



MORNING ON THE GÉANT GLACIER

*R. L. Mitchell*

## ALPINE FOLLY.

JOHN MORGAN.

WHILE in Skye in the summer of 1949 I had met Douglas Sutherland, and the September holiday saw us on our way to the Robber's Copse, near Luibeg, to join William Brooker, who had preceded us. We discovered in the bus that we would both like to visit the Alps in 1950. The week-end in Corrie Bhrochain was the start of a happy partnership, and we began to meet on Tuesday nights to discuss recent events and future plans. Soon others joined us, and often eight and even nine were crowded round a restaurant table, to the management's ill-concealed horror. The Alps were much discussed and eventually the "expedition" stabilised itself in numbers to three who thought the necessary funds could be got somehow or other—Doug, Malcolm Smith, and myself. Doug then rashly, or ambitiously, secured a post near Sikkim, and his sailing-date ruled him out, leaving two of us.

We chose Chamonix, and after consultation with an habitu  of the region, learned that £30 would be an approximate minimum sum for the trip. Thereupon we decided that £20 would be enough for us. At this point we overlooked the fact that our adviser is himself a believer in Spartan holidays.

We left Aberdeen on a Friday afternoon, reaching London on Saturday evening in three lifts, and there had our first good meal and first sleep since Aberdeen. On Sunday we camped on a building site mid-way between Newhaven's shopping centre and harbour. The ferry cost much more than we had been led to believe, so we could not afford the train to Paris, but after an hour or so outside Dieppe we were bound for Rouen, where we had a small meal. It had been dark some time when we settled down on the Paris branch of a road-fork, making comfortable hollows in a pile of road-metal. Vehicles were few, and drivers, we had learned, were chary of hitch-hikers at night; so we arrayed



the rucksacks in a prominent position to convince drivers of our bona fides and at 12.30 P.M. were rewarded by a large van.

On reaching Paris around 5 A.M. rest was uppermost in our minds and we were rather at a loss when five *agents de police* approached us. Assured we were neither Belgians nor Americans, but Scots, their scowls changed to friendly smiles. The absence of the kilt puzzled them, however, and we had to explain that it was unsuitable for mountaineering and that even Scottish climbers did not wear it. They told us there were seats in the Place de Robespierre, and soon we were trying to make ourselves comfortable, stonily observed by the bust of the infamous revolutionary. My seat proved too narrow for sleep, so an hour or so later I awoke Mac and suggested a move to the Gare du Lyon. After struggling with our monstrous packs in various buses we won through and at 7.40 A.M. on Tuesday morning the expedition entrained for Chamonix. We had judged hitch-hiking from Paris onwards would be hopeless in the time at our disposal and the sight of the country we passed through confirmed our opinion.

Around eight in the evening we alighted at Les Praz de Chamonix, where we found a secluded camp site near the railway. We spent two days recovering lost sleep, eating, and buying supplies. Valuable francs were spent in joining the French Alpine Club in the hope that it would pay us at the huts, which offer cheap rates for members, but we could not afford to stay that long in the end. Chamonix itself shocked us. We had not expected a mountain version of a seaside resort, with everything bar a pleasure beach. This last, we soon found, was replaced by the Mer de Glace, where one could hire snow-glasses and an ice-axe and be conducted up and down the glacier. Poor elementary arithmetic on my part with the twenty-four-hour timetable cost us the last train to the Montenvers next day, but on Saturday we were caching (ruthlessly, we thought at the time) things we hoped we would not need beside the path down to the Mer de Glace. We had already left a good deal with the *gardien* of the C.A.F. hut in Chamonix.



With packs reduced to about 50 lb. we headed up the glacier for the Couvercle. We found the going not very easy, but the climb from the glacier to the hut shook us. The first "pitch" was an iron ladder up a vertical wall. We are strongly opposed to artificial aids on a climb, but we used it. The route above was festooned with stanchions and handrails and abounded in steps hewn from the rock. We used them all. The arrival of an expedition from Aberdeen aroused no comment in the crowded hut, apart from references to our "grands sacs." Compared with the others we might have been settling in for a month. Among those present was Armand Charlet, who unaccountably did not recognise us. Rumour had it that his ascent of the Aiguille Verte next day was his eightieth.

Rooms are allotted by the *gardien* according to the time one wishes to get up. With the Aiguille du Moine in mind we chose the 5 A.M. room. We were assured in the morning, however, that it could not possibly be climbed at that late hour, so we bowed to what we thought was the voice of experience and spent the day in photography and exploration, with many wistful glances at our peak. That evening we dutifully took the 3.30 A.M. room, but were not aroused until two hours later. It was raining heavily. The day passed tediously, brightened by frequent sessions with the primus, which we were surprised to find was an object of much admiration. A very pleasant young English couple had arrived and told us that the early start, for the Moine at least, was merely force of habit on the part of the guides. The clouds lifted towards evening and we were treated to the spectacle of lightning playing on the Aiguille du Géant.

The weather was perfect as we left the hut shortly after six. We followed the path to the foot of the Moine glacier and headed for the bergschrund up delightfully hard snow. At the foot of the rocks we found a party roping up. According to the Vallot guidebook "the best way is not easily found" on the *voie normale*, so when we learned they had climbed it before, we thought it would do no harm to keep them in sight. We therefore politely declined their offer to let us pass them; we might hold them up, as we would be using our



cameras frequently, and furthermore we believed climbing should be indulged in lazily.

