

MONT BLANC AND THE EASTERN GRAIANS.

BY J. A. PARKER.

THE ascent of Mont Blanc is undoubtedly the finest mountain expedition to be had in Europe, and most climbers hope to make it sometime or other. Given good conditions the ascent of the mountain by the ordinary routes from Chamonix or Courmayeur presents few difficulties apart from the hard work involved. But, owing to the uncertainty of the weather, Mont Blanc is a difficult mountain to secure just when one would like. On the other hand, one may get it most unexpectedly. The three ascents described below illustrate these two points.

In August 1901 Dr and Mrs Inglis Clark and I met at Chamonix with a carefully pre-arranged programme that we would spend a couple of weeks there and would climb Mont Blanc. We regarded the latter as so much of a certainty that we had arranged for a couple of good Zermatt guides to meet us on arrival. They were to be paid a fixed sum for the fortnight and were to climb Mont Blanc and any other peaks that we wished, or were able for, without any extra charge. It was my third season in the Alps, and I hoped that it would qualify me for the Alpine Club. Such was the plan. The reality was that the weather was not good, and the only ascents that we made were the Aiguille du Géant (13,170 feet), Mont Buet (10,201 feet), and the Brévent (8,284 feet). We had many nice walks and took numerous photographs. The two guides thoroughly enjoyed their holiday and smoked great quantities of tobacco. When the fortnight was ended the guides were paid off, and I returned to London to answer the call of duty by turning up at the office at 9.30 A.M. on Monday morning according to that part of the plan. I met the Clarks in London a week later, on their way home to Edinburgh, and they told me that immediately after I had left Chamonix the weather changed

for the better and they had had a most successful ascent of Mont Blanc. All this taught me two valuable lessons, viz., never engage guides at an inclusive fee for a holiday, and, at the end of a holiday, do not regard the immediate requirements of the office too seriously.

Three years later, in August 1904, Gilbert Thomson and I arranged to go to the north of Italy and meet the Clarks at Cogne in the Graian Alps. No guides were engaged beforehand, and the simple plan was that we would meet the Clarks at Cogne and do what we could. Travelling straight through from London, Thomson and I arrived at Aosta on the evening of Sunday, 14th August.

It was our first visit to Aosta, and next morning we were much impressed with Mont Emilius (11,677 feet) which towered up on the south side of the valley to a height of 9,834 feet (nearly 2 miles) above the city. Cogne lay on the other side of Emilius, and we decided to cross the mountain to it, not a short cut by any means, and send our baggage round by road. We left Aosta shortly after midday, and had a pretty stiff climb up the steep slopes on the south side of the valley to the huts at Camboe, which we reached before dark. The shepherds placed a good room at our disposal for the night. Next morning we were up at 3.15 A.M., made our breakfast, as we did not have a porter, and were off before dawn. Passing the Arbole chalet, we went up the valley on the south side of our peak and gained the south ridge, up which we had an interesting rock climb to the summit. The view looking down the 2-mile drop to Aosta was decidedly impressive. Returning back along the ridge, we made for the Col d'Arbole, crossed it, and thence found our way over very broken-up and complicated country to Cogne, which we reached about an hour after dark. It had been a pretty hard day, and we decided there and then that we would have an off day to-morrow, and do simply nothing.

On Wednesday morning, after breakfast, we thought that it would be well to spend a bit of the off day in enquiring about a guide. So, in due course, Gerard Clement was brought forward and presented to us as being the best guide

in the district. We explained the position to him and the details of our plan, which were that we would like to climb all the peaks round about Cogne—a modest dozen or so. Clement seemed to be impressed and suggested that, as a beginning, we might make a three-day excursion and climb a couple of peaks, namely, Mont Herbetet and the Grand Paradis. We agreed, and then Clement said decisively that we would start that afternoon for the Herbetet chalet, a walk of four or five hours. So the latter half of our off day was spent in toiling up the Valnontey to the chalet.

Thursday morning was not good, mist and light rain, but later on it showed signs of clearing a little, and Clement said that it was all right for the ascent. Our Chamonix men would not have started; but Clement was paid by the peak, and he knew each of them thoroughly. Our route lay up a simple valley to the southmost Col Herbetet and then up the very steep rock and snow north face of the peak to the summit (12,396 feet). We saw nothing, in fact we hardly saw the peak, as there was a thick mist and it was snowing pretty hard. We should not have been there at all. With such conditions I was rather apprehensive that something might avalanche; but nothing happened and we got down to the col safely, and in due course reached the chalet early in the afternoon. It had been an easy day.

