

41 On the shores of Lake Sils at the end of the 19th Century (This and next photo: Swiss National Tourist Office)

The feminine share in mountain adventure. Pt II

Cicely Williams

(In this paper there are many extracts from my book *Women on the Rope*, George Allen and Unwin, 1973.)

As the 19th Century moved to its close and Europe looked back on an era which had been momentous in so many fields of modern history, women mountaineers could look back, with a sense of pride, on the achievements of their own little galaxy of outstanding climbers. But they looked forward too with a sense of quiet expectancy, and who better to be in the forefront of that eager band than Gertrude Bell – once described as 'scholar, poet, historian, archaeologist, art critic, mountaineer, gardener, naturalist, distinguished servant of the State; all of these and recognized by experts as an expert in them all'.

In her earlier years climbing was probably Gertrude Bell's greatest thrill and relaxation. During one of her first visits to the Alps she had come under the spell of the Meije, had fallen hopelessly in love with it and decided there and then that she must climb it. 1899 was her first big year and what a remarkable season she had! She arrived at La Grave in the middle of August and immediately engaged guides for the climb. She found the Meije somewhat

daunting; small wonder that she did since she was an almost complete novice. However, she concealed from the guides how little experience she had; her enthusiasm and natural ability carried her along and when they descended again to La Grave she had made the traverse of the Pic Central of the Meije and was almost certainly the first British woman to have accomplished this. Inspired by her success she contrived to make the ascent of the Ecrins before returning to England. The next year she could spare only a few days in the Chamonix area, but this did not deter Gertrude and with the guides Ulrich Fuhrer and Ernest Simond she managed the traverse from the Grand to the Petit Dru.

In 1901 she was at Grindelwald in the late summer. She began with the Schreckhorn and, in spite of some bad moments, thoroughly enjoyed the climb; bad weather then set in and foiled most of her plans, but she had a grand time on the Engelhörner and at the end of the holiday was able to report that the fortnight's bag included 7 new peaks and one new saddle traverse.

The next year, 1902, proved to be Gertrude's greatest Alpine year – albeit one that nearly ended in disaster. With Ulrich Fuhrer she did the Wellhorn arête at the second attempt – but this she regarded as a mere curtain-raiser. She had set her heart on the NE Face of the Finsteraarhorn, at that time unclimbed. This adventure made Alpine history and was described by Captain Farrar of the AC as one of the greatest expeditions in the Alps. The party set out on 31 July and did not return until 2 August. Only a few hours after leaving the Pavillon Dolfuss the weather deteriorated and grew worse with every hour. Thunder-storms, driving snow and freezing temperatures were almost continuous. They were forced to bivouac in appalling conditions on 2 successive nights and during one of these a tremendous blizzard raged incessantly. They were out for 57 hours, of which 53 were spent on the rope. They eventually returned safely to Meiringen on the morning of 2 August to the intense relief of the whole village. Everyone was full of praise for Gertrude. Ulrich Fuhrer said that few could equal her technical skill and she had no equal in coolness, bravery and judgement – all the honours of the climb went to her. The whole climbing world was agreed that safe retreat under such conditions was a tremendous performance doing credit to all; the occasion was a defeat deserving more credit than many a victory.

Two years later Gertrude arrived in Zermatt for the first time; at the Riffelberg she met Geoffrey Winthrop Young who gave her useful advice and a general introduction to the surrounding mountains. She traversed the Matterhorn from Breuil back to Zermatt and included in her programme the Lyskamm, Monte Rosa and the Dent Blanche. Rather surprisingly little was heard of Gertrude Bell in the Alps after this. She made her home in Baghdad and became famous as political secretary to the High Commissioner there. Although her active climbing career covered little more than 6 years she is still remembered as one of the great women climbers of her time.