The first pitch was a groove with rather small holds, and gave them no little trouble. The second, a steep chimney with good holds, they found scarcely easier, and we began to have doubts as to their ability to act as unwitting guides. We were sure of it when a few hundred feet higher they lost the route. We volunteered to go ahead and soon picked it up, a traverse round an awkward corner and steep but broken rock leading to an apparently holdless narrow-angled groove. To a mind conditioned by Cairngorm granite it looked imposing, so I began an outward and ascending traverse on a steep wall on the right, followed by a second in the opposite direction above the first. I was now above the groove's exit and almost within a jump of the proper route but the holds petered out. Mac had been slightly perturbed and was relieved when I regained the bottom of the groove; but he need not have worried, the granite was sound and delightful. The groove, when tackled, proved an impostor, and I was half-way up when Mac cried that the leader of the party below wanted the rope. He was obviously out of training and finally asked to be let down. The climbing was varied and interesting, while a wide choice of route was possible on the face.

On the summit we met five Swiss whom we had watched at intervals on a route just to the right of the S.W. arête. Their flowing, effortless movement on difficult ground had been good to see and had emphasised our utter inexperience in the art of moving together. We had a bout of mutual photography with the Swiss and followed this with a rapid recording of the Dru, Grandes Jorasses, and Mont Blanc before rising cloud from the Chamonix side should obscure the view. To the north, north-east, and right round to the south-west rose peaks we had read and dreamed about, but it was to the Grandes Jorasses that our eyes returned most often, irresistably drawn by the north face. We gazed, fascinated, at the relentless downward sweep of ice couloir and rock, and tried to trace the few routes on it.

The Swiss treated us to a song and began the descent.



We followed their example a few minutes later as it was obvious there would soon be no view worth staying for. We thought we were making good progress, but each time we saw the Swiss through breaks in the mist they had increased their lead, being accustomed to continuous movement.

A third of the way down we came on our erstwhile guides, still persevering. They had found an easier route, but on hearing they were still almost a thousand feet from the summit they decided to turn back. We felt it our duty to see them down safely, but their form had returned somewhat, and we made fair progress. Mac glissaded from the bergschrund. He is quite happy glissading, as is any self-respecting mountaineer; so also was the leader of the other party, it appeared, but his second bluntly refused, even on the rope, thus relieving me greatly. Having fallen twice down steep snow for considerable distances I have still to acquire confidence in glissading it. When the slope eased, however, I plucked up courage and sped off on my own.

As my eyes became accustomed to the dim interior of the hut I saw Mac hunched intently over the primus, brewing tea. He has a very happy way of losing no time in indulging his second vice whenever possible.

Next morning, Wednesday, we left for the Montenvers, with the Petite Aiguille Verte and the Aiguilles des Grands Montets in mind, and collected our cache. Since leaving the hut both had felt a certain lassitude, and though we now suspect it was the unaccustomed altitude we attributed it at the time to lack of suitable food. It might well have been partly caused by this: compared with the French at the Convercle we had been living like Spartans, mainly on "cheese brose." This is simply porridge with plenty of cheese added instead of milk. I had invented it during a solitary camp near Corrie Garbhloch and had lived on it, from necessity, for four days, and on the strength of this had persuaded Mac that it would be a good staple food. Given good cheese it is, but I fear Mac will never again touch it; our cheese was of a sickening rubbery consistency when cooked.

On considering carefully the food and money situation, we were forced to decide that we would have to start on the



return journey if we wished to keep a reasonable sum in hand for it. As on the outward journey we judged hitch-hiking through France hopeless in the time at our disposal and reached Paris by the night train, which was blessedly cooler. Such was our ill-luck, however, that it was again dark before we were decanted by the docks in Rouen. The historic city's ribbon development seemed interminable, and in the early morning we were still trudging along the silent road, vainly seeking even a clearing between two houses where we could unroll our sleeping-bags. We eventually found a poultry field.

A metaphorical veil is sometimes used to pass over events which will not bear recording and most of the return journey merits its use. This much shall be said, however. Civility from London Transport employees was non-existent. Our rucksacks, of course, were the cause of this. A slight lack of courtesy we would have understood and forgiven, but as it was we kept our tempers and the peace with great difficulty. In Glasgow the treatment was entirely different. Tramwaymen, to a man, went to considerable trouble to help us, with unflinching cheerfulness. Our most pleasant night was spent in a roadman's shelter. Between Stirling and Perth I had found Mac with one leg propped on a wall, head on hand, asleep, and we were very tired when at 2 A.M. we were investigating a haystack on the northern outskirts of Perth. That was probably the worst night, although we were dry in spite of heavy rain.

We had climbed in the Alps on £20 all in, but only just. With £40 it would be possible to use public transport, and enjoy a good fortnight's climbing. Hitch-hiking is much too exhausting if a particular destination in a short time is the aim. On £40, too, certain desirable items of equipment might be purchased, such as crampons, and even, dare we hope, a superb pair of boots! What little climbing we had, we enjoyed, but next time we will pick routes with snow and ice: there is ample rock in Skye. We intend to repeat Alpine Folly in other years, money permitting, but with much greater emphasis on "Alpine."