

THE FIRST ASCENT OF MONT BLANC DIRECT FROM THE
BRENVA GLACIER AND OTHER CLIMBS IN 1927.

By F. S. SMYTHE.

(Read before the Alpine Club, February 7, 1927.)

The Second Ascent of the Aiguille du Plan by the E. face.

SO much has been written and said anent the weather of 1927 that it is beyond my powers to invent any new expression or improve on any old one. The only ingenious explanation that I have ever heard was that of a Swiss hotel-keeper during a heavy thaw at a popular winter sports resort. He said that Englishmen were responsible for the Föhn wind, and, when I asked him why, replied: 'Because zey opens all ze windows and so, alas, let ze 'ot air outside.'

When, on July 21, J. H. B. Bell and I arrived at the Montenvers the weather on Mont Blanc seemed almost to reflect the conditions on the Italian frontier. Two days later, however, it cleared and we spent a happy day in the sun prospecting a route up the icefall of the Glacier d'envers de Blaitière. We found an easy way up the rocks of the N. side, but at one point were forced on to the glacier and wriggled through a gritty hole in the ice.

We left at 1.40 A.M. the following morning, armed with the admirable electrical lighting contrivances advocated by Mr. Unna, and, constraining once more through the gritty hole, were soon above the icefall.

The Glacier d'envers de Blaitière is a shy little glacier set in a *cirque* of truculent rock peaks. Greatest of these peaks is the Aiguille du Plan, supported on this side by a narrow scimitar-shaped buttress. It was by this buttress that Capt. V. J. E. Ryan with Joseph and Franz Lochmatter made the first ascent of the E. face in 1906. Like others of Capt. Ryan's amazing climbs no details have been published, save for a short note by Franz, in which he said that he considered it the finest climb among the Aiguilles.

Three schrunds defend the foot of the buttress. The lower two were easy; the top one awkward. We crossed well to the right, and traversed to the left to the foot of the buttress.

Ryan's party gained the buttress low down, but now the sunless rocks were heavily iced. We decided therefore to



Phot. Sydney Spencer.

AIGUILLE DU PLAN (showing E. face)
from Aiguille de Blaitière.

ascend the couloir between the Plan and the Dent du Crocodile and break out on to the buttress at the earliest opportunity.

The couloir was in very bad condition and consisted of steep slabs covered in floury snow. There were no good stances; feet had to kick and scrape for the joints in the slabs, and every hold be cleared of its load of snow. A malevolent little waterfall gambolled down the middle, in the teeth of which a most difficult crack had to be negotiated. We were much longer than we had anticipated and the danger from avalanches became apparent. We escaped from the danger zone not a moment too soon, for a nasty slab of hardened snow detached itself and slid down over Bell's head as he crouched behind a rock. The slabs petered out into ice, not ice formed from snow, but ice formed from water melting above, almost black and terribly hard. Mummery's party met with much the same thing on the N. face.

We halted in an uncomfortable niche under a prominent rock face falling from the buttress and there consumed a thoughtful meal. The suggestive noises in the couloir beneath had no terrors for us now, but it was still impossible to gain the crest of the buttress.

Continuing on our way we were cheered by a patch of snow, perhaps 100 ft. long, but it gave place all too soon to the pitiless ice. Higher up the slope became a veritable wall. Handholds were necessary and cutting became a constricted and tiring business. If the work was hard for the leader, the second man's lot was the most unpleasant. As well as we could we linked the occasional rocks projecting through the ice, but these usually sloped the wrong way, and offered little service, either as belays or temporary resting places. This involved long 'run outs' of rope and the second man's lot was not a happy one as he was bombarded with ice chips which, on such a steep slope, acquire a considerable velocity. But Bell endured five hours of it without complaint, while his numbed hands were bruised and cut by the cannonade.

At 3 P.M. we emerged into the sunshine on the crest of the buttress. Ahead, sunny slabs beckoned us up in a great curving crest. Optimism bloomed. 'In three hours we shall be on the summit.' Never was man more utterly deceived. The point at which we struck the buttress crest is perhaps 1200 ft. below the summit, and this 1200 ft. occupied 12 hrs. of climbing time. Conditions were bad. We were often opposed by unstable snow edges which gave us much work in flogging them away, but the *general* standard of difficulty

is the highest that I have met with. In this I may be influenced by the gruelling preliminary work in the couloir. Many hours of cutting in ice are a poor preparation for fancy rock climbing.

The climbing consisted of clean-cut cracks set in magnificently firm granite slabs. Seldom were these cracks less than 50 ft. in length, and often the whole of our 100 ft. rope was requisitioned while axes and rucksacks formed a third and very inefficient climbing member of the party. In one crack Bell lost his axe beyond recovery, and in another a loose stone fell and jammed my leg. But for Bell's prompt action in climbing up and working it free a serious accident might have resulted. As it was, I escaped with nothing worse than a skinned knee. After this the lead finally changed hands and, with the exception of one or two short stretches, remained with Bell for the remainder of the climb.

At about 7 P.M. we bivouacked on the only ledge we had seen capable of accommodating us. We were glad to have brought a *Zdarsky* tent-sack, for we were very tired and suffered from cramp. 'We felt perfectly contented and even luxurious,' wrote Bell in a description of the climb, 'as we lay back and admired the glorious crimson of the sunset on the Grandes Jorasses.' The night was perfect with scarcely a breath of wind and finally we slept.

At 5 A.M. the sun rose in a cloudless sky, but we waited until 7 before starting as there had been a hard frost overnight.

To fresh men the work was easier, but an awkward snow bulge and unstable snow edges took a long time. At length we found ourselves beneath a 100 ft. step in the buttress where further advance seemed hopeless. The solution lay in a traverse low down to the left, and for this Bell removed his boots. I have never seen a more exposed or delicate traverse and I realized as I studied Bell's progress that I was watching the finest piece of rock climbing that I had ever seen. As I clawed and dangled and swung round myself I began to suspect Bell of becoming a sort of climbing 'Faust' and of making certain arrangements with 'Mephistopheles.'

