proceeded to tackle the chimney, which was in two storeys separated by a chock-stone, with a through-route blocked by ice which George had to excavate morsel by morsel, a lengthy task. Above, the bed of the chimney was an unclimbable bulge, but the left wall flattened out, the angle between showing a miniature crack. George mounted my shoulder and wriggled out of sight. He soon reached a good stance and let down an extra loop. I grasped it at the third throw and prepared to advance. The only hold, a poor one at that, was at the level of my head. I grasped the loop, gasped and panted, George hauled with a will, I attained the hold and saw George smiling above me and separating us a minute 10 ft. crack, into which he had inserted his axe and climbed up it, the Knubel trick. I used the loop again. The next 20 ft., two parallel cracks and a steep slab, were also very severe. The whole episode had cost us $1\frac{1}{2}$ hrs, and it was already noon. We climbed another long chimney and emerged into warm sunshine. The ridge now broadened and gave more choice. For an hour we sped up perfect protogine, sensational and exhilarating. In a mood of cheerful confidence we were nearing the main ridge, when emerging over a mantelshelf we were faced by a grim red tower mocking us with a smooth and vertical grin, apparently barring all further progress. To the right, hopeless slabs. To the left, the corner of the tower was almost rectangular, the undercut wall beyond falling steeply to the same old couloir 200 ft. below. It was already 3 p.m., the summit was in cloud and the possibility of forced retreat began to nag at our minds. But I had one great asset, an unwavering belief in George, so that I could gaily urge him on to feats of strength and balance impossible to a weaker mortal. There was a big knob to the left of the tower projecting from our little platform. Over this George disappeared and the rope ran slowly out. My hopes began to rise, when I found it coming back, but when near at hand he called me along. He had succeeded in traversing to a corner some 25 ft. away, but failing to get above me had come back to help me round the awkward start. Soon we were together at the far corner in a situation of extreme exposure. I drove my axe into a woefully inadequate patch of snow as a symbolic



RAYMOND BICKNELL AND CLAUDE ELLIOTT NEAR THE SUMMIT
OF THE GRIVOLA.



RAYMOND BICKNELL, CLAUDE ELLIOTT AND L. G. SHADBOLT
ON THE COL DE MIAGE.

belay, while George scaled a 12 ft. wall of extreme severity, followed by a scabrous little crack back to the right. So we circumvented the red tower and came to the final obstacle, a gigantic block which yielded to combined tactics. On the main arête a few rope-lengths took us to the summit, and by 4.15 we were looking for and finding tracks to guide us down the unknown Nantillons glacier. At 5.15 we ate our last scrap of food, ran the gauntlet of the upper and lower séracs unscathed and with puffy feet and excoriated hands re-entered Montanvert at 7.45.

Three days later we realised another of George's dreams, a new route up the Chamonix side of the Aiguille du Midi, which we had spent the whole of a perfect rest-day studying from above the Plan des Aiguilles. It proved a sound and interesting route, free from objective danger, and hard work all the way. Then we returned to the Torino hut to try out George's design on the Brenva ribs, but were foiled by a storm. Instead we joined forces with Pigou and McLean in an unpremeditated descent without passports into Italy. Purtud, where no English had been seen for three years, regaled us with heavenly omelettes and instructions how to avoid the *carabinieri* on our way to the Quintino Sella hut for the traverse of Mont Blanc back to Montanvert, by which we rounded off a memorable season.