It is common knowledge that the Himalaya, which have been the focal point of mountaineering expeditions during the middle years of this century, were already being opened up before the end of the last century by leading British Alpinists like Martin Conway and A. F. Mummery. It is less well-known that a woman was in the forefront of these pioneer expeditions. Fanny Bul-



42 On the Grindelwald glacier, 1905

lock Workman was an intrepid traveller who graduated to mountaineering in early middle life. As a personality she stood alone – a tough, aggressive, rather ruthless character who was nothing if not a go-getter. Fanny was American and immensely rich. With Dr William Hunter Workman her 'mild' husband – the description is Geoffrey Winthrop Young's – she travelled extensively in all directions by bicycle. In 1899 they pedalled their way to the Karakoram; the Himalaya gripped Fanny immediately; thereafter they dominated her life and between 1898 and 1912 the Workmans visited the Karakoram 8 times. Many of their ascents were made with the Swiss guide Matthias Zurbriggen and in their first year all the peaks they climbed were in the 18,000 to 21,000ft bracket.

In 1903 with her husband and 3 guides she made the ascent of Pyramid Peak in the Karakoram. Certain people were disposed to argue as to whether or not the summit was actually reached – there was no doubt in Fanny's mind. In 1906 she covered herself with glory by making the first ascent of Pinnacle Peak, 22,000ft, in Kashmir and no one attempted to disprove this fact. In 1911 Fanny visited the Masherbrum Glacier from Hushe; this was a notable and quite unchallenged achievement – so much so that in 1938 the British party to Masherbrum named one of the peaks 'Fanny' in her honour. In 1912 the Workmans capped their long series of adventures in the Karakoram by making the first exploration of the Rose Glacier. All these climbs were, of course, achieved without the assistance of oxygen.

The outbreak of war brought Fanny's climbing career to a close and she died, after a long illness, in 1922. Fanny was *par excellence* the New Woman of the Edwardian era – the current Women's Lib. would have loved her. In spite of her admitted weaknesses and eccentricities her intentions were good and she was a real mountaineer who loved the hills. She became a member of the Ladies' Alpine Club in 1908 and was elected as its Vice-President for America in 1912. Her spirit and determination were inherited by her only child who, in the Second World War, came into her own as the courageous Lady MacRobert whose 3 sons were all killed serving with the R.A.F. To commemorate their deaths she gave a Spitfire fighter to the Royal Air Force and christened it 'MacRobert's Reply' – the spirit of Fanny Bullock Workman still burned.

Alexander Burgener of Saas Fee must have had a special *flair* for detecting promising young women climbers. Without his persuasion Mrs Mummery might never have climbed the Teufelsgrat; and if there had been no Burgener there would have been no Eleonore Hasenclever.

Eleonore was German, a spritely young teenager who came to the Alps just before the turn of the century. She was fascinated by the mountains and by the prospect of climbing them. An introduction to Burgener was arranged and Eleonore was launched on her climbing career. With him she climbed in all parts of the Alps; no mountain seemed too much for her and she was ever seeking new adventures. She married and became Eleonore Noll-Hasenclever and the mother of a family.

Guideless climbing, still in its infancy among men, was hardly to be thought of where women were concerned. However, it eventually became part of Eleonore's scheme of things. She began in a small way, very successfully, with parties of her own choice; by 1911 she was already well-known as a guideless



43 'Fair conqueror of the Alps'—Madam P. F. Namur (reproduced from 'The Tatler', 1908)

climber and in that year made the first guideless traverse of the Petit to the Grand Dru. The First World War intervened but at the earliest opportunity she was back in the Alps and with a small group of companions descended the Marinelli Couloir of Monte Rosa. In 1923 she made a 2-day traverse of the Matterhorn and the Dent d'Hérens with 2 men friends. In August 1925 she set out from Zermatt with 2 friends for the Weisshorn Hut; the next morning they left for a long-desired climb. That afternoon news reached Zermatt that Eleonore and one of her party were lying on the Bies Glacier. Every available guide volunteered for the *Colonne des Secours.* When they reached the scene it was clear what had happened; a snow avalanche had broken away from the Bieshorn and had swept them down to the glacier below. Eleonore lies in the village cemetery at Zermatt. She was the first famous woman mountaineer to die in the mountains – perhaps she would have chosen that way.