Chimney after chimney, and crack after crack followed, until we realised with joy that we were just beneath the final buttress sweeping up to the summit rocks. But seemingly the only way up was an ugly narrow vertical crack which appeared to ease off in a slope some 15 ft. higher. Once again Bell took off his boots and I gave him a shoulder. But this time he could make nothing of it.

There seemed no other way. The situation was distinctly ugly. It was long after midday, and we were actually discussing the chances of another night aloft or the more than disagreeable alternative offered by retreat or a series of *rappels* down into the couloir to the S. The peak *had* to go. We descended and traversed to the right. I was first and shouted to Bell. 'There's a chimney ahead; looks not too good; full of ice; but it *might* go.' Ignoring this gem of logic Bell joined me and started up the chimney. Ice filled the interior, but he was able to utilize a crack in the right wall. Fifty feet up further progress appeared impossible. The chimney thinned out into a wicked overhang that leered down upon us. But now came one of those dramatic surprises the mountains reserve for the mountaineer. Right across the hopeless wall to the left and unseen from below ran a narrow ledge. Half wondering what further frightfulness the mountain might have in store for us, we passed along it. The ledge broadened. We walked. There was snow ahead and on it three people, two guides and a *voyageur*, were descending by the ordinary way. We threw off the rope, raced past them, and a minute or two later stood on the summit of our peak.

The 'Knubel' Chimney on the Grépon.

The 'Knubel' chimney on the Grépon was first led by Josef Knubel during the first ascent of the Grépon by Mr. G. W. Young's party from the Mer de Glace. Coming at the end of many hours of exacting rock climbing it may fairly be described as an amazing *tour de force*.

Messrs. Bower, A. S. Pigott, E. H. Pryor and Morley Wood, who made one of the earlier ascents of the Grépon from the Mer de Glace, attempted this chimney, but failed. Bower was naturally anxious to try once more, so accordingly one pleasant sunny day he and I wandered gently up from the Col des Nantillons to the foot of the chimney which is one of the most forbidding places that I have ever set eyes upon.

To the subsequent proceedings my only contribution consisted in offering myself as a foothold while Bower climbed the rocks above a stone wedged half-way up the chimney. The limit of the possible is reached by these rocks and our tactics were similar to those employed on overcoming the 'Flake Crack' on Scawfell. The leader threads the rope behind the wedged stone, brings the second man up and ties him on. The leader threads his own rope through the loops,

and utilizing the second man as a foothold, completes the ascent.

I must confess that, when my turn came, I was thankful not only for sustained hauling, but to have an additional rope let down as handhold. I was thus dragged like a lobster from beneath a rock feebly gasping into the summit sunshine where I congratulated Bower on his wonderful feat. The objection to the Grépon is the thoroughly unjustifiable traverse beneath the séracs of the Nantillons glacier. It is the most perilous 'standard' route that I have seen, and we were in great danger during our descent.

The Aiguille Blanche de Pétéret.

At 9 A.M. on August 10, G. Graham Macphee and I swung on weighty sacks and stepped out along the dusty road from Courmayeur to the Val Veni.

We were bound for the traverse of Mont Blanc by the Pétéret ridge from the Brèche des Dames Anglaises. This great traverse, without question the longest in the Alps, was accomplished in its entirety by Herren Obersteiner and Schneider on July 31 and August 1; repeated by Herr von Kehl with two guides and a porter on August 4 and 5 of this year. Both parties bivouacked on the ridge; the first party below the Aiguille Blanche, and the second party on the Col de Pétéret.

Conditions promised well. The weather of late had been bad, but many days of waiting and disappointment seemed on the eve of being rewarded. The ugliness of grey skies and sullen cloud roofs was gone, and only a silver lock of cloud trailed from the summit of Mont Blanc.

As we trudged along the military road in the Val Veni, I looked upon the huge ramparts whose intricacies we hoped to unravel; the black precipices of the Aiguille Noire; the mass of the Aiguille Blanche so elusively foreshortened. How vast they look, and yet that vastness is but a tithe of their real majesty.

Before entering upon the wilderness of boulders below the slopes leading up to the Gamba hut we rested and feasted on luscious bilberries. Placed between slabs of bread and butter they form a delicious dish undreamt of in the philosophy of Mrs. Beeton.

The Gamba hut is situated on a little oasis of greenery enclosed by the jaws of the Brouillard and Pétéret ridges.

Glaciers riven and torn crawl down on either hand. Uneasy sounds of mountain strife; the forces of gravity and decay come ceaselessly to the ear: the harsh roar of stones and the growl of stricken séracs echo threateningly around the *cirque* of splendid peaks. To the S. the fair pastures of the Val Veni are at our feet, and beyond gentle hills stretch to the snowy mountains of Cogne.

Long hard work was in front and we stretched ourselves on the bunks for two hours of rest.

Other parties had meanwhile arrived; Messrs. Eustace Thomas and A. Zürcher with Josef Knubel and Josef Lerjen; Dr. Hugo Müller with some friends and an Italian party.

At 5.15 P.M. we left, with the good lucks and 'Gute Reises' of our friends in our ears.

At 6.15 P.M. we stood on the Col de l'Innominata. I know of no scene more damning to hope and optimism than the Pétéret ridge seen from here. The day was nearly spent, and the great wall opposite looked terribly forbidding in the half-light. The livid huddle of séracs beneath seemed like some ghostly gathering, the sliced precipices of the Aiguille Noire, a dungeon wall. Our avenue of advance was the slender ribbon of snow couloir to the Brèche des Dames Anglaises first followed by Messrs. G. Winthrop Young and H. O. Jones in 1912.

A loose and unpleasant descent from the Col de l'Innominata brought us to the Fresnay Glacier. The glacier is broken and torn. The best way across lay above the icfall, but how to get there? There was nothing for it but to skulk in the wilderness of fallen ice blocks beneath the séracs. And we must hurry; already the first star shone tranquilly far removed from our absurd problems.

Momentary indecision gave place to fierce energy as we struggled and scrambled between the fallen blocks lying piled like the discarded bricks of the Ice King's children. Now over a half-choked crevasse, now leaping a cleft, now balancing on a slender edge, or crawling like rats through narrow corridors of polished ice. But at length the labyrinth was behind; we stamped our crampons into more sedate ground beneath the couloir. The bergschrund is a formidable one, but we turned it by a snow bridge on the left and traversed back above into the couloir.

