over the Isère he was out of sight. The last three or four hundred metres into Bourg seemed endless, but I had the energy to turn up from the station road towards the main street, meaning to buy grapes and peaches. I was surprised to find the shops shut. Passing the station, I saw that it was one o'clock. And then, at the Hostellerie, there was Abbatt already seated at table with a bottle of *vin rouge* and one of lemonade. I sat down and helped myself while ordering another of each. The *hors d'œuvre* arrived. 'What time do you make it?' I asked. 'Twelve thirty' said Abbatt.

The cowherds had been right.

BAD WEATHER AT CHAMONIX (1)

By D. L. BUSK

(*Read before the Alpine Club, May* 3, 1949.)

Last Spring I received a letter from T. A. Brocklebank asking me to join an A.C. party in Switzerland, which would include Peter Lloyd, J. L. Longland and other eminent members. It was ten years since I had been on a rope and the idea of making a few climbs safely tied between Peter Lloyd and Longland appealed immensely, so I dashed off an acceptance, but before I posted it doubts assailed me. On re-reading Brocklebank's letter it became clear that far from being safeguarded in this manner, I was expected to lead beginners. I therefore sent off what is known in official circles as a 'courteous expression of regret,' pleading advancing age, lack of experience and family responsibilities.

It was therefore somewhat shamefacedly that on July 1 my wife and I drove into Les Praz de Chamonix for the worst four weeks of weather we have ever experienced. You will therefore hear precious little about climbing to-night.

During the war years the seasons seem to have been on the whole remarkably good and many members of the Club will remember the dangerous splendours of 1947. The winter of 1947/8 was unusually snowless at Chamonix and the glaciers very open. March and April were perfect, but in May bad weather set in and continued through June. Heavy snow fell, but as temperatures were high, bridges over crevasses were dangerously insecure and Armand Charlet warned me on my arrival that the greatest care would have to be exercised on all glaciers, which turned into penitential morasses after 10 A.M. (Actually he could safely have said 8 A.M.).

Throughout our stay there were never more than a couple of clear days, succeeded by rain and snow. During July the temperatures were generally high and it sometimes rained up to nearly 10,000 ft.,

thus increasing the sogginess of glaciers. On occasion snow fell as far down as the Chapeau and in August it snowed in Argentière. The only consolation was that I have rarely enjoyed more lovely mountain views.

A few days of alternating rain and shine were occupied with walks and reknitting old friendships up and down the valley. It was interesting to compare conditions in 1948 with those I had last experienced in 1938. Even before the war Chamonix was greatly overcrowded during the season, but this is even more true to-day and conditions are so bad that I really feel that the area is best avoided in July and August. The congestion at huts is contributed to by the large numbers of walkers who come up to spend the night for the thrill of it. These include considerable squads of quite small children who are entirely out of place. Even those who actually climb from a hut sometimes bring up their doting relatives for the night. The climbers themselves have increased immeasurably in numbers and I do not think I am being unfair when I say that many of them seemed either unduly optimistic or had very little idea of their real capacity or of the potential dangers of mountaineering. It seemed to me that last year the mountains were in particularly insidious condition, but the cheerful carelessness of many who climbed them was unaffected.

The increase in enthusiasm for mountaineering in France can no doubt be attributed in part to the drive in favour of sport and physical fitness undertaken by the Pétain Government after the Fall of France. Those who have read *Alpinisme* for the war years will have noted a tendency to push climbs to the ultimate limit, similar to the reaction one observed among Germans and Austrians after the last war. Mighty deeds by the few were not, it seemed to me, balanced by proper training of the many. To some extent this was inevitable during the war when conditions of all kinds were very difficult. In particular the low scale of rationing [1] resulted in many cases of exhaustion and some deaths. It thus arose that while the gospel of mountains was being fervently preached, little or no real instruction was given to novices, who in many cases contented themselves with scrambling on local rocks, which they believed would equip them for high mountains.

These young people flock in their thousands to Chamonix and are not prepared to waste any of their precious days on minor climbs. I was interested to talk to parties in huts of their intentions. Almost invariably they were pitched very high. Equally interesting was it the next day to note the frequent failures, which had seemed to me inevitable except to the very strongest parties in those vile conditions. It seemed a great pity that these gallant folk did not resign themselves to less startling routes, which they could no doubt have climbed, even in 1948. It is interesting that of only six ascents of the Aiguille Verte during the summer two were of the extremely difficult Nant Blanc face and two of the Argentière face. The remaining two were by the

[1] I found rationing in France something of a nuisance last summer, but I understand that almost all restrictions will have been removed by next season.

