

OVER THE AIGUILLE BLANCHE DE PEUTERET TO MONT BLANC.

BY P. V. SCHUMACHER, ACAD. A.C., BERNE.

ON August 27, 1926, W. H. Amstutz and I reached Courmayeur. We intended to start next morning for our last year's bivouac at about 3700 m. on the E. face of the Aig. Blanche. But a glance out of the window showed us a clouded sky, so we went to sleep again. We spent the rest of the morning in learned discussions of the 'Highs' and 'Lows' of the barograph, but when after lunch the last cloud in the sky had vanished, my friend's plea for an immediate start carried the day. By the time we had made up the sacks and found a porter it was 3.30 P.M. We had to catch up the delay, and stepping out well we attained in 3 hrs. the plateau about 2700 m. on the left bank of the Brenva glacier. Dismissing the porter and dividing his load between us, we roped and put on the crampons and took to the glacier. Most of the numerous crevasses were, in this snowy summer, bridged with good bearing snow. Close to the other bank, however, long, wide-open crevasses forced us to long detours, wide jumps or short passages along narrow ice ridges and steep steps. As dusk came on, say 50 minutes after we had taken to the glacier, we reached its right bank. One must conclude from earlier descriptions that the glacier has altered considerably in the course of years, for even last year, when the crevasses were not covered with snow, we had no considerable difficulties.

The tolerably steep ice slope which followed demanded a number of steps, while some transverse crevasses looked at first as though they might stop progress until, after a little search, bridges were, in every case, discovered.

By now it had got quite dark, so step by step, carefully probing for crevasses, we set to work to cross the slope, now snow, bearing to the left. By 8.30 P.M. we had reached the little rocky plateau covered with scree (about 2800 m.) immediately below the Dames Anglaises.

In the dull lantern-light we experienced the well-known romance of a bivouac. The hours flew with cooking, eating, smoking and chat, and it was 11 P.M. when, wrapped up in a goodly lot of English newspapers, we crawled into our common sleeping-sack. Thanks to our warm bivouac material, we slept

MT. MAUDIT.

MT. BLANC
DU TACUL.

CAPUCIN.

Ice Ridge of the
Brenva Climb.



Ridge between Mt.
Maudit and Tour
Ronde.

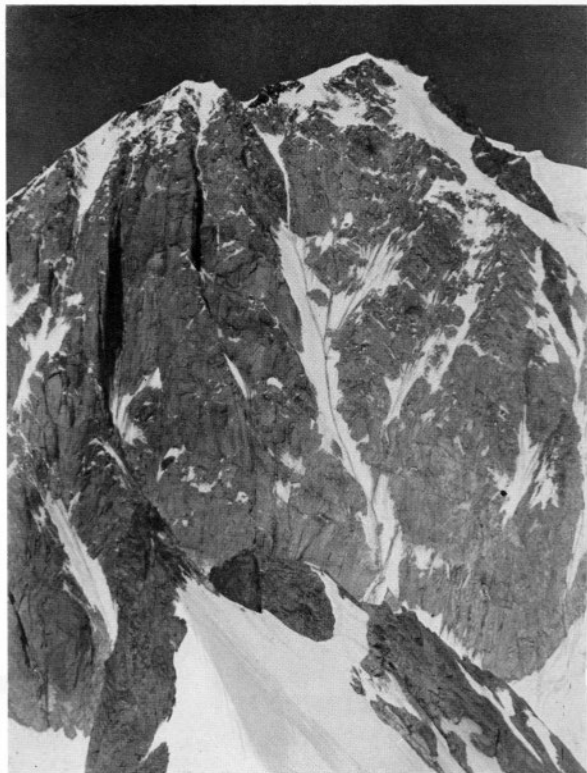
LOOKING ACROSS BRENVA FACE
from Col de Peuteret.

PIC ECCLES.
COL ECCLES.



Phot. W. H. Amstutz.

PIC AND COL ECCLES
seen from Col de Peuteret across head of Fresnay Glacier.



S. FACE OF MT. BLANC DE COURMAYEUR
from Col de Peuteret.



Phot. W. H. Amstutz.