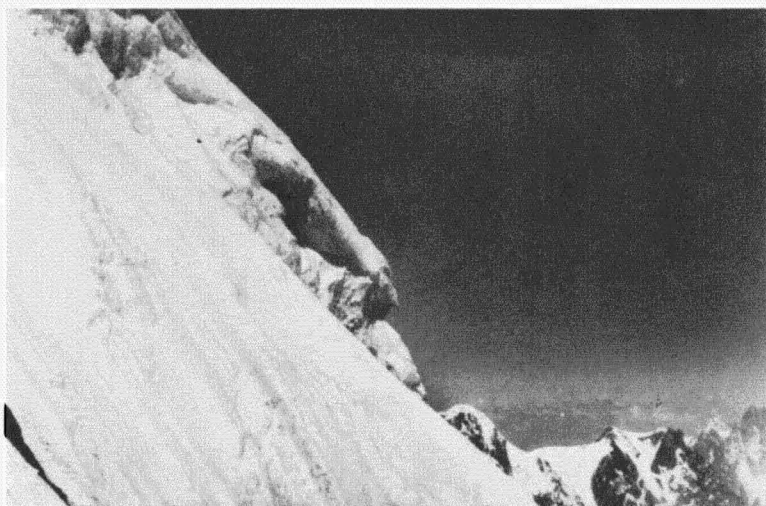
A full moon seizing the torch of day shone obligingly straight into the couloir and we mounted rapidly over steep hard snow.



Phot. T. G. Brown.

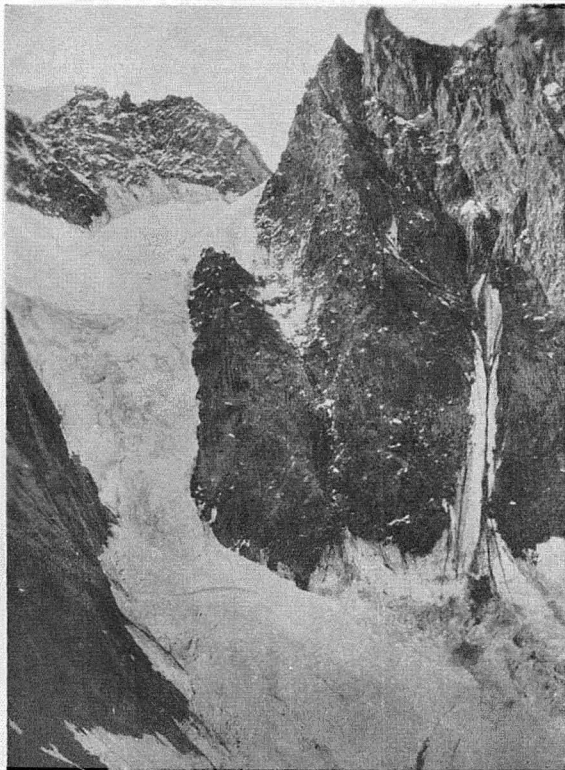
TAKEN FROM BASE OF "BENDING
RIDGE"

looking across branch couloir. Showing
average inclination of slopes.



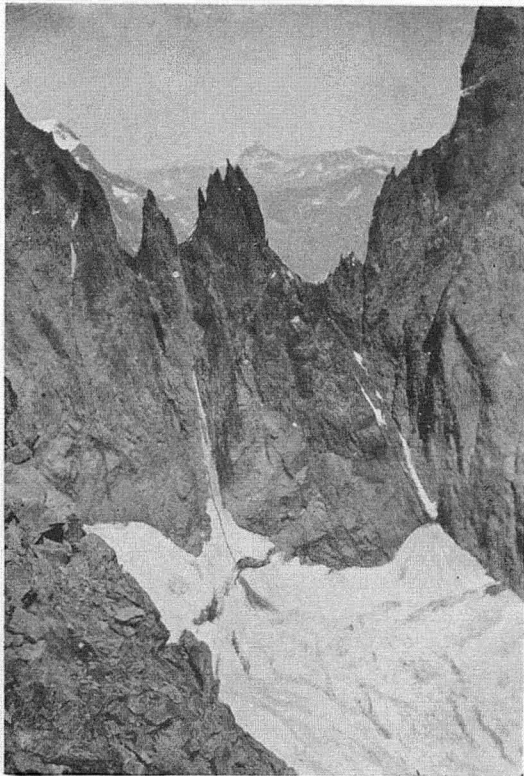
Phot. T. G. Brown.

THE UPPER ICE SLOPES BELOW THE UPPER SÉRAC WALL.



Phot. Hugo Müller.

THE ROCK BASTION OF THE COL DE
PÉTÉRET
from the Fresnay side.



Phot. H. Müller.

DAMES ANGLAISES AND BRÈCHES.

It had long seemed evident that we were carrying far too much, and we were glad to sit down on some rocks and transfer some of the edible portion of it to a more convenient receptacle, which had for some time been advertising its grievances in no uncertain manner. Even so, our sacks still remained very heavy and I suggested to Macphee that we should jettison something. To give weight to this idea I seized a large lump of cheese and hurled it down the slope to the bergschrund. It was the only occasion on the expedition when Macphee displayed emotion.

About two-thirds of the way up the couloir forks into a Y, the arms of which contain the rock pinnacle of L'Isolée. We mounted by the left branch, which is narrow and deeply cut.¹ No moonlight reached us, but reflection served to light the way.

The angle steepened; the snow thinned, ice supervened. The silence was broken by the thud of the axe. Little fragments hissed away into the void; the Goblins, if there were any, came forth to inquire into this disturbance of their nocturnal revels. Two hundred feet below the Brèche we took to the rocks on the left, but they were evil and untrustworthy and gave us a foretaste of the many hours' climbing to follow.

Keeping always on the W. face of the Aiguille Blanche we climbed until 2 A.M. when, the moonlight failing, we bivouacked in a peculiarly draughty place until 5 A.M.

Grey cheerless light stirred us to action. Numbed and fumbling we made hot tea and duly blessed its calories of life-giving heat before commencing to clamber, a trifle stiffly, up the rocks to the crest of the S.E. ridge.