Whymper couloir. The ridges were untouched. The Drus were not climbed at all and the Grépon perhaps five times.

Sometimes this high ambition led to disaster. One party, which cannot have been competent enough, was not prepared to do the Moine by the ordinary route, but took the E. face. The summit was reached at noon after eight hours' climbing. This was late, but it should nevertheless have been possible to descend the easy ordinary route before dark. Rain started to fall and in the event the party was benighted and four out of eleven lost their lives through falls or exposure. There were simultaneous accidents on the Blaitière and Cardinal and no fewer than 53 *chasseurs alpins* were out on rescue work.

These, then, are two features one immediately noticed at Chamonix: the gross overcrowding of the huts, often by non-climbers, and the immense numbers of comparatively inexperienced mountaineers who frequently aimed too high.

A third feature is the change in guiding. Tariffs have become astronomical in francs and very few can afford guides in France to-day. Many of the guides (who nevertheless steadfastly refuse to lower tariffs) have been forced out of business or wait for clients who never come, while the élite have become almost indistinguishable from amateurs,—in itself no bad thing. They climb with each other or with friends, raising still higher the standard of the 'impossible.' I am not clear how they all make a living. Some write books or keep sports shops, many earn more money in winter as skiing instructors than they do in summer. A few of the greatest have retired and only climb with friends for old times' sake. My own companion of many summers, Armand Charlet, has his hands pretty full as Mayor of Argentière and Assistant Mayor of Chamonix, but during the season he directs the École Nationale d'Alpinisme. For the rest he does perhaps a dozen climbs a year, usually of the highest class.

A fourth thing that struck me was the almost universal use of Vibram rubber soles. On standard rock climbs these are certainly first class and they grip remarkably well on snow and on the bare ice of lower glaciers where it is not too steep, but for big snow and ice climbs or on mixed climbs crampons must be worn. Some experts use special crampons with short points which they claim can be worn on rock so there is no need to stop and take off or put on crampons. I must confess that I think it is rather unwise for beginners to use Vibram soles, since they lead to early and continuous use of crampons.[2]

The C.A.F. and the G.H.M. have, I think, begun to realise the importance of the first two features, the overcrowding of huts and the inexperience of the general run of mountaineers. I do not know and could not ascertain what steps they propose to take to deal with the former, indeed I do not really see what can be done, except perhaps to bar huts to persons not members of the C.A.F. or kindred clubs, which might act as a slight deterrent.

[2] See Tilman's interesting comments on the use of Vibram soles and short rampons in the Himalayas in *A.J.* 56. 331.

Senior French climbers now seem to deplore the spirit of rivalry and the tendency to choose only *grandes courses*. This is all very well, but it was precisely in *Alpinisme* and other periodicals that such tactics used to be applauded and the victors crowned with jewelled words. No one can blame the mass for following such a lead.

As regards training of mountaineers, steps have already been taken on a small scale. The École Nationale d'Alpinisme has been established in a hotel at Les Praz. It takes 30 to 40 pupils for three weeks each summer. These are selected by sections of the C.A.F. from those who apply to them. No private application is permitted, though British volunteers would be welcomed. Armand Charlet has now taken over the direction of the mountaineering instruction and those who know him will not be surprised to hear that it is admirably run. From what I saw I should say that the training was very strict and anyone who is really keen certainly has every opportunity to learn the best methods and indeed has them constantly and at times embarrassingly brought to his notice. Rock work is begun on the cliffs called Les Gaillands just below Chamonix above the road ; ice work on the steep, bare tongue of the Bossons glacier. Thereafter moderate climbs are done and candidates who show sufficient promise are sent off in pairs and threes to climb easy peaks unaccompanied. We met one such trio on the Aigulle du Plan where they performed competently. The instructors are guides carefully picked by Armand for their teaching as well as their guiding capabilities. They receive retaining fees from the French Government which is responsible for the school.