Another name to conjure with in the early 1900s was that of Mrs C. W. Nettleton, looked up to by her contemporaries as one of the really great climbers of those days. In 1900 she did the traverse of Monte Rosa; in 1901 the Cinque Torre and Kleine Zinne; in 1903 the Aiguille de Blaitière; the Weisshorn in 1904 and the traverse of the Matterhorn in 1906. But her great-

est achievement during these years was the traverse of the Grépon in 1903 which she led with her husband and a porter. Rock climbing was really her *métier* and she excelled in it in her own country as well as in the Alps; she led on Kern Knotts Crack in the Lake District only a year after Owen Glynne Jones had climbed it for the first time; indeed some reports claim that she actually led this famous climber himself on Kern Knotts. Mrs Nettleton became President of the Ladies' Alpine Club in 1920; she lived to be 80 and never lost her interest in mountaineering.

While women were becoming increasingly adventurous in the Alps in the first decade of the present century great things were happening in the Southern Hemisphere. A climbing centre had been established at The Hermitage in the Mount Cook area in New Zealand, under the direction of Peter Graham the leading New Zealand guide of the time. It attracted climbers in considerable numbers, among them an Australian – Miss Freda du Faur. She began serious climbing with Peter Graham in 1908; in 1909 she climbed Mount Kinsey and Mount Wakefield; later he took her up Mount Sealy, a long expedition, and they added to their list several more climbs including the exciting Mount Malte Brun.

Mount Cook beckoned Freda for several years but it was not until 1910 that Peter Graham allowed her to climb it and they accomplished the expedition in the remarkably short time of 6 hours. In 1912 Freda returned from Australia again and they did one of the peaks of the Main Divide near the Copeland Pass and Peter Graham insisted on christening this peak 'Du Faur'. After this they made the first ascent of Mount Dampier and eventually, after many difficulties, reached the summit of Mount Tasman. In 1913 - 14 Freda had a great season; it included the first traverse of the 3 peaks of Mount Cook – a blue-riband achievement, still regarded as one of the finest feats in the history of the Southern Alps. They finished the season with Sefton, another great traverse, and then Freda's climbing career, as that of so many others, was brought to an end by the outbreak of World War I.

The year 1906 must have been a period when the star of women mountaineers was in the ascendant. Miss Beatrice McAndrew, a rather fragile little person, was considered by her family to be not strong enough for climbing. She herself thought otherwise; in 1906 she engaged a guide and a porter and set out on her first climb. By the end of the season it was obvious that she was a born mountaineer and so began a long life of devotion to the mountains. She usually climbed with her cousin Freda (Merriman) and their guide was Theodor Bumann of Saas Fee. Zermatt and Saas Fee were their favourite centres and until 1914 they never missed a season.

In 1910 they were staying at the little Bricolla Hotel when a group of AC members arrived. The ladies quickly sensed that their presence was slightly resented and tactfully kept out of the way. This must have touched the hard hearts of the AC men who became more genial and enquired if they knew about the Ladies' Alpine Club which had recently been formed. The address of the Club was supplied; Miss McAndrew and her cousin were soon elected members; as a result she gave many years of service to the Club; she became Hon Secretary in 1913, a post she held for more than 20 years, and in 1938 she was elected President. All through the 1920s and early 1930s Miss McAndrew had a strenuous programme arranged for each season and in 1939 she



44 On the East Buttress of Lliwedd, 1909 (reproduced from the Climbers' Club Journal)

climbed her last peak with Theodor Bumann. After the war she continued to enjoy Alpine holidays until she was 86 and came regularly to the Annual Dinner of the Ladies' Alpine Club until she was 97. She died in 1970 in her 100th year.