We struck the ridge too high and had to descend some way before we could traverse across the base of the Grand Gendarme.² This pinnacle rivals the Grépon in size and yet it is but an incident in the S.E. ridge of the Aiguille Blanche. The scale of this mountain is amazing. Hour after hour passes; progress seems a mockery. If the W. face is loose, the E. face is a ruin. All the morning it was alive with stones.

The dawn had not been promising and the weather now showed signs of changing for the worse. We debated on our position. To go back was vetoed because of the dangers of the couloir which rains stones from an early hour. The E.

¹ Messrs. Young and Jones took the right branch.

² Punta Gugliermina, ca. 4000 m.

face was equally unpromising. We decided to go on to the Col de Pétéret.

It was snowing as we hurried over the summit ridge, while a fierce wind arose as we descended to the Col de Pétéret. Where we should normally have advanced both together, the wind enforced caution and we could only move singly.

At 3 P.M. we reached the col. A hurricane was now blowing on Mont Blanc and the noise of it resembled the deepest note of a great cathedral organ. The Col de Pétéret itself was a fearful sight. The snow came whirling through the gap in a furious writhing *tourmente*, while ever and anon came the mad crash of falling rocks from the crumbling cliffs on the Brenva side of the col.

We knew nothing about the route down to the Fresnay Glacier and were even unaware that it had never been descended, but we realised, through some curious inexplicable instinct, that it offered the best avenue of escape and we were determined to get down somehow.

A bastion of rock a thousand feet high falls from the upper bay of the Fresnay Glacier to the lower. The glacier itself is impracticable and drops in a nearly vertical wall of ice for many hundreds of feet. The rock bastion is thus the only direct line of descent from the Col de Pétéret.

High up, the rocks of the bastion are smooth and slabby and offer no belays or support. A slip must result in destruction to the whole party, and it is probably here that Professor Francis Balfour and his guide Johann Petrus lost their lives after what was, in all likelihood, the first ascent of the Aiguille Blanche. Against our will we were forced off the rocks into the couloir between the bastion and the Aiguille Blanche. But here, unexpectedly, we found good snow and proceeded quickly, keeping as close to the side as possible, for the couloir is constantly raked by stonefalls. Lower down, where the couloir narrows, the snow gave place to ice, and the danger from stones made a traverse back on to the rocks of the bastion advisable.

We were frequently in danger from stones *blown* off from above, while now and again gusts of enormous hailstones beat down upon us. At such times we could only crouch down close to the rocks. It was no time for half measures. We cut our rope up into loops, and using our 100 ft. line roped down. But these rocks are climbable and there is no question that a party retreating from the Pétéret ridge in bad weather will be well advised to follow this route in preference to the E. face where Herr Richardet was killed.

An awkward chimney, a short ice slope and a treacherously bridged bergschrund brought us at last to the Fresnay Glacier. Light was failing as we hurried down, wondering how we were going to fare on the sérac wall. But fortune favoured us and we found footsteps and a neat little staircase cut up a cunning recess between the séracs. It was the work of Josef Knubel in prospecting the route to the Col de Pétéret for Eustace Thomas's party. So down we went, and presently climbed the weary little couloir and loose rock face to the Col de l'Innominata.

It was almost dark when we reached the col where, with nothing but easy ground separating us from the Gamba hut, we paused to watch a baleful lightning flicker. With incredible rapidity the storm approached. Never had we seen such a storm. Its ferocity surpassed those of the Argentine. The ragged edges of the Brouillard and Pétéret ridges flamed with a continuous mauve fire, while the hollow roll of thunder was flung from precipice to precipice in tremendous waves of sound, until it seemed that we were enclosed within the jaws of some monstrous dragon breathing hatred upon the world. We heard afterwards that there was a cloudburst over Montroux and a storm of unprecedented violence over the Italian Lakes, but Mont Blanc was the presiding genius, and we stumbled down the moraine half blinded by the hail and electrical discharges.

At 9 P.M. we reached the hut. Our entry savoured of the best old-fashioned drama. The door opened to a blaze of lightning and crash of thunder and in we went. As one man the inhabitants arose from the bunks and cheered. Kindly hands pulled our sopping clothes off our backs; our boots from our feet. Exciting liquids were poured down our throats; a hot meal prepared. The return of the Prodigal Son was a poor affair compared to ours. And when at last our friends had ceased their ministrations we turned in, to listen thankfully to the straining of the hut on its wire leashes and the wild raving of the storm outside.

The Col Maudit.

In 1921 the Signori Gugliermina, de Petro and Ravelli made the first ascent of the Col Maudit from the Géant Glacier.³ It was

³ *A.J.* 35, 120; but see *Ibid.* 14, 151 for a *probable* previous ascent, 1888.

repeated from this side at a later date, while the first ascent from the N.W. was made by a French party, MM. Migot and Savard, in 1927.⁴ The pass has not yet been traversed.

On August 13, two days after our defeat on the Pétéret, Macphee and I walked up to the Col du Géant. The Torino hut was full of Italian Generals, Admirals and Marshals of the Air—to judge from the variety of uniforms and headgear; we lay awake all night unable to sleep.

We left thankfully at 12.30 A.M., and, in full moonlight, strolled over the snowfields.

The S.W. tributary of the Géant Glacier is secluded from the vulgar gaze. When the moon glances over the Tour Ronde and the shadow of the Trident de la Brenva is thrown like a devil's toasting-fork across the bosom of the glacier, the 'little folk who dwell in the hollow hills' steal out from the mysterious places in the cliffs of the Capucin. But, alas for imaginings, one ordinary remark was sufficient to restore the 'normal suburban equilibrium' of the party.

We crossed the bergschrund without difficulty at 2.30, and climbing in crampons ascended steep icy snow to a rock rib. The rock was good and we continued happily. A murmur above, sometimes swelling to a growl, spoke of wind, but as yet we were sheltered.

Rock climbing by moonlight is more dignified and restrained than in the day time. One advances leisurely, inspired by the absence of necessity for haste. There is none of the 'Come on,' 'Buck up,' 'Both together now,' sweating, hard breathing, late afternoon methods. Each hold is a link in a gradual progression, to be grasped contemplatively and its merits compared to its neighbours. Each little ledge is a resting place, a belvedere of dreamy moonshine.