In 1920 Raymond Bicknell was in command and Leslie Shadbolt and I made up the party. We started well in the Dauphiné with traverses of the Ecrins and Meije, accompanied by a British flea which had attached itself to Raymond in the Newcastle sleeping-car. They were both first ascents of the season. On the Meije we lost a sack, containing a valuable camera and all our food except a tin of sardines, a mouthful of cheese and a bar of chocolate at the Pyramide Duhamel soon after dawn and were faced with the difficult decision, to go on or to go back. We went on, and after a long and strenuous day arrived at the Rocher de l'Aigle hut at 6.25. There we found some hunks of stale bread, relics of the year before, which when boiled into a soup gave us vigour enough to reach La Grave with the last ray of light, to be welcomed as heroes by the hotel guests, who had been watching us all day through the telescope. Moving on to Argentière we survived two sub-alpine perils en route, one from the reckless driver of a charabanc over the hairpin bends of the Col du Galibier, the other from an excited *wagon-lit* attendant who objected to us standing in his corridor, the only standing-room in the midnight train at St. Michel de Maurienne. He worked himself into a foaming passion, brandishing a bottle round our heads and shouting 'I hate ze English, you shall never see England again', until forced to subside into a sulky silence by the indignant protests of his aroused sleepers. In the Chamonix valley food was more plentiful this year and we could lay in a good

stock of provisions for our next rather ambitious programme, the traverse of Mont Dolent via the Brèche de l'Amône and down into Italy followed by the traverse of the Col des Grandes Jorasses and so back into France. This Mont Dolent route, first achieved by Messrs Kugy and Bolaffio with Croux and Proment in 1906 and again by Dr. Thomas's party in 1911, had been Raymond's favourite project for many years. Now the time had come. We left the hut at 3 and were at the head of the glacier before dawn. As the light strengthened, we looked with some misgiving at the wall we had to surmount to reach the brèche. It was defended by a gigantic schrund, bridged only on the extreme left and extreme right. The wall itself was fissured by a shallow couloir leading almost directly to the brèche. The schrund yielded easily on the left, but it cost Raymond an hour of hard labour cutting in hard, steep snow back to the entrance of the couloir. For 300 ft. the rocks gave no trouble, then came the pitch of which Kugy writes: 'A smooth slab, quite 70 ft. high, rose so steep that it defied our efforts to climb it unaided. Croux tried a bold manoeuvre with the rope.' I mounted the slab with increasing difficulty on minute holds, came to the crux, took the plunge and emerged onto easy ground, which led us to the final obstacle below the brèche. Here our predecessors had gone left and reached the ridge above the col by an overhang, but there was a direct and obvious route to hand straight ahead in a 80 ft. chimney, culminating in a neat hand traverse into the brèche itself, into which we made a jubilant entry at 10.20. Proceeding we soon had an impressive lesson on the character of the ridge, which cost Auguste Blanc his life on the second ascent. One of us dislodged a stone which fell six feet on the Swiss side and landed on a vast block weighing at least a ton. To our amazement the block silently heeled over and fell with ever increasing momentum and with other masses of rock and snow following in its wake, which careered in a colossal avalanche down the glacier, while the ridge itself trembled under our feet. Constant vigilance was necessary, especially above the point where the three frontiers meet. We relaxed on the summit at 3.15, and trudged happily down into Italy. At Lavachey, we were welcomed by the same charming *contadina* of pre-war days, who feasted us forthwith on a twelve-egg omelette in a deserted dining room. Two days later in heavy weather and with heavy sacks we toiled up to the Jorasses hut, from which next day we climbed Pointe Whymper by the Hasenclever variation, being greeted on the top by a crystal clear view of our recently acquired friends, Ecrins and Meije. This was a pleasant preparation for our attack on the Col des Grandes Jorasses, the early history of which, associated with the controversy between Mr. Middlemore and the orthodox, had long fascinated Raymond. We had a perfect day for our adventure. Starting at 1.30, each of us on the long

trail to the foot of the col was brooding over his own secret fear. Raymond, one of whose crampons had broken in two on Mont Dolent, was appalled at the prospect of having to cut steps down 'the first nearly vertical 250 ft. of blue ice, seen from the Montanvert'⁶ mentioned by Broome. My Austrian guide-book alarmed me with its description of a complicated rock-route, by which peril from stone-fall in the couloir could be evaded. Leslie's fear was the more general one of spending hours in a death-trap. In the event, not one of these fears was found to have any justification. By 4.30 we had crossed the schrund, and, led by Leslie on his super-crampons, were racing up the steep, hard snow into the jaws of the couloir itself. In it each problem as it presented itself was solved without delay, and at 8.45 we were enjoying a rest on a rock-island in the middle of the ice below the fantastic cornice which crowned the col. Raymond then stood on our two ice-axes driven horizontally and poked a hole through the cornice. A moment later a jubilant cry assured us that all was well. Instead of a nearly vertical 250 ft. of blue ice, all we had to contend with was a 50° slope of excellent snow, which Raymond made short work of despite the handicap of a missing crampon. The rest of the day was uneventful, and we were back at our base tired and happy by 7.30.