Probably the most important step in the history of women's mountaineering was the founding of the Ladies' Alpine Club in 1907, just 50 years after the AC. Mrs Aubrey Le Blond became its first President; the Club established itself in headquarters at the Great Central Hotel at Marylebone and Queen Margherita of Italy consented to become Honorary President. Queen Margherita was a keen climber with many peaks to her credit who had ascended the Signalkuppe on Monte Rosa to inaugurate the Cabane Margherita. The qualifications for membership of the Ladies' Alpine Club were set high from the beginning and remained so throughout the years. It was this high standard, combined with the international outlook which soon developed, that maintained the Club as the premier women's climbing club of the world.

Most of the pioneers still alive at the time joined the Ladies' Alpine Club –

Lucy Walker, Anna Pigeon, 'Katy' Richardson, Mary Paillon and, of course, the invincible Mrs Bullock Workman. The AC became a good friend to the ladies, after its earlier misgivings, and excellent relations were always maintained. Mrs Le Blond remained President until 1913 when she was succeeded by Miss Lucy Walker. By this time the Club had become truly international and included members from Austria, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, and Switzerland, as well as from Canada, India and Japan. The first Year Book was published in 1913 and the first published climbing lists recorded ascents in the Japanese Alps, 2 peaks of 21,000ft in the Karakoram and outstanding achievements in the Alps. The Year Books continued regularly until 1975 when the last Journal was published just a few weeks before the Ladies' Alpine Club merged with the AC. Similarly the Annual Dinners, which became quite famous, began in 1909 and with the exception of the years of the 2 World Wars continued until Christmas 1974.

Shortly before the founding of the Ladies' Alpine Club the Fell and Rock Climbing Club came into existence – in 1906. From the first it was open to men and women and is still one of the most popular clubs in the country where friends and relations of both sexes can meet and climb together. Many of the most famous British women climbers have been, and are, members of the Fell and Rock. In 1908 came the Ladies' Scottish Climbing Club, founded in a delightfully informal way by three Scottish ladies, Mrs Inglis Clark, her daughter Mrs Jeffrey and Miss Lucy Smith. The idea was that women should have the chance to climb together just as women. The qualifications are high and it is a most highly regarded mountaineering society.

Not a great deal was heard of Swiss women climbers until after the First World War. Then in 1918 the Swiss Women's Alpine Club was founded; it has never had any specific qualifications for membership but it now numbers several thousand, a large number of whom are foreigners; it brings women together, assists them in many ways and maintains its own attractive chalet in the mountains.

By 1920 mountaineering had got into its stride again after the war and women, being now emancipated, were in the forefront of the climbing world in large numbers. The Pinnacle Club, the first rock-climbing club founded by women for women, was founded in 1921 and was greatly encouraged by Geoffrey Winthrop Young. The first Hon Secretary was Pat Kelly and the first President was Len Winthrop Young, wife of Geoffrey. The qualification for full membership was the ability to lead an ordinary Difficult climb and among its early leaders were such brilliant climbers as Brenda Ritchie and Evelyn Low (Leech).