A sérac wall several hundred feet high defends the col. We kept too high and were forced into a traverse to the left over nasty ice-glazed slabs, sprinkled with powdery snow. Dawn greeted us here; an uneasy sanguinary dawn, full of vague threats.

Continuing our traverse to the right we came upon a large cairn. A steep rock face above and an ice slope brought us to the ridge a few feet to the right of the actual col at 6.35 A.M. There we met a spiteful wind and with some absurd peak-bagging instinct, turned right and trudged up the Mont Blanc du Tacul. We rested there before returning to the col and

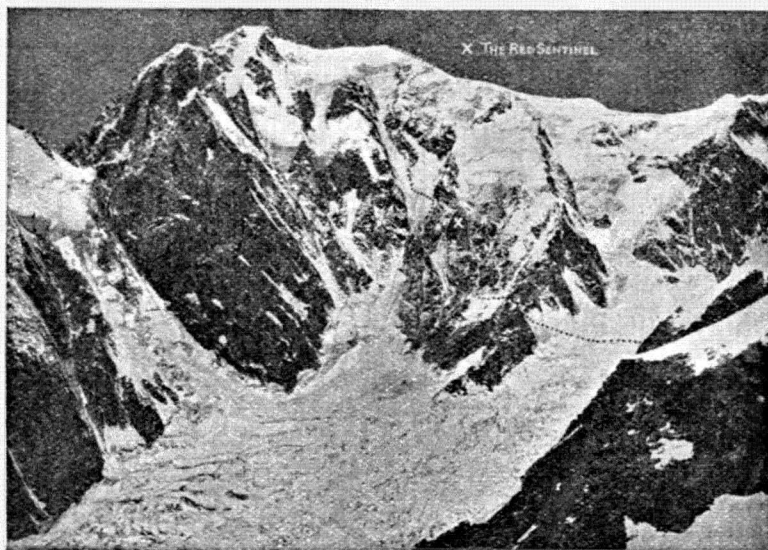
⁴ *A.J.* 39, 331; *Alpinisme* (8), 1927, pp. 250-7, illustrated.

traversing the Col du Mont Maudit to Mont Blanc. The wind was blowing the snow in clouds as we ground over the col and we struggled up Mont Blanc in the teeth of a full-fledged *tourmente* to find the French flag on the top fluttering in defiance (so we gathered afterwards) of the Italian flag on the summit of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur! The weather was worsening every moment and we hurried thankfully down the conventional groove, and, shortly after 6 P.M., were wallowing in hot baths at the Montenvers.

The First Ascent of Mont Blanc direct from the Brenva Glacier.

(Written in collaboration with T. Graham Brown.)

Towards the middle of August, T. Graham Brown and I were fortunately able to join forces. When I say fortunately,



BRENTA FACE OF MT. BLANC.
Showing Mr. Smythe's route.

I speak personally, for bad weather and the claims of civilization had taken my friends away and I found myself at the Montenvers with many cherished but unattempted ascents. Of these, the greatest by far was an attack on the unclimbed Brenva face of Mont Blanc. I was therefore delighted to find

that Graham Brown was equally fascinated by this great mountain-side. Indeed, he and E. S. Herbert had studied it previously. My own inclinations towards it had been considerably enhanced by the ease with which Ward, Bower and I had traversed the Col de la Brenva on August 1. If the snow, which so firmly adhered to the ice, lay uniformly on the face there might well be justification in an assault.

Graham Brown and I had both discovered that only the saving grace of patience, combined with unlimited time—in my case a convalescence—made anything possible. The hurricanes, blizzards, and thunderstorms of the early part of August had apparently settled down to their work in earnest towards the middle of that unfortunate month. One of the last to leave the Monteners was E. E. Roberts who cheered us up by saying that there was no bad Alpine weather in the English sense. A subsequent postcard however tersely rescinded this theory. On August 21 we climbed the Petite Aiguille Verte under wintry conditions. The weather on the 22nd again brought disappointment, which was confirmed by even worse weather on the 23rd. We were reduced to planning desperate ascents on the aiguilles traced by the barograph. Helped by a judicious bang the unfortunate instrument would always rise nobly to the occasion, only to sink again lower than before. The other relaxation was the gambling machine—a remarkable source of revenue to the proprietor. Bell, I should add, had previously worked out the odds on every colour and had then wisely resisted its blandishments.

We finally decided on a walking tour, and were glad to miss the shocking railway disaster.

On the evening of the 26th we watched Mont Blanc from the Col des Aravis slowly disentangle itself from the storm clouds.

The weather on the 27th was perfect, and on the 29th we returned to the Monteners. It looked at last as though we had the conditions for our climb.

On the 31st we trudged up to the Col du Géant, and on the way studied as much of the upper part of the face as is visible over the Tour Ronde ridge.

Some weeks before I had heard that Dr. Güssfeldt had studied this face, but decided against it on account of the great sérac wall that runs round at the top from Mont Blanc de Courmayeur to the Col de la Brenva. Again, it is remarkable that this 5000 ft. face had never been attempted. A few months previously Mr. T. B. Blakeney had suggested the possibility of an attack; Messrs. Young and Mallory had

studied it in the past, and so had others. It was an ambition of Dr. Preuss, and also of Dr. Grünwald and Herr Bischoff, who had perished under such sad circumstances on the Aiguille de Bionnassay in the previous bad weather. Indeed, I understand that they were at Courmayeur in August with the object of attempting it. Could the sérac wall be surmounted or turned? As we examined it through a small but excellent Zeiss monocular, we were overjoyed to see that the barrier would almost certainly be surmountable; but the decision must rest with the larger telescope at the Torino hut. Not the final decision—that must be left to the process of trial and error—*absit omen* . . . !

We arrived at the hut at 10.15 A.M. and spent the whole of the morning and afternoon in careful examination of the visible part of our route.