When we reassembled for the 1921 season with the addition of Claude Elliott, Raymond announced his new and revolutionary scheme to telescope our usual training period into one ascent of a 4,000 m. peak. The Grand Paradis from the Victor Emmanuel hut was selected for the experiment, and after seven hours of purgatorial endeavour the peak did in fact succumb. A photograph of the party prostrate on the summit still adorns my diary. Raymond's belief in his new theory was reinforced by a successful ascent of the Grivola direct from Dégioz two days later. Moving on to Courmayeur we crossed the Col de Miage to Contamines, on the way marvelling at the debris of the avalanche which had swept down the whole length of the Brenva the previous November, coming to rest only just short of the Chapelle de Notre Dame. We returned over the Aiguille des Glaciers, a very decrepit mountain. Our last act as a quartette was a frolic up the Dent du Géant in perfect conditions, after which Claude and Leslie had to go home. Raymond and I were left to our own devices. For years past Raymond had been plied by his friends with three questions: Have you been up (1) Mont Blanc, (2) the Matterhorn, (3) the Grépon? So far he had always had to say 'No' to all three. Now was the moment to eliminate Mont Blanc from the list. Owing to weather doubts we did not leave the Torino till 4. Trying to make up the lost time we pushed ourselves too hard over Mont Blanc du Tacul and Mont Maudit and were distinctly jaded by the time we reached the Col de la

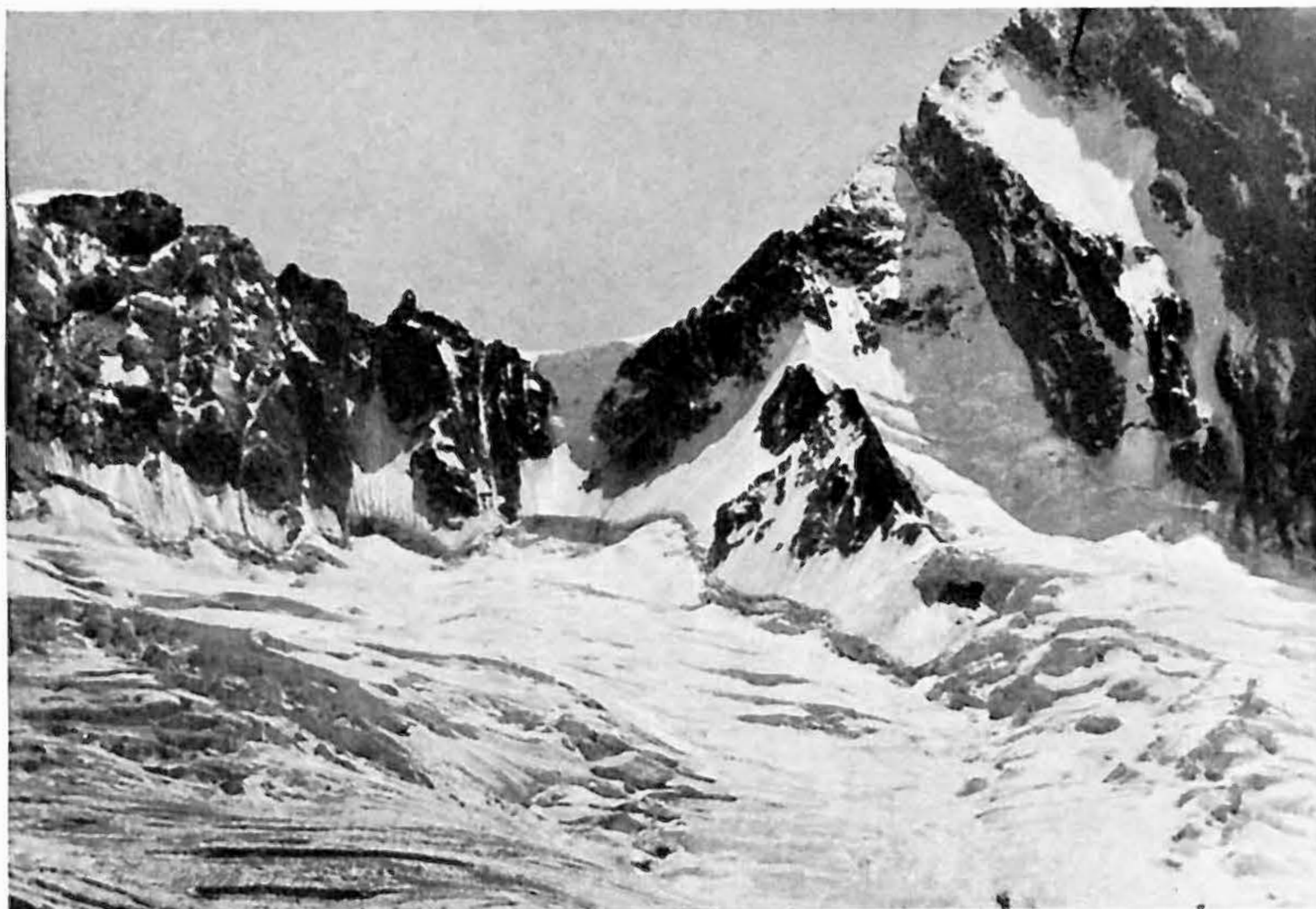
⁶ *A.J.* 19. 413.