If there is a criticism it is that there is only one such school in the French Alps and that the output is small. Personally I also much regret that it is established at Chamonix. The magnetic effect of Mont Blanc on all French mountaineers is as powerful as it seems to be undesirable in the case of beginners. Good, bad, or indifferent they flock to Chamonix, disregarding lesser peaks where they would be wise to learn their craft. I was amazed when we visited Val d'Isère for the day to find that only three hotels were open and that there were precisely eight visitors, none of whom was a climber. Val d'Isère has a hectic winter season from December to May, but for the rest of the year it is dead, though from my own experience I should have said that it was an ideal centre for beginners. It is true that all the facilities, guides, etc., are available at Chamonix, but if a guide *is* being paid, I can see no reason why he should not be stationed at, say, Val d'Isère for a month. If I may make a suggestion to our French friends, it would be that three or four ' Écoles ' be established at smaller centres and that the one at Les Praz should be regarded as providing the advanced course which would only be attended by those who had passed a course in the previous year at one of the elementary schools. It would not be necessary to rely exclusively on guides as instructors. It can be taken as certain that in France as here many amateurs would be happy to give up their time to training others.

At long last I come to our climbs which were really too modest to merit your attention. I began with a solitary ascent of the Aiguille de la Glière, largely in thick mist. Last year the Aiguilles Rouges were almost in the condition one expects of four-thousanders. Snow lay from the Flégère at 1,800 metres and in the couloir leading up to the ridge I was lucky to escape a venomous little avalanche which passed me as I made my way up close to the right-hand rock wall. The ridge itself was snow-plastered and demanded great care, particularly as I was alone and tremulous. The climb seemed to me more difficult in those conditions than the Chardonnet by the ordinary route.

My wife then delighted me by saying that she wanted to try some mountaineering, so we went up to the hut at the Lac Blanc which I strongly recommend. It is well situated for the Perséverance and other good climbs and is admirably run by Louis Mouchet who owns it. Next morning we were in thick mist, but we tracked up to the Col des Dards which surprisingly just rose above the clouds. Thinking the conditions would be hopeless, I had not brought a rope so we did not continue to the Belvédère. That evening Armand Charlet raced up to join us for old times' sake and next day we did the Belvédère, as the Perséverance presented too serious a problem for us in such conditions. Even the Belvédère was relatively difficult. There was verglas in the initial chimney, loose snow on the ridge and steps had to be cut up the final slope which is usually scree.

After further bad weather our next jaunt was to the Albert Premier hut on the Tour glacier. Here we ran into a fellow member of the G.H.M., Gérard Blachère, who was also leading his wife in her first season so we joined forces but not ropes. We made a very early start for the Aiguille du Tour and were glad we had done so, as even before dawn the snow was still soft. Next day we traversed the Trois Cols. The Col du Chardonnet had a nasty cornice on it so we took the variant Pas des Chamois to the right. This is extremely steep for two hundred feet but our beginners performed well. On the descent the glacier dangers were illustrated when my wife, who was leading down, went through three feet of soggy avalanche débris into a crevasse. I could hardly believe my eyes, but she was on a taut rope and did not completely disappear.

One final expedition to the Aiguille du Plan was all the weather permitted us in the month. We were lucky at the Requin hut. It was revoltingly overcrowded, but I had friends in common with the *gardien*, who kindly put my wife and myself in the small dormitory he reserves for his friends. There our companions were real mountaineers, so while in every other room there was shouting, singing and confusion, we enjoyed a peaceful night and were hardly disturbed when our bedfellows, competent and quiet in the darkness, got up and left at midnight. We, too, started early in clear weather though with a bitter wind. We made good time to the Col Supérieur du Plan, for the steep slope of which we donned crampons. At the foot of the final peak, my wife, who dislikes steep rocks even more than I do, decided she had

had enough, so we renounced the summit. Early though we were, the descent involved some snowploughing and on the last slope slush was peeling off underlying ice. I must admit that my wife's Vibram soles held remarkably well on this, but personally I was glad of nails.

BAD WEATHER AT CHAMONIX (2)

By T. A. H. PEACOCKE

(*Read before the Alpine Club, May* 3, 1949.)

I HAVE been asked by Mr. Busk to add a postscript. My season at Chamonix followed closely on his. A. M. Binnie and I joined a party from Sandhurst organised by Mr. Geoffrey Dixon. Few of the rest of the party had had Alpine experience, but all were competent on British hills.

Owing to our shortage of leaders, application was made to the École Haute Montagne, the French school for training the experts of the Chasseurs Alpin, for any assistance they could offer. They responded generously and accommodated us in a requisitioned hotel—the Royale —for a ridiculously small sum. They also took us over completely and even worked out a course lasting a fortnight.