A magnificent couloir descends from just under the summit of Mont Blanc to the westernmost bay of the Upper Brenva Glacier. High up, this couloir is split into two arms by a curving rock ridge, the right fork of the Y, so formed, being comparatively short. The ridge ends above in the steep ice slopes beneath the point where the sérac wall is breached. In order to reach the curving ridge we must traverse across the foot of the branch couloir to the lowest point in the ridge and follow it up to the point where the upper ice slopes appear feasible. Through the telescope, these upper slopes seemed of an easy angle, but the telescope lied to us. Once on the bending ridge, however, we should be safe from ice avalanches and stones. But the branch couloir *must* be crossed early. To do this a secure bivouac as high as possible was essential; but all these problems must wait till the morrow.

All the afternoon we were faced by that terrible view. The huge Pétéret ridge to Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, and the 5000 ft. face of Mont Blanc sweeping round to the Col de la Brenva. How cold and repelling it seemed when the sun had left it, and the fear of it sank into both of us.

We left at 3.30 A.M. next morning en route to the Col du Trident. Our spirits, none too high at this hour, had been further lowered by an individual in the hut who spoke depressingly of 'warm airs.'

The snow was soft and the wind warm as we crossed the Col des Flambeaux. On the N. side the snow became softer and deeper. We waded on until we realized the immense labour and time involved in reaching the Col du Trident and we decided to postpone the climb for yet another day and

ascend to the Tour Ronde to examine the lower part of the face.

We gained the Col Est de Toule and turned N.W. along the frontier ridge, traversing the Aiguille de Toule to the first point of the Aiguille d'Entrèves. This was useless as a viewpoint, so we returned and descended on to the bay of the Géant Glacier lying between the Tour Ronde and the Aiguille d'Entrèves. A steep snow and ice slope led up to the E. ridge of the Tour Ronde.

As we topped the ridge Mont Blanc burst upon us in all its magnificence. Far beneath, the Brenva Glacier crawls down to the meadows of the Val Veni. All day long and all night its shattered ice-falls rage at the imperious behests of gravity and the grumble of their discontent echoes sullenly around the precipices that enclose them. Higher up the glacier relents, and at the head of the ice-fall is a little bay of snow, set like a peaceful strand 'twixt the frozen ice billows and the huge face behind.

To the right of the great couloir, at the point where it narrows, a conspicuous red buttress projects from the face. It looked perpendicular and we were at once assured that here—at its base—was the ideal situation for our bivouac. Not only was it placed in an exactly suitable position for a rapid traverse of the branch couloir early in the morning, but it appeared to offer the only completely safe site for a bivouac on the whole Brenva face. Two routes to it appeared possible. The first directly from below; the second by an upward traverse from the little 'col' at the foot of the Brenva ridge. In either case this little col, which we have named *Col Moore* in honour of the first conqueror of the Col de la Brenva, must previously be reached. So delighted were we with our bivouac rock, that we have since named it the Red Sentinel or *la sentinelle rouge*.

The Tour Ronde is no part of a rapid or easy route from the Col du Géant to the upper Brenva Glacier; moreover, it was 10 A.M. Nevertheless we decided to push on with the climb. In this we were influenced by the perfect weather and the good snow on all southerly faces. The latter enabled us to traverse directly across the S. face of the Tour Ronde, thereby saving probably two hours. We descended from the Col Occidental de la Tour Ronde to the Brenva Glacier, walked across the snow bay, and climbed a short but very steep little slope to the Col Moore. We at once saw that the direct route up from the Brenva Glacier to the foot of the

Red Sentinel was not to be thought of, as it involved an extremely unpleasant descent from the Col Moore to the glacier. The upward traverse across the face from the lowest rocks of Moore's ridge above the Col Moore was the right route. To reach these rocks we had to worm our way along a sharp crest of ice, artfully overlaid by slushy snow, and an hour passed before we reached the rocks, just below the first big gendarme in Moore's ridge.

Here we halted, ate, dried our clothes and waited for the sun to pass, before starting on the traverse which involves the crossing of four couloirs.

We had arrived at this point at 2 P.M. and had two or three hours to wait. We were now confident and happy. The unknown lower part of the route, which we had feared most, was now known. We rested eyes and minds on the Pétéret ridge. If foreshortened, it was yet grander than ever. We heard the roar of falls from it, but so vast is the scale we could see no falling débris.

The sun left us at 3.52, but we waited until 4.50 for the snow to harden properly. The first couloir was simple, our 10-point Eckenstein crampons gave splendid purchase on the steep hard snow. The second couloir was seared by an avalanche groove 10 ft. deep and took some time. The last couloir is liable to be swept by falling séracs, but we raced across in a few seconds to the friendly shelter of some rocks. The whole face was as silent as the grave and we had not seen the smallest stone fall. A mixture of rocks, ice and snow took us up to the base of the Red Sentinel at 7.10 P.M.

A big inward tilted slab lay beneath, covered by a cone of snow and ice. Twenty minutes' work sufficed to fashion an alcove, protected at both ends, and large enough for our *Zdarsky* tent-sack. To prevent any possibility of a nightmare roll to the Brenva Glacier we drove our axes in above and securely fastened the rope thereto.

We unpacked our sacks, made a hot soup and settled down to await the night. This was not long in coming. As the sun set, we saw the beautiful phenomenon described by Leslie Stephen in his classic essay 'Sunset from Mont Blanc'—the immense shadow of the Monarch sweeping the ranges and finally mounting the sky. Like Stephen, we were privileged to witness that other sun whose rays are shafts of darkness, but which are actually the parallel shadows of Mont Blanc, apparently converging on the horizon.

Yet day lingered awhile, and long after the fires were quenched

and the pageant had passed on its way, an ashen glow steeped some stately cloud pillars brooding in the S. We expected to see them lightning-lit later, but on this most perfect of late summer nights even the Thunder God slept in his couch of *cumuli*.

The air was very still. Not a breath of wind whispered around the stern figure of the 'Sentinel' above. It seems absurd to invest a mere rock with the attributes of sympathy and understanding; but all that night a friendly presence encompassed us, watching over the two little things that were men, who shivered and kicked and swore on that hitherto untrodden mountain-side.