Brenva at 12.30. A murky mist now obscured the summit and was creeping down the Mur de la Côte. Scarcity of oxygen, a long stretch of ice and the necessity to steer by compass combined to slow us down on this last 1,600-ft. rise, and it was already 4 p.m. when we staggered across the summit and followed welcome tracks to the haven of the Vallot hut. Fortified, however, by a hot drink and the lifting of the mist, we made what haste we could to the Grands Mulets and reached it with the last light. Keen to regain Courmayeur by a less familiar route than the Col du Géant we chose the romantic but seldom visited Col des Hirondelles, and suffered our first and last involuntary benightment on its slopes. The schrund was quite impregnable except on the extreme right, from which it looked feasible to us to climb snow and rocks up to the ridge and drop down onto the col, a possibility to which Leslie Stephen alludes in his account of the first ascent. We tried it, but after many hours of toil with 200 ft. of smooth rock still above us we had to admit defeat and reconcile ourselves to an incredibly cold night out on the face. Humbled, we crossed the Col du Géant to Purtud. Next day, as we were idling out of doors, an old man passed by. Suddenly he picked himself up and leapt nimbly over a 5 ft. watercourse. Raymond had an idea and stalked him to make sure. It was Douglas Freshfield on his way over the Col de Chécouri. He lunched with us and departed. Soon after Sir Alexander Kennedy turned up at the inn. He had come over the Col de Chécouri. Old friends, they were staying together in Courmayeur. Both wanted to do the Col that morning, but could not agree about the direction, and neither would give way.