This had advantges and disadvantages. Equipment was loaned where necessary and all responsibility and instruction was taken over by the École. Capitaine Flotard, a very competent mountaineer and most charming man, was in command and could not have been more helpful. The disadvantage was that the École became a trifle too possessive. The course they had prepared was excellent for the beginners, but we rather felt that some of the cadets were capable of a little more. At first any attempts at introducing modifications or taking any of the more experienced cadets on separate climbs was regarded with grave apprehension, but during the second week this attitude was relaxed. I think their view was justifiable as their instructions for the course had been given on a very high level and the three A.C. members of the party were unknown to Capitaine Flotard.

The course started with a trip to the Bossons glacier where a demonstration of crampon work was given by a very competent guide—Le Noir (I forget his other name). He made some rather extravagant statements such as : ' Modern climbers hardly ever cut steps and can walk up ice slopes of 70 degrees in crampons cutting hand holds only and using ice pitons.' I was called upon to translate and felt constrained to add a few footnotes to the effect that British climbers believed in cutting steps and that the Chamonix school of guides were rather over influenced by rock technique to the exclusion of snow and ice work. We then practiced our crampons and returned to Les Bossons in a cloudburst and so back to Chamonix drenched to the skin.

At dinner that night we were suddenly informed that we were to be

received by the Mayor at 8 P.M. at the Savoy hotel. This was alarming, for it indicated speeches. As the least incompetent French linguist I was deputed to prepare a speech and hastily wrote something on the table cloth, not forgetting the Entente Cordiale. Then ripping off the relevant portion of the cloth and taking it in my pocket we hastened to meet the Mayor. However, the Mayor was away in Paris and we were received by the deputy Mayor (the proprietor of the Savoy) and the speech was, perhaps fortunately, never read. We were, however, entertained to the worst possible preparation for serious mountaineering, a champagne dance !

Our stay at Chamonix was marred by some of the worst weather I can remember. The following expeditions were accomplished :— Aig. du Tour, Aig. du Moine, Aig. du Plan, Petits Charmoz and Aig. de l'M, Aig. de Belvédère, Aig. de Persévérance and a traverse of several other peaks in the Aigs. Rouges—not a very formidable bag. The last will be described later. On the Aig. du Moine there was a convincing demonstration of the inadvisability of using Vibram soles in fresh snow. The cadets, shod with nails, managed well, but the members of the French school, all expert rock climbers, had considerable difficulty and much regretted that they did not have nails. Vibram soles are so good under *ideal* conditions that one is sorely tempted to suppose that they are the best form of footgear under *all* conditions. This is far from being true ; they can be a considerable source of danger under bad conditions. With soft wet snow on rocks, even in small quantities, they are useless without crampons. On damp lichen-covered rocks or slimy rocks they are a positive menace. In doubtful weather they are best left at home ; in fact it is very much an open question as to whether it is wise to use Vibrams at all on big climbs unless the weather and conditions are perfect.

To return to my narrative. During our second week the snow came lower and lower, almost reaching Chamonix and, as we had only a few days left, I suggested in desperation that we should go up to the Grands Mulets and dig snowholes. The French thought we were mad, but reluctantly agreed. Unfortunately the route proved too dangerous from avalanches—this in mid-August !—and we had to be content with the cabane du Lac Blanc. Our French friends insisted in equipping us with enormous windproofs as though we were going to the polar regions and provided us with some excellent snow shovels. Weighed down with all this gear, Geoffrey Dixon and myself with eight cadets sweated up to the Lac Blanc in charge of two young members of the École, aged 19, as guides. One of them had climbed the Eiffel Tower, remarking that the only difficulty was the slimy steel (perhaps he was in Vibrams !). He was an amazing rock climber but seemed to know little or nothing of snow work. They both seemed entirely ignorant of the rudiments of map and compass and, because it was misty at la Flégère, suggested that we should spend the night there. We would have none of this and, getting out our maps and compasses, reached the cabane without difficulty.

AIG DU LAC BLANC (ON RIGHT). TÊTES PLATTE ON LEFT. NOTE THE VERTICAL CHIMNEY ON AIG DU LAC (DESCENDED BY RAPPEL).

The next day we ascended the Aig. de Belvédère in brilliant weather, despite the protests of our two guides whom we persuaded to return home after about half a hour, they having assured us that the summit could not be reached until 4 P.M. at the earliest. We only managed to get rid of them by saying that, as we never had any snow in England, we wanted to take a short walk (perhaps I should say ' wade ' for it was waist deep) and would soon return.