The night was long and bitterly cold. No comfort was to be found in our *Zdarsky* tent-sack. As a means of refined torture these tent-sacks are admirable. The idea is that the two victims sit inside facing each other. A few minutes of partial suffocation follow until at length, unable to gasp longer without fresh stimulus, the edge is raised and a gush of cold new air rudely forces its way into the carbon-dioxidized interior. The inside of the tent is meanwhile saturated with condensed moisture, which drips unpleasantly down the neck. In fairness, however, it must be admitted that one of these tents might prove of the greatest service to a party forced to bivouac high up in bad weather.

All night long the noise of the rock and ice falls was almost continuous, chiefly from the direction of the Pétéret ridge, but one colossal fall of séracs was overhead, and the cataract of ice divided by the 'Sentinel' thundered down the couloirs on either side a few yards away. We made several brews of tea and it was during one brewing that three long-drawn moans came up from the Brenva Glacier beneath. No doubt their origin was prosaic, but to us the effect was weird in the extreme.

Sleep was impossible and it seemed as though the world were given over to perpetual darkness and cold. But at long last grey dawn filtered up from far Tyrol. We made tea, ate some chocolate and painfully strapped on crampons over the boots we had not removed all night. The iron stuck to our fingers with cold.

At 5.30 we passed out from beneath the 'Sentinel' into the couloir on the left of it. We climbed up and across this at the greatest possible speed, and soon gained the ridge at the edge of the great couloir. There can be no finer couloir in the Alps than this immense chute. In the middle runs an enormous

groove of polished black ice writhing down like some evil serpent.

We descended into the couloir, and, keeping close under the ridge, commenced the ascent. Nothing could touch us, for a friendly rock promontory projected ahead and the hard snow over which we mounted was smooth and unscored. The angle is over 50° , but our crampons ground well into the icy snow. Yet speed was essential if we were to cross the branch couloir in safety to the curving rock ridge. At top speed we laboured on until we were nearly level with the lowest of the scattered rocks at the foot of the curving ridge dividing the main from the branch couloir. Then we rushed the branch couloir transversely towards them, finding with thankfulness that its deep avalanche channel went easily. At length we were on the ridge in perfect safety. Not a pebble had fallen.

Above was a gendarme with a perpendicular face. Below this at 7.10 we sat down and rested for an hour. Our exertions up to this point had been severe. Just before starting again we saw the first stones falling down the couloirs on either hand. We thought that above the climbing would become progressively easier; but here the telescope had entirely misled us and we found the exact opposite to be actually the case. There was, in fact, only one short portion on which we were not moving one at a time. Such is the reality that perspective may clothe with fantasy on high mountains.

The rock was unexpectedly sound, a grey red granite affording delightful climbing. We turned the red gendarme on the right and gained the ridge above over steep ice. A narrow snow edge followed and we were again forced to the right over very steep ice under some rocks; we then climbed back to the ridge and continued over rock to the nearly horizontal crest separating the head of the branch from the main couloir. This crest abuts against a rock face. It was 10.30 A.M. and we sat down to another meal. Some way below us on a ledge lay a piece of wood like an aeroplane strut, or it may have been a bit of the old Jansen Observatory.

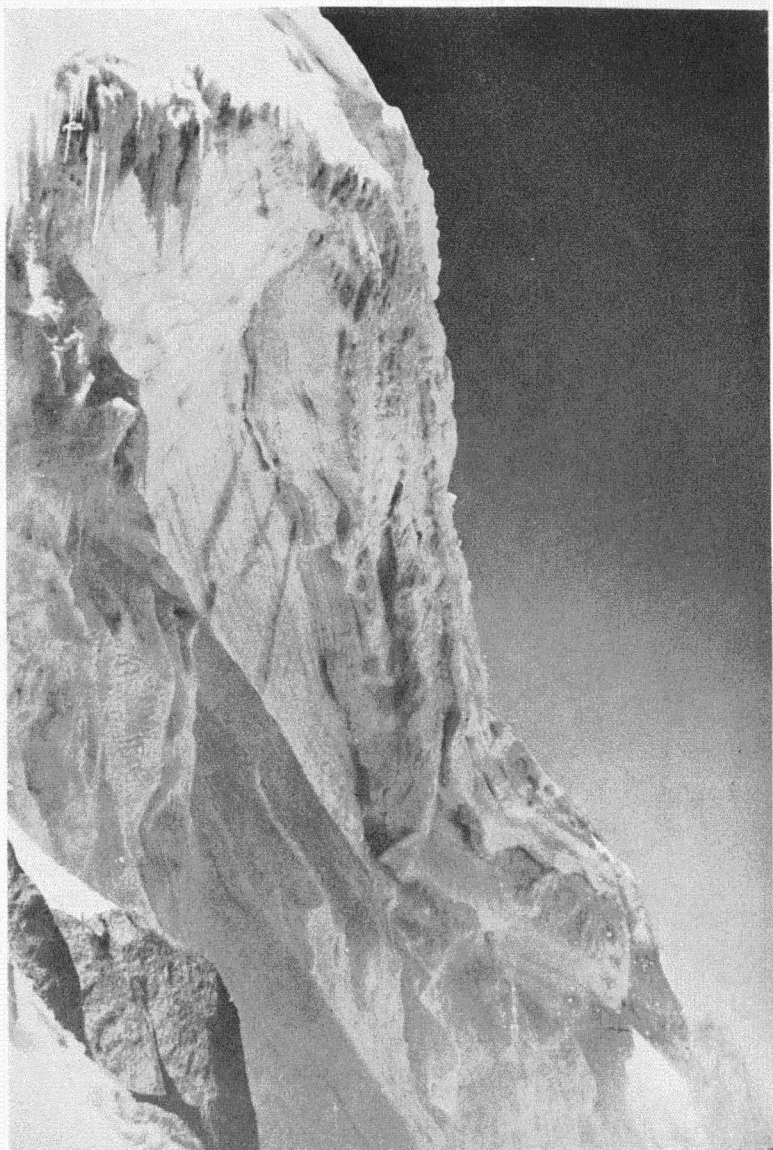
The view was now magnificent. The ice ridge of the Brenva had sunk below us. A violet haze filled the Italian valleys over which the distant snow peaks of Cogne rose like fairy castles from a sea of dreams. Far above in grim reality loomed the final ice-wall.

After building a cairn and leaving our names in a jam tin, we set out again at 11.45. Continuing along the snow crest,



Phot. Alfred Holmes.