1922 was one of those years when most parties spent the fine days walking up to huts and the wet ones coming down again. We went to the Oberland with Grindelwald as our centre. We took much exercise, saw a great many waterfalls and gorges but very few mountain tops. So we returned in 1923 and fared much better. Our great day was that on which we traversed the Jungfrau from the Guggi hut, a fascinating ice-climb, which in those days had a reputation of being beyond the compass of an amateur party by reason of its length and difficulty. It is a climb of infinite charm and kept us alert in every faculty during the eight hours we spent on the ascent from hut to summit. On the top were two parties who had been watching our progress towards the end. One was Swiss and complimentary, wanting to know our names. The other was American with a surly local guide, who was fool enough to assert that we had had a guide's staircase to show us the way. During a hurried tea at the Scheidegg in the afternoon we learnt that our doings had been watched with interest through the telescope and the courtly manager expressed amazement at our speed. Nevertheless at Grindelwald that evening

rumours were already current that we had followed in the footsteps of a guided American party! In fact we had had the whole face to ourselves and every trace of steps had been washed out by the storms of the previous week. Our next peak was the Finsteraarhorn *via* the Strahlegg and Agassizjoch. The joy of the day was ruined by the one and only crevasse incident in which we were ever involved as a party. The serious work was over, and we were standing bunched together on an innocuous surface of level snow, when Leslie suddenly vanished, engulfed by a narrow, perfectly invisible crevasse. We were on the rope in a trice and he only went four or five feet in. Unluckily one arm got entangled in the rope and the jerk dislocated his shoulder. In his struggle to get out the shoulder went back with an audible click, but tendons had been damaged and the pain was great as we did the long trek over the Grünhornlücke, down to Concordia and over to the Eggishorn Hotel. It was the end of his climbing for the year. We went on to Zermatt and girded ourselves to grapple with Raymond's second 'task' peak, the Matterhorn. Leaving at 2 with a porter to carry a sack as far as the glacier we crossed the Breuiljoch and attained the Italian hut above the Col du Lion at 1 p.m., shivering in an icy wind, thanks to which we had the hut to ourselves all night. The hut was filthy, and we spent the afternoon ejecting rancid fat, mouldy corks, dirty tins and other garbage for the hungry choughs to batten on. Leaving at 5 next morning we battled with a wind strong enough to imperil the balance and with ice-feathers bedevilling all the innumerable fixed ropes. By 9 we were enjoying a rest in bright sunshine a few feet below the Italian summit, from which we watched with amusement the Hörnli parties with one exception being shepherded off the Swiss peak by their guides within five minutes of their arrival. We had no reason to hurry and were content to saunter down to Zermatt at our leisure.

The Weisshorn by the Schalligrat had long been on Raymond's programme, as a great climb not yet trodden by a British guideless party. Two days after the Matterhorn we hired a porter to help with our loads to the Weisshorn hut, but changed our minds when we got near the glacier. The country between the hut and the Schallijoch looked too complicated for us to traverse in the early hours with any hope of achieving the peak and getting down to the valley, so we decided on a voluntary bivouac on the joch itself. There we built a 2 ft. wall to moderate the blast of the bitter north wind and put on every stitch of clothing, but by midnight the cold was too intense to be borne. We killed some time over breakfast and boot-thawing, then at 1.45 in brilliant moonlight advanced over the first easy stages traversing under the ridge to a gap, where we tied ourselves to rocks and awaited dawn struggling with an overmastering desire to go to sleep. The first great



COL DES HIRONDELLES.



RAYMOND BICKNELL AND L. G. SHADBOLT AT THE SCHRUND
BELOW THE SCHNEEHORN, GUGGI ROUTE.

gendarme, encountered almost at once before we had begun to warm up, proved to be the severest obstacle of the whole day. It was succeeded by an endless series of towers, most of them taken direct and almost all of them connecting with the one above most pleasantly by a snowy nick without loss of height. We had only 2,500 ft. of height to make and had hoped that five hours would suffice. But the night had taken heavy toll of our energy and our hands were too worn from much climbing to enjoy the very rough rock of which the ridge is composed. By the time we had reached the great Red Tower, the sixth from the top, our pace was lagging sadly. We traversed under it and the next. Four to go. Three conquered with a halt on each. Only one more. We pull ourselves together and at 9.50 stand on the delicate cone, where the three great ridges meet. A glorious moment. A sip of brandy and a hasty meal, and we were off down the East ridge, thankful to have steps and good snow to help us on our way. We had had quite enough by the time we collapsed into chairs on the verandah of the Randa hotel at 4.30.