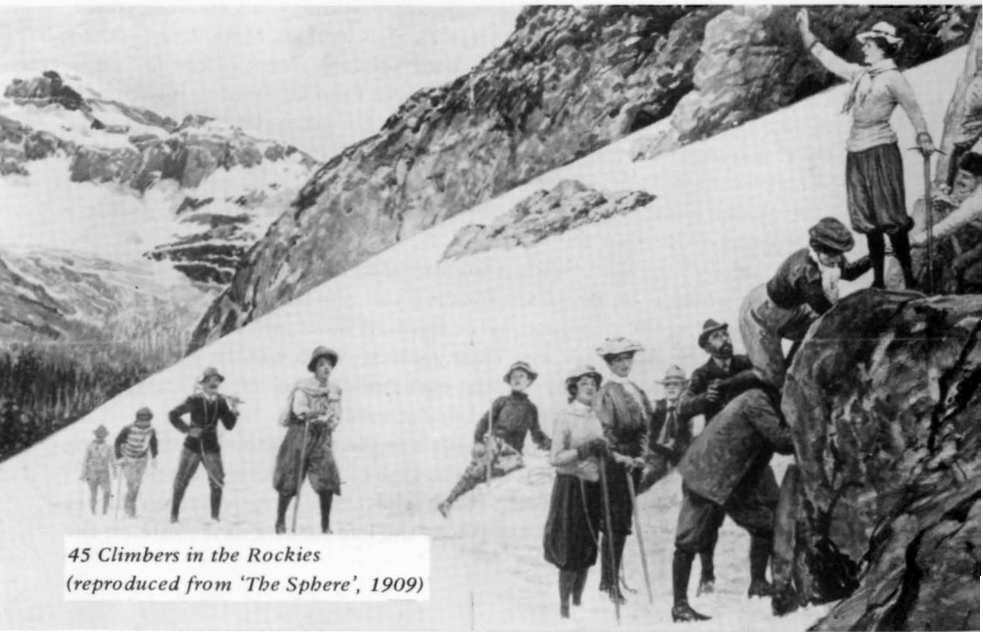
Probably the outstanding woman mountaineer of the early 1920s – and for many years after – was Dorothy Pilley, now Dorothy Pilley-Richards, a founder-member of the Pinnacle Club and later editor of the *Pinnacle Journal,* and also, since 1920, a member of the Ladies' Alpine Club – by whom she soon became regarded as a virtuoso, with her annual list of exciting ascents. In her first Alpine season she did the traverse of the Charmoz, the Grépon, the traverse of the Drus, the Dent du Géant and the Petit Clocher de Planereuse. All this was merely a curtain-raiser for the rest of her career; in 1921 having achieved the Mittaghorn-Egginer and the Portjengrat with 2 women friends she went over to Zermatt and climbed the Zmutt Ridge of the Matter-

horn. A few days later at Ferpècle she met Professor I. A. Richards, destined to be not only her life-long climbing companion but also her husband. In the Bertol Hut, on the way down from the Douves Blanches they met the guide Joseph Georges, *le skieur,* who became their friend and guide until his death in 1960.

During the next 3 years these 3 tackled the biggest peaks they could find in Spain, Italy, the Mont Blanc chain, the Oberland and Valais. Undoubtedly their greatest climb took place a few years later, as a delayed honeymoon trip in 1928. With Joseph Georges and his brother Antoine they made the first ascent of the great N Ridge of the Dent Blanche. After incredible adventures they reached the summit successfully and this pioneer climb is still spoken of as one of the great mountaineering achievements of the century. After the 'Great Year' as they called it, Dorothy and I. A. R. travelled far and wide and climbed in many distant mountain ranges. Now at last they are home from their wanderings and nearly 50 years later are still to be seen in Zermatt.

The Dutch woman climber, Rini Deelen-Jurgens, coming from a country almost devoid of hills, had some very impressive achievements; Spigolo de Velo of the Cima della Madonna; the N Face of the Breithorn; the Nadelhorn–Lenzspitze–Dom traverse; the Bieshorn–Weisshorn traverse; the Dent Blanche by the Viereselsgrat; the traverse of the Matterhorn by the Zmutt ridge; the Younggrat on the Breithorn; the Grépon and Mont Blanc by the Brenva Ridge.

Another British woman climber of the mid-1920s was Dorothy Thompson. She climbed mainly with Joseph Georges; they did all the great standard routes in Savoy, Valais, the Graians and the Dauphiné – where the programme included one of the Aiguilles d'Arves and the Meije. Later she was attracted to the great ridges of Mont Blanc; from the Quintino Sella Hut she did the Emile Rey Couloir and she was the first woman to do the Brouillard Arête. But perhaps her greatest achievement was the traverse of Mont Blanc from the Refuge Durier over the Aiguille de Bionnassay with the first ever descent of the Peuterey Ridge to the Gamba Hut.