THE BRENVA FACE OF MONT BLANC.



Phot. T. G. Brown.

THE UPPER SÉRAC WALL.

we reached the foot of the rock face which was forced by a slanting chimney. Above we found ourselves on very steep ice slopes covered with slushy snow. And it was ice of exceptional hardness. The axe sank in with a dull thud as though into glue, often without bringing away a chip. Many strokes were required to fashion a step, and every step represented a definite piece of hard work. Scattered about were many rocks; we linked these as best we could by a series of ascending traverses to right or left.

Against our will we were gradually forced to the right until just beneath the impending sérac wall where it sweeps round a shoulder in the direction of Mont Blanc. Danger, however, there was none, for this portion of the wall was solidly built. We turned left again and clambered up to the highest rocks. We now looked right along the mighty natural fortification. Once above it we should be within the inmost keep of the Monarch. A veil of ice javelins hung from the upper edge, and beneath the wall was sheared away as though cut by the knife of a skilled workman. From our position we saw with joy that the wall indeed ended in the ice slope we had seen through the telescope.

We pressed on to the attack. On our left an ill-defined rib of ice, rounded and exceedingly steep, ran up to the left of the shoulder at the point where the sérac wall is breached. To reach it involved a traverse over steep ice. We found the rib to consist of the usual glutinous ice. We had had three hours' cutting already and the three or four hours more that now seemed in prospect was not pleasing, but, at all events, uncertainty as to the route was now at an end, and fortune smiled. To the right of the ice rib, sheltered from the sun, two or three inches of hard snow adhered to the ice sufficiently firm and frozen to hold our crampons. We climbed rapidly and passed between some bulges that evidently formed the remains of the sérac wall. A further steep slope led up to a small corniche. The leader fell upon it furiously and flogged it down. At 3.30 we stepped over. Nothing remained save 400 ft. of easy snow to the top of Mont Blanc. Up went our arms and axes and roars of joy were flung over the edge into Italy. For many hours we had been chained to the wall; now that wall, terribly forbidding in the afternoon shadow, lay well below.

We halted awhile and then toiled slowly up to the summit. It was 4.15 P.M., and, on top at that late hour, Mont Blanc seemed lonely—all our own. The evening was a beautiful one.

Great clouds stood up out of the valleys in perpendicular columns like genii; the haze in the Italian valleys had deepened to purple. We turned and trudged down the track to the Vallot hut where, in spite of the filth, we spent a comfortable night.

We returned to the Montenvers next day *via* the Dôme du Gôûter and the Tête Rousse.

The proprietor and Josef Knubel joined us over the inevitable champagne. We were very happy. Before passing into sleep that night we both realized that rain had come down in torrents within ten minutes of our arrival at the Montenvers.

Les Courtes from the Glacier de Talèfre.

A week of bad weather followed our traverse of Mont Blanc and all Graham Brown and I were able to do was an ascent of the Grands Charmoz. We were on the point of leaving when a temporary break tempted us up to the Couvercle hut. It also tempted several dozen other people.

It was snowing in desultory fashion when we awoke next morning, but at 5.50 A.M. we staggered from the combined third-rate cinema-hall *cum* eating-house atmosphere of the hut and gratefully gulped the fresh air. We had breakfast on a boulder before reaching the Glacier de Talèfre and afterwards walked up the glacier to the foot of the 2000 ft. rock face of Les Courtes. No one appeared to have climbed direct up this face, though a continuous buttress dropping from the summit offers the obvious and most direct route up the peak.

The buttress is undercut and glaciated at its junction with the ice and we mounted a short distance up the couloir dropping between Les Courtes and the Aiguille Croulante. A steep little chimney and a short rock wall brought us to the crest of the buttress. The rocks are easy and we scrambled leisurely upwards. A curious bent crack, avoidable on the left, afforded a slight diversion, followed by 1000 ft. of easy scrambling towards the foot of a fine red tower. Below the tower the buttress constricted to a narrow ridge. The climbing here redeems the ascent from mediocrity. A traverse over snow-masked slabs, and again an ascent to the buttress crest above the tower, brought us to easier ground leading without difficulty to the summit at 2.30 P.M.

The weather was not good and we hurried down *via* the Col de la Tour des Courtes. The descent was a misery, the snow being in execrable condition. We collected our belongings at

the Couvercle, chatted with Monsieur de Ségogne, and as dusk was falling set off for the Montenvers.

It was dark ere we left the rocks, and we flitted like disembodied spirits from moraine heap to moraine heap at the junction of the Glacier de Leschaux with the Mer de Glace.

The scene was a remarkable one as we trudged down the Mer de Glace. In front over the Aiguilles Rouges a range of livid thunderclouds were illuminated every few seconds by fountains of lightning. Behind all was peace; 'The cold ice slept' in radiant moonlight.

I rashly promised a quick route off the glacier, but only succeeded in getting into a maze of great crevasses. Finally we stood on a knife edge of ice, with the conventional abysses on either hand, while the lightning winked sardonically and the thunder rumbled with merriment. But at last Graham Brown's better sense prevailed; we retraced our steps and finally got off and down to the Montenvers. It was snowing next day and we left for England.

KILIMANJARO IN 1927.

By Miss SHEILA MACDONALD.

[The substance of this account is contained in a letter to Mr. Claude and Mrs. Macdonald, to whom we offer our best thanks.—*Editor 'A.J.'*]

MOSHI,

TANGANYIKA TERRITORY,

August 2, 1927.

MR. W. C. WEST of the Alpine Club and I have climbed to the top of Kilimanjaro, and no woman has ever succeeded in getting there before. Kilimanjaro consists of two mountains—Kibo (19,710 ft.) and Mawenzi (17,300 ft.), separated by a 6-mile plateau. Mr. West and I and Major O. Lennox-Browne climbed Mawenzi first, choosing our route as we went, at least Mr. West did, and got to the highest point which had been reached by two German parties, both in 1912. We found their names and records in an old tin built into the cairn and added our names on the same piece of paper.

Our camp was at the foot of Mawenzi, but we could not stand the height for two nights running, and had to descend to 12,700 ft. again before attacking Kibo. Mr. West and I were