BROUILLARD ARETE
from Col de Peuteret.

as well as in our beds at home. When the alarm went at 2.30 neither of us heard it. When we awoke, the slender crescent moon was still high in the heavens. After a capacious breakfast we left the friendly spot soon after 3 A.M. We had soon climbed the rocks above us and reached a steep, hard frozen névé field. It was a delight with our sharp Eckenstein crampons to mount between the crevasses and séracs. Only the last bergschrund held us up a bit as its upper lip was about 10 m. nearly vertical above the lower, and good footsteps and handholds were indispensable. Then we traversed away to the right over easy snow and rock slopes.

When, at about 3200 m., we passed the great boulder which has sheltered for the night many a Mont Blanc climber, it began to get lighter in the east. The next névé field was furrowed with several 2 to 3 m. deep runnels caused by falling stones. However, not even the smallest stone was stirring, so we crossed these without any danger. We were soon once more at the rocks, which we climbed, always mounting diagonally to the right. The slope here is steep and demands constant care by reason of the extraordinary untrustworthiness of the rock, but offered not the slightest difficulty. The rocks are well stepped and practically free of snow, which, however, increases their untrustworthiness. By 7 A.M. we reached the steep rock arête which mounts in a straight line from the Brenva glacier to the summit of the Aig. Blanche. Here, at about 3700 m., where, a year ago, we had bivouacked, we sat down to breakfast. My friend was very uncomplimentary about his sack, in which, besides many good and indispensable articles, were the heavy sleeping sack and a mighty bundle of newspapers—for our second bivouac. As I harboured the secret hope of reaching the Vallot hut that night, I did not demur when he abandoned half of the newspapers. The same fate overtook the other half a few hours later on the Col de Peuteret.

With renewed energy and rather lighter loads we started again in half an hour. Here, where Güssfeldt and Blodig found a névé arête, the rocks were nearly clear of snow. For a moment we considered whether it were not better to traverse direct across the steep névé fields to the Col de Peuteret. This direct route seems difficult, but is certainly not impossible; but then the splendid summit of the Aig. Blanche would escape us, and that were a pity, so we continued up the increasingly steep arête, the rock becoming much firmer. While I stuck to the arête, which gradually became more difficult, Amstutz discovered more to the left a much easier ascent. At the point

where the rock arête joins the snow cap of the Aig. Blanche we joined up again, and reached the summit at 9.30 A.M. We were much astonished to discover in the soft snow half-melted but still readily recognisable steps of an unknown party ¹ of about a fortnight earlier.

We sat down in the warm sun for half an hour's rest. We had already seen with the telescope from Entrèves that the whole upper slope (Germ. Hang) of the M. B. de Courmayeur, crowned with a mighty cornice, consisted of blue ice. This was now confirmed.

Although the descent to the Col de Peuteret is not difficult we put on the rope, and kept it on till the Vallot hut. We followed at first a sharp névé arête which led us to a fine nameless gendarme. After the next gendarme ² we left the arête, which became slabby, and descended the S. face of the gendarme to a steep névé slope. A short traverse in ice leads to a névé arête, which soon brings us to the Col de Peuteret (11.20). Here we found a little water, which gave a welcome excuse for a $\frac{3}{4}$ hr. rest, used mostly to transfer as much as possible of the contents of our sacks into our always hungry stomachs.

In consequence of the enormous ice and rock masses which fell down on to the Brenva glacier six years ago, the topography of the Col has changed somewhat. Not only is the Col lower, but the névé arête which led, on the other or M.B. de C. side, up to the rocks of the big corner bastion (Germ. Eckpfeiler) has disappeared, and in its place is a perfectly smooth rock fall, which, however, can be turned easily on the left flank over névé and ice. A pretty climb puts one on the arête about 50 m. above the Col, but already in a quarter of an hour we leave the arête again and climb the almost snow-free but rotten rocks of the S. flank direct towards the last gendarme on the arête (4341 m.). The flank is throughout well stepped, and notwithstanding the considerable angle is in no case really difficult. The risk of falling stones is not great, although the midday sun is hot, as everywhere is good cover. At 2.30 we sat down on the uppermost gendarme for a rest. From here the last bit of the ascent, in spite of the foreshortening, can be clearly judged. A narrow snow arête forms the continuation of the rock arête.