45 Climbers in the Rockies
(reproduced from 'The Sphere', 1909)

By 1930 outstanding first ascents by women in the Alps, and further afield, were making news in each succeeding season. Una Cameron had great success in the Mont Blanc range on the Sentinelle Ridge, the Innominata Ridge, the Route Major and the Brenva Ridge. Then in a combined party with Dora de Beer these two became the first British women to climb the Peuterey Ridge of Mont Blanc. Una then turned her attention to Africa and became the first woman to climb the Nelion and Batian peaks of Mount Kenya in 1938.

Back in the Alps Molly FitzGibbon with Joseph Georges did the E Ridge of the Aiguille du Plan and the first complete traverse of the Eiger-Hörnli. About the same time Hermione Blandy (de Freitas Martins) made the first ascent – 'direttissima' – of the S Wall of Pomagagnon and the first ascent by a woman of the N Ridge of Piz Badile. This decade also brought to Zermatt, to everyone's satisfaction, Ethel Whymper, the only child of her famous father. In the course of a few years she did the Dom, the Rothorngrat, the Younggrat on the Breithorn, the Brenva Ridge of Mont Blanc and the traverse of the Matterhorn from Zermatt to Breuil. In 1937 Ethel married Edward Blandy, a member of the AC.

From New Zealand there came in 1933 the epic story of another British woman climber, Wren Corry (Robinson) who set out in January with her guide Mark Lysons for some major ascents among the peaks at the head of the Franz Josef Glacier. When descending Mount Goldsmith Mark Lysons slipped and broke his leg. There was no other party in sight and distances in the Southern Alps are enormous. Wren improvised a splint from a split ski which she bound on with puttees and a leather belt. Knowing there was little chance of a search party finding them they decided to try to get back to the Almer hut. Wren led down the peak and across the glacier inch by inch; after 12 hours darkness forced them to bivouac until dawn and at 8.0am the next day, after a wearisome journey of 20 hours they reached the hut. Wren's reward was that Mark Lysons lived to climb again.

It was by no means only British women who were setting the pace in the years leading up to the Second World War. Mrs Don Munday, a Canadian, made many pioneer ascents in British Columbia; a French woman, Mme Paul Dalmais, with her husband and the Charlet guides made the first ascent of the Col du Pain de Sucre from the NE; away in the Himalaya Frau Dyhrenfurth with her husband and 2 guides pioneered the route up Sia Kangri in the Karakoram; Elizabeth Cowles (Partridge), an American, reached a height of nearly 19,000ft in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and Ella Maillart, the Swiss woman explorer who travels and climbs in fearless solitude, achieved a summit of 17,000ft in the mountains of Russian Turkestan.

Nearer home a young Dutch girl, Anna Roelfsema, was beginning a great climbing career which is by no means finished yet. She climbed with her famous brother Roeli and their Zermatt guide Bernard Biner and occasionally the brother and sister climbed guideless. Their greatest climb was the guideless ascent of the Younggrat in 1936, the first-ever guideless ascent with a woman in the party – an event still remembered in Zermatt today.

The great development of the mid-1930s was the appearance on the mountain scene of women climbing *sans hommes.* One of the leading exponents of this was the American Miriam O'Brien (Undershill). She already had an impressive record. In the Dolomites with her guides she had made a new route on the