On Friday morning Clement wakened us long before daylight, a good sign, and on looking out we found that it was a perfect morning with the stars shining brilliantly. After breakfast we got away about two hours before dawn, and I envied Thomson the experience as it was his first sunrise in the Alps. The going was quite easy for the first hour or so and, after crossing many rocky slopes, we reached the Dzasset Glacier, crossed it, and went on to the big Tribulazione Glacier. This latter was much broken up, but presented no difficulty. Clement now made for the foot of the steep eastern slope of the Grand Paradis and reached the bergschrund at a point almost immediately under the summit of the mountain. The schrund was rather troublesome, but we got across all right and then tackled the steep slope. At first this consisted of hard snow, but towards the

top we encountered a considerable stretch of pure ice which gave Clement a lot of hard work cutting steps. Then we had some rocks and snow, and finally topped the summit ridge only a few yards away from the highest point of the mountain (13,324 feet). The slope had taken us about three hours' work, and must be about 1,000 feet high. Before leaving the summit we screwed Mummery spikes into the heels of our boots in order to be secure on the ice slope. It was certainly sensational, but the spikes proved excellent and gave us perfect confidence. The snow lower down and the bergschrund gave no trouble; we reached the Herbetet chalet in good time, and Cogne in the evening. The Clarks had arrived and were just going to bed in view of an early start for the Grand Nomenon the next day. Thomson and I made the Saturday a real off day. Sunday and Monday were devoted to an attack on the Grivola in company with the Clarks and Charlie. On the first day we went up to the Pousset chalet in rain, and there spent a most uncomfortable night. Next morning the weather was decidedly bad, but Clement took Dr and Mrs Clark to the top of the Grivola (13,022 feet) and, I believe, had a snowstorm on the top. The other three, with the second porter, climbed the Punta del Pousset (9,993 feet), to which the bad weather did not extend. The Clarks returned pretty late, and they wished an off day to follow.

So Clement took Thomson and I on again on the Tuesday and, with a porter, we had an interesting day crossing the Glacier Monei and the Col Monei (11,247 feet) to the Pian-tonetto Club Hut for the night. The glacier was very broken up, but Clement knew it perfectly and led us across it in a thin mist to the col without a mistake. The descent of the south side of the col was rather tricky and demanded great care. The following day we recrossed the col, and after a short descent turned to the east and climbed the Tour du Grand St Pierre (12,113 feet). It is a good rock and snow peak, but the weather was not too good and we saw little. Cogne was reached in ample time for dinner. Our two-day trip had been quite good, and Clement had by now done very well indeed, considering the poor weather we were

having. The only first-class day was that on which we climbed the Grand Paradis.

On Thursday morning we were forced to the conclusion that our respective times were about up, and we walked down to Aosta where we arrived an hour or so after dark. On Friday morning we held a council as to our various plans. Thomson said that he would require to leave by train that afternoon so as to be at his office in Glasgow first thing on Monday morning. The Clarks had a week still in hand and wished to have a try at Emilius and then move on to the Dauphiné for the Meije. I also was due in my office on Monday morning; but, as it was in London, I had a clear day on hand and I therefore decided to take the motor up to Courmayeur, spend one night there, take a look round the place, and come back to Aosta the following afternoon for the train to Turin and home. The only one of these three plans that was carried out to the letter was Thomson's. I rather think that, on account of a late start, the Clarks did not get to the top of Emilius; but Mrs Clark got to the summit of the Meije all right. I was three days late for the office.

I left Aosta with the midday motor and found the journey to Courmayeur quite interesting, especially as the weather seemed to have taken a decided turn for the better. During the latter part of the journey Mont Blanc looked magnificent and became much more attractive than my office appointment for the Monday morning!