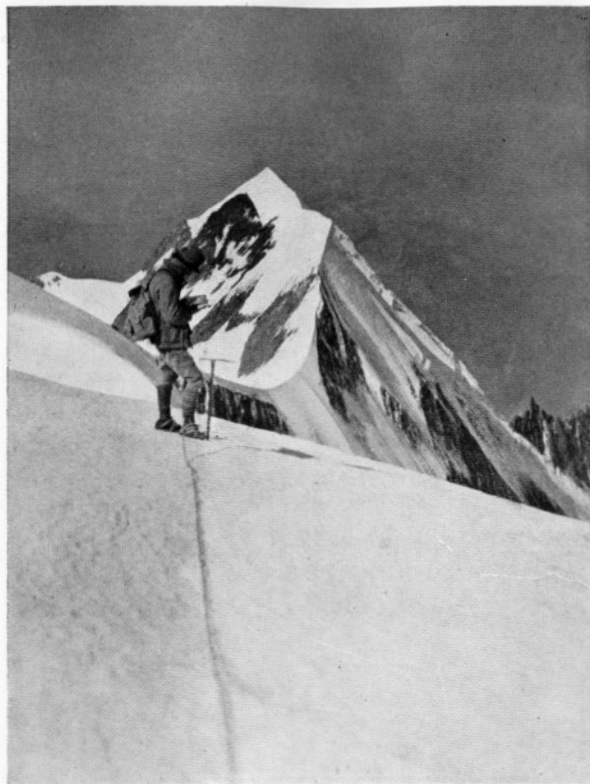
¹ [An Italian party, Si. Albertini and Mattiola. It is understood three bivouacs were made.]

² [There are two big ones: the first is turned on its right, the second traversed.]



Phot. W. H. Amstutz.

DOME DE MIAGE
from above Col de Miage.



AIG. DE BIONNASSAY
from Dôme du Goûter.



LOOKING TOWARDS MT. BLANC
from Col de Miage.



AIG. DU TRELATETE
from near Dôme du Goûter.

Higher up it bends to the left and loses itself gradually in the final, nearly 40°, ice wall. In place of the good névé we encountered, after about 150 m., hard blue ice. We could follow for a bit with the glass the melted-out steps of our predecessors, but higher up, where the snow covering ceases, no sign of the steps could be discovered. For a moment we considered whether it were not more prudent to make a second bivouac at P. 4381, for the idea of a bivouac on the ice wall or the steep side slopes was not very inviting. But the aspect of the moderately steep wall and faith in our sharp Eckenstein irons decided us. Rapidly we cut upwards, steps not too small but as far apart as possible. Amstutz, whose legs are shorter than mine, complained at first bitterly, but soon resigned himself to cutting an intermediate step. To gain time we finally took to the edge of the ice wall along the edge of the rocks. Sometimes climbing, sometimes cutting, we gained height rapidly. Contrary to expectations, the cornice offered no difficulty, a little snow arête on the left reaching almost to its top.

At 6.30 P.M. we stood on the broad névé back of the M. Blanc de Courmayeur (4758 m.). The last 400 m. had taken us $3\frac{1}{2}$ hrs. In the golden evening light we strolled over to the summit of M. Blanc, reached in $\frac{3}{4}$ hr. While we walked down the high road to the Vallot hut the daylight slowly vanished.

We did not have too good a night in the hut. Everywhere the icy N. wind blew through the badly fitting joints. It was only when one party after another from the Grands Mulets stopped for breakfast in the hut that we thought of getting up. We set out about 9 A.M. and strolled comfortably in an hour over the Dôme to the Aiguille de Bionnassay, reached the Col de Miage at 11.30 A.M., and were back in Courmayeur late in the afternoon.

In answer to the paper in the last JOURNAL on 'The Aiguille Blanche de Peuteret,' by J. P. Farrar, Mr. P. von Schumacher writes as follows [the notes in square brackets are Capt. Farrar's]:

'Under this title appears in the last number an article from the competent pen of Captain Farrar. The author as well as the veteran guide Chr. Klucker express therein the opinion that our party of August 10-11, 1925, established their bivouac too high. I submit that there can be a perfectly legitimate differ-

ence of opinion on this point. The parties Maischberger-Pfannl-Zimmer in 1900³ and Blodig-Compton in 1905 chose the same bivouac, while others like Güssfeldt-Klucker-Rey and Farrar-Maquignaz in 1893 bivouacked lower down. I may be permitted in the name of my party to express our view on this question.