After they left us we made good progress by sheer weight of numbers, changing the lead every 5 minutes (we were a party of ten) and five of us reached the summit at 12.30, the last few hundred feet being distinctly difficult.

On our return we attempted to dig snow holes, but found that as soon as we struck névé the shovels were not much use and cutting with an axe was too slow. I expect we were over-influenced by the proximity of a comfortable hut, and so abandoned our quarters when they were only half completed.

On our return to the hut we found that Binnie and Col. Whatman had arrived with two guides, so we decided to split the party. Dixon and I, with four cadets, were to start at the col du Lac Blanc and try and reach the Persévérence, while Binnie and Whatman, with the other four and two guides, would make sure of the Persévérance and get a night in Chamonix.

We left at 5.15 and following our route of the previous day towards the col du Lac Blanc, struck up a couloir to the right when near the col, thus gaining the crest of the ridge quite easily at 7.30. Interesting but fairly straight-forward climbing took us to the summit of the Aig. du Lac with an abundance of snow everywhere. The descent on the east side was more difficult. Some slabs led to a very steep chimney. Here we met a French party ascending and had to wait about an hour and a half. We then roped down the chimney and so arrived on the col before the Tête Platte.

The next section of the ridge was easy though rather loose. The summit of the Tête Platte is an almost level ridge, falling steeply on the west side up which we came and very gently on the north-east side to the Col de la Tête Platte, which we reached at 14.30.

The next obstacles on the ridge were the Pointes de Bougeants, aptly named, for they are exceedingly loose anywhere off the ridge. We traversed the three little peaks, the first two being easy and the last distinctly difficult—a very narrow ridge. We thus arrived at the foot of the Aig. des Chamois. This was ascended by an upward traverse on the south side of no particular difficulty and we reached the summit at 17.45.

At 18.00 we started down and reached the col before the Persévérance at 19.15, roping down the last steep section although this was probably unnecessary. At so late an hour all thought of the Persévérance had to be abandoned. This was a pity for it is one of the best of these Aiguilles.

We reached the hut at 20.45 by moonlight after a tiring descent over

AIG DU LAC BLANC FROM TÊTES PLATTE. ROUTE SHOWN BY DOTTED LINE. NOTE THE VERTICAL CHIMNEY JUST ABOVE RIGHT-HAND EDGE OF SNOW SLOPE.

boulders interspersed with soft snow, to find it in complete chaos—fifty people and space for forty. The guardian offered us 18 square feet for six of us. We declined his offer and stretched our sleeping bags outside, preferring a night under the stars. These shone with unusual brilliance and I could see opposite the shadowy forms of the Verte and the Drus clad in a mantle of white and all the other Aiguilles spread out in a row with Mont Blanc standing behind, silent and aloof.

It was a fine ending to a good day—the best expedition by far that we had achieved. We had moved slowly, but with comparative novices in bad conditions one can afford to take no risks. They acquitted themselves well in a day of $15\frac{1}{2}$ hours.

We descended to Chamonix in the morning to be entertained to a gala luncheon, with speeches in English and French, songs and many good stories. It was a magnificent send off.

I must add that half way through our course we were entertained by the members of the Chamonix Golf Club and fed right royally, each member taking two cadets away to dinner at his house.

Thus ended the Sandhurst meet of 1948. Considering the impossible weather and the equally impossible state of the mountains it was not entirely unsuccessful. We owe a great debt to our French friends of the École Haute Montagne.

FRANÇOIS PACCARD AND BOURRIT

By CLAIRE ELIANE ENGEL

Mont Blanc has been climbed since the days when the ascent of a mountain was an expedition almost as long and as arduous as the discovery of a new continent. It was then an intensely personal venture, in which tastes, prejudices and temperaments were prominent features. Consequently, it is not surprising to find how frequently early climbers and would-be climbers quarrelled with one another and how such rows had their effects on subsequent mountain history. This does not mean that mountaineers are less temperamental nowadays, but they are more numerous and less inclined to show their feelings than were 18th-century people, who insisted on making a parade of their sentimentality, of their ' virtue,' or of their ' righteous indignation.'

One of the as yet not very well understood features of the first ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786 is a celebrated quarrel which flared up between Bourrit and François Paccard.

François Paccard's life reflected a many-sided, unusual and rather erratic temper. He was born in Chamonix in 1734 and, when he was 20, he acted as guide to the well-known highwayman Mandrin. After