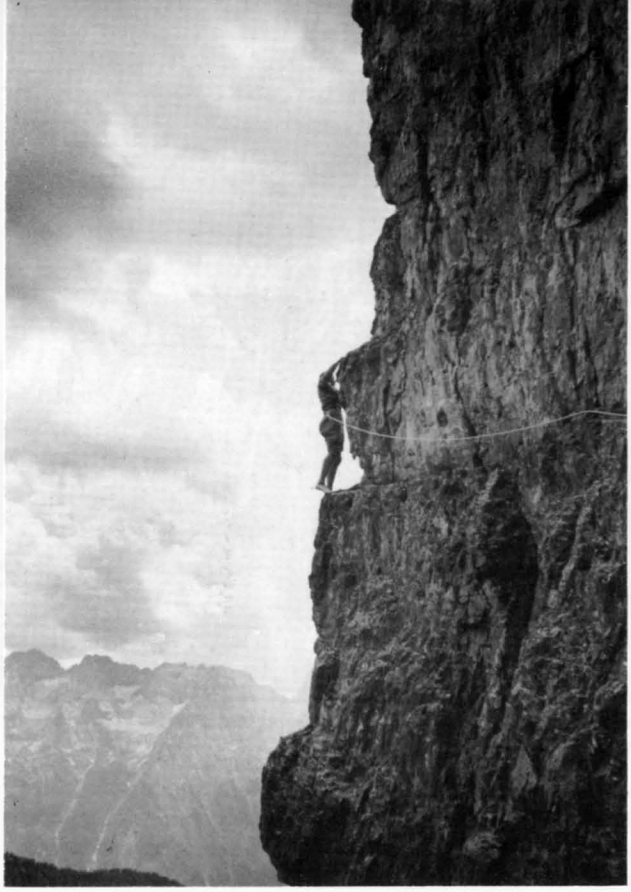
46 Left to right, Micheline Morin, Nea Morin and Alice Damesme, after traversing the Meije, 1933 (This and next photo: N. Morin)

Torre Grande, one of the most difficult in the whole Dolomite region, which was subsequently christened the 'Via Miriam'. From Chamonix, with guides, she made the first ascent of the Aiguille de Roc from Montenvers and led the traverse of the Grépon – the first feminine lead – and also achieved the first complete traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable. In the Oberland she climbed with Adolf Rubi and they made the 3rd ascent of the NE Face of the Finsteraarhorn – the climb attempted nearly 30 years before by Gertrude Bell.

All this was great but it was not enough – Miriam longed to climb *sans hommes.* Her first effort was the Aiguille du Peigne with Winifred (Jo) Marples, an English climber of considerable experience. This first adventure having been safety accomplished they set off with a French woman mountaineer, Alice Damesme, for the first manless traverse of the Grépon. Weather conditions were poor and route finding was difficult but they struggled on and their efforts were crowned with success.

Nothing now would satisfy Miriam but the Matterhorn; she did many other routes, including the SW ridge of the Mönch with the brilliant French woman climber Micheline Morin, but all the time the compelling Matterhorn was calling her. In 1931 with Alice Damesme and Jessie Whitehead she spent the whole season in repeated attempts on the mountain – only to be foiled by bad weather on each occasion. In 1932 Miriam and Alice set out alone; the day was perfect, there were no insurmountable difficulties and they rested on the summit blissfully content. Sixty-seven years after Whymper, 61 years after Lucy Walker, the Matterhorn had been climbed by women alone.

Loulou Boulaz is one of Switzerland's most distinguished climbers and her achievements in the Alps must be unique. To mention only some – the first ascent of the N Face of the Zinal Rothorn; the third ascent of the Grandes



47 Nea Morin on the Guglia di Amicis, 1937

Jorasses by the Central Spur; the N Face of the Aiguille Verte; these were done with guides. But Loulou also has an interest in 'women's ropes' and with Luly Durand she did the Requin, the traverse of the Grands Charmoz from left to right by the SW Face and the NW Ridge and the SW Face of the Dent du Géant. Loulou Boulaz then made other great ascents with guides, including, in 1937, one of the very first attempts on the N Face of the Eiger before it was ever climbed.

The name of Nea Morin is famous in all mountaineering circles. In her early days she climbed with Jo Marples and a guide; in one season they did the Requin, the traverse of the Grands Charmoz, the traverse of the Grépon and the Aiguille d'Argentière and the traverse of the Aiguilles Mummery and Ravanel. Naturally Nea went on to lead 'all-women' ropes. With Micheline Morin and Alice Damesme sharing the lead they did the Meije and followed this the next day by doing the 3 summits of the Aiguille de Blaitière. During the course of the next few years Nea married Jean Morin of the GHM and their fame as a climbing couple spread far and wide. It was at its height when the Second World War put an end to climbing for 7 long years. Sadly Jean Morin lost his life in the conflict; more will be heard of Nea in the final instalment of this paper.

(To be concluded)