In 1924 and 1925 my climbs were mostly with guides. I move on to 1926, the year of the great inflation of the franc, which fluctuated round about 200 to the £1, though prices had hardly begun to rise and everything was dirt cheap. Pension at the Montanvert was only 6 francs a day, and the management by far the best we had ever met. The party was Claude Elliott, David Pye, Jim Butler and myself, and our chief ambition was to traverse Mont Blanc from the Tête Rousse Pavillon *via* Aiguille and Dôme du Goûter. The train from Chamonix was very late at St. Gervais, and the last train to the Col de Voza, though supposed to be a connexion, had left. The stationmaster was adamant in refusing to put on an extra. It looked like checkmate. In desperation we asked him the price of a 'Special'. A thousand francs cash down, was the reply. We counted our resources. We could just pay for the train, but would have nothing left for the Pavillon. Suddenly with a cry of triumph Claude produced a £5 note, tucked away in a pocket by mistake. A hurried dash to an adjacent bank netted exactly the required sum, and without undue delay we set off on the first stage up Mont Blanc in a special train at nominal cost. At the Pavillon we found R. W. Lloyd with Josef Pollinger, *père et fils*, about to do their great ice-climb on the Aiguille de Bionnassay. Lloyd disliked being disturbed in the early hours before the time of his own departure, and tried to persuade us that there was no point in our starting before 3 at the earliest for a route which should not take us more than six hours. But prudent amateurs on an unknown climb must allow time for mistakes, and we were non-committal. In fact, we were away at 1.30 next morning and were high up on the face of the Aiguille du Goûter before we saw the lantern of the Lloyd party moving across

the glacier below us. Dawn appeared in a marvellous gradation of colours as we mounted the broad bosom of the Dôme du Goûter, and we topped the summit of Mont Blanc at 7.30, exactly six hours as foretold by Lloyd. Fearing frostbite from the arctic wind we stayed only a moment to absorb the peerless view of old friends all round the horizon, before plunging down the highroad to the Grands Mulets. As we approached Chamonix some hours later a girl stopped us and asked if we had been up Mont Blanc. We said, 'Yes.' 'So now,' she replied, 'you are saying to yourselves "Something accomplished, something done".' It struck us at the time as a rather jejune remark, but in retrospect I suppose there was some truth in it.

With this ascent I close the account of my guideless heyday. Thereafter with the exception of an unforgettable summer with Marcel Kurz in the Southern Alps in 1927, most of my climbing was done with guides, gradually diminishing in intensity up to my last 4,000 m. peak, the Breithorn, in 1954 in the company of Marcel Kurz and my wife, and dwindling with advancing age to wandering from valley to valley over high passes in the same delectable company. It will doubtless all seem very dull to modern tigers compared with their own fantastic feats. I have never seen them at work, but I read their articles and books, I listen to their lectures and I see them in action on the screen. I marvel wholeheartedly at their agility, endurance and ingenuity. I have no doubt whatever that they get every whit as much pleasure out of their acrobatics as we did out of our simpler methods. Yet I can't help feeling that something infinitely precious, though hard to define, has gone astray in the Iron Age. Fifty years ago George Mallory in his 'Mountaineer as Artist'⁷ drew an enchanting comparison between a great alpine climb and a classic symphony, elaborating the theme at some length and with convincing detail. How different are the 'movements' of the modern masterpiece, the great North face of the Alps, the *via direttissima* of the Dolomites. In them there is no peace, no harmony, only discordant jazz, harsh drummings of metal spikes into crucified mountains. Free climbing on a great precipice is a thing of superlative beauty. Can anyone find beauty in the technique of piton driving or the spider's web of cordage which ensures the relentless crawl up the dièdre and the overhang? I sometimes wonder to what unimaginable extravagances of physical prowess the next generation can hope to aspire, when the last refinements of the artificial have been exhausted. For youth is restless and must at all costs surpass the deeds of its ancestors. Good luck to them.

⁷ C.C.J. 1914, p. 33.