‘According to our experience the ascent of the Aiguille Blanche is endangered by stonefall at two points: (1) in the snow couloir divided into several little branches on the right above Farrar’s bivouac,⁴ and (2) in the couloir to the left of (1) in which Richardet was killed. The rest of the route is relatively not dangerous as cover can be taken nearly always in case of stonefall.⁵ In good and not too warm weather even the two couloirs, in the early morning and late in the afternoon, can be crossed without great danger as the whole N.E. face of the Aiguille is in shade after 2.30 P.M. Actually during our ascent, between 2 and 5 P.M., in August 1925, only once was slight stonefall experienced. If, as occurred to us, mist and rain compel a descent [from the higher bivouac] it is tolerably indifferent at what time of day this is undertaken, as in bad weather stonefall does not cease even at night. If you bivouac where Güssfeldt and Farrar did, on the rocky arête at about 3000 m.,⁶ you have still in case of a descent to cross the lower couloir, where we were surprised by stones in the thickest mist, but you avoid the upper, much steeper, couloir, and this is an advantage of the Güssfeldt-Farrar bivouac.

‘Our reason for choosing the 3700 m. bivouac, notwithstanding its drawbacks in this respect, was that we hoped to complete the ascent to the M. Blanc de Courmayeur without a second bivouac, which would, without a doubt, considerably reduce the danger, for, in case of bad weather, retreat from the Col de Peuteret or further advance would entail the greatest danger. Farrar thinks it hardly likely that, even from the 3700 m. bivouac, we should have made the summit of M. Blanc in the day. At the same time his times as well as those of guideless

³ [*A.J.* 24, 691 *seq.*, and Mr. Compton’s admirably clear paper *A.J.* 23, 115 *seq.*, which gives a picture of the bivouac.]

⁴ [*A.J.* 38, 109 (illustr.), and 23, opp. 116 (illustr.).]

⁵ [I do not agree with this. There is another or even two stone couloirs considerably higher up, quite 2 hrs. above our bivouac (*A.J.* 33, 54). It seems to have been one of these which held up Compton and Blodig (*A.J.* 24, 692).]

⁶ [I do not think it was over 2800 m.—see p. 109, note 1.]

parties ⁷ show that it is possible ⁸ even with none too good conditions.

‘In conclusion I should like to identify myself with Captain Farrar’s remark that the repetition of the ascent ought not to be discouraged owing to Richardet’s death. As Captain Farrar remarked to us in Courmayeur directly after the accident, safety on a mountain is always relative; at no time can one rule out danger entirely; on fashionable mountains like Matterhorn stones can fly about one’s head very disagreeably. The Aig. Blanche fatality occurred through a chain of unfortunate circumstances. In good condition the ascent can surely not, by far, be so dangerous as one would conclude from Dr. Blodig’s terrifying description.⁹ The threatened bits are neither very long nor very steep, and in fine weather it should not be difficult for climbers, unroped and with crampons, to dodge any stones.

‘P.S.—On August 29, 1926, when these lines were already written, Amstutz and I made the actual ascent from a bivouac 1½ hrs. below Güssfeldt’s and Farrar’s, reaching the summit of M. B. de C. in 15½ hrs., with 2 hrs.’ rests [described in detail above]. Now that I know the route better my opinion is that, in good conditions, well-trained mountaineers would do better to use Farrar’s bivouac and start early with light sacks. They would be pretty certain to reach the summit the same day. In less favourable conditions I still think that the upper 3700 m. bivouac is warranted.

‘Berne, 4 Sept. 1926.

‘P. V. SCHUMACHER.’

⁷ Dr. Pfannl’s guideless party left the 3700 m. bivouac at 2 A.M., and notwithstanding many rests and heavy cutting in hard ice reached the summit of M. Blanc at 5.15 P.M. Farrar and his guides, from the 3 hrs. lower bivouac reached the summit at 0.05 midnight, partly by moonlight [and much delayed by continuous step-cutting and fierce gale].

⁸ The conditions on August 10, 1925, appeared to be splendid. Fine warm weather had cleared off the new snow which a fortnight earlier had hindered the party Welzenbach-Allwein, while, so far as one could tell with the telescope, there was no ice either on the Aig. Blanche or on the M. B. de C.

⁹ [I have stated, always and often, that ‘there is nothing of great interest about the ascent, nor any difficult rock-climbing . . . the members of the party had *better* be very fit, and the weather *ought* to be without reproach’.—F.]