On the Saturday I climbed a peak of the Crammont (8,980 feet), descended to the Col de l'Arp, and from it to the Col de Youla. Descending 1,000 feet to the west, I struck the high-level path which runs high up along the south-east slope of the Val Veni to the Col de Chécouri, the view of the 2-mile high precipitous south face of Mont Blanc being magnificent. It was also sufficient, and on getting back to Courmayeur I went at once to the Guides' Office and engaged Joseph Croux for the ascent of Mont Blanc, to start the following morning at 6 o'clock, he to arrange for two porters and provisions. I then sent a post card to the "old man" advising him that I would not be

at the office until 9.30 on Thursday morning. So much for duty; but I had learned my lesson at Chamonix three years ago.

We were off the next morning at six sharp. There were four of us, Joseph's brother Hugo as first porter, and a second porter who would only go as far as the Cabane. We had food for two nights in case we might be delayed. Our route was up the Val Veni to the Lac de Combal and thence up the Miage Glacier to the foot of the Aiguilles Grises. A steep ascent over rocks and snow then placed us at the Dôme Cabane (10,235 feet) for the night. Later in the day two Austrians arrived from Courmayeur, and were to try the ascent to-morrow, guideless. They had a porter who returned to Courmayeur with our second man. The afternoon was perfect and we lay on the rocks for a long time basking in the warm sun; in fact, until Joseph called me to the Cabane for a wonderful dinner that he had prepared. We went to bed at 6 o'clock.

Next morning (Monday) at midnight I saw Joseph get up and go outside to look at the weather. It was a most critical moment, as I knew that should he go back to bed the weather was bad, and that my ascent of Mont Blanc would be off. On the other hand, should he light the candle I would get the peak. *He lit the candle!* A hasty breakfast and we were away about 1.30, Joseph, Hugo, and myself, on one rope. The two Austrians followed on a doubled rope. For the first half-hour we were in shadow and used our lanterns; but we then emerged into the brilliant light of the full moon and put the lanterns away. It was almost as bright as day. Our route lay up the Glacier du Dôme to the snow ridge which runs west from the Dôme du Goûter towards the Col de Bionnassay. Turning to the right, we shortly reached the narrow snow arête which is the feature of this route. It is about 50 yards long with slopes falling away exceedingly steeply on each side for several thousand feet, and requires, as Baedeker would say, a steady head. It is rather sensational and is impossible with a high wind. I believe that many parties are turned here in otherwise perfect weather.

We then skirted the actual summit of the Dôme, and on reaching the Vallot Cabane had a second, or was it a third, breakfast. We were at last in sunlight; but it was extremely cold. We then tackled the 1,500-foot climb up the Bosses Ridge to the summit. This ridge is fairly steep and was much narrower than I had expected, but there were good old steps all the way as we were now on the Chamonix highway. Going very steadily, we reached the summit (15,782 feet) about 9 o'clock. There were several Chamonix parties there. One of the Austrians arrived shortly after us; but his companion got no farther than the Vallot Cabane. The small Observatory on the summit was occupied by several scientists who wished to study solar radiation.

The view from the summit is most extensive, but with the exception of the nearer peaks such as the Verte, is not impressive as the viewpoint is too high up above everything. After about an hour on the summit we returned the way we had come. The snow arête gave no trouble, and at the Dome Cabane Joseph concocted a wonderful repast from the remainder of the two days' provisions. Courmayeur was reached about 8 o'clock in the evening, and I had got the finest climb in my life. Nine-thirty on Thursday morning saw me at the office, three days behind time, but the "old man" took a lenient view of the matter, in fact he said he was glad I had done it.

So much for what I may call Cases One and Two. Case Three was simpler. A friend of mine, whose only previous ascent was Arthur's Seat, happened to be at Chamonix for a holiday; but without intending to do any climbing. In the hotel he heard someone remark that Mont Blanc was in perfect condition and that any person desirous of climbing it should lose no time, as the conditions might change for the worse. My friend at once decided to have a try and got hold of some guides, or perhaps it would be better to say that they got hold of him. They left at midnight, got to the summit, and were back in Chamonix within the twenty-four hours, a feat seldom achieved even by experienced and well-equipped mountaineers. My friend was neither and was

lucky. Very lucky, indeed. So were his guides, who were, of course, paid full tariff rates.

Moral.—If you are going to the Alps do not make out a detailed plan before you start as you may be disappointed, and if you wish to secure peaks, engage guides at the tariff rates for the peaks. Or give them a nominal retaining fee for your holiday plus an extra, based on the tariff rates, for each peak climbed.

The Cairngorm Club