

## THE TOUR AND TRIENT GLACIERS.

By DOUGLAS L. BUSK.

THE first chapter of the first volume of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* opens with the words 'The Glacier du Tour is perhaps the least generally and the least accurately known of all the great ice streams which have their end on the northern side of the chain of Mont Blanc.' In the seventy odd years that have passed since those words were written the Glacier du Tour has certainly become better known. All the peaks at the head of it have been climbed, huts have been built in the neighbourhood, and the 'passage des trois cols' is one of the best-known easy expeditions that can be done from Chamonix.

It is nevertheless still true to say that the Glacier du Tour is the least known of the glaciers on the N. side of the chain of Mont Blanc. It is tucked away at the head of the valley, and few of those who mope at Chamonix, when bad weather has made all the higher peaks impossible for some days, seem to realize that there is within easy reach a district where the summits are lower but no less delightful.

Until 1930 there was no hut on the French side from which these mountains could be attacked conveniently, and a long *marche d'approche* was necessary, either from Lognan or from Charamillon, where there is a clean and comfortable little inn whose red-painted sides can be descried from Chamonix half-way up the path to the Col de Balme. But now, through the generosity of the Club Alpin Belge, a fine hut (*Gardien*, Ulysse Simond) has been erected at the top of the moraine on the right bank of the Glacier du Tour at a height of about 2750 metres. The Refuge Albert I<sup>er</sup> meets a long-felt want, and I hope that this account of climbs and ski runs carried out in the district during the last three seasons will lead more British mountaineers to visit it.

Climbers who come from the Swiss side can make use of the Dupuis hut or even of the Orny or Saleinaz huts, though the latter are less convenient for the region whose charms I am attempting to describe. It is of course also possible to start from Lognan and reach the Tour and Trient Glaciers either by the Col du Passon or by the Col du Chardonnet and the Fenêtre de Saleinaz.

The glory of the district is of course the Aiguille du Chardonnet, with the Aiguilles Dorées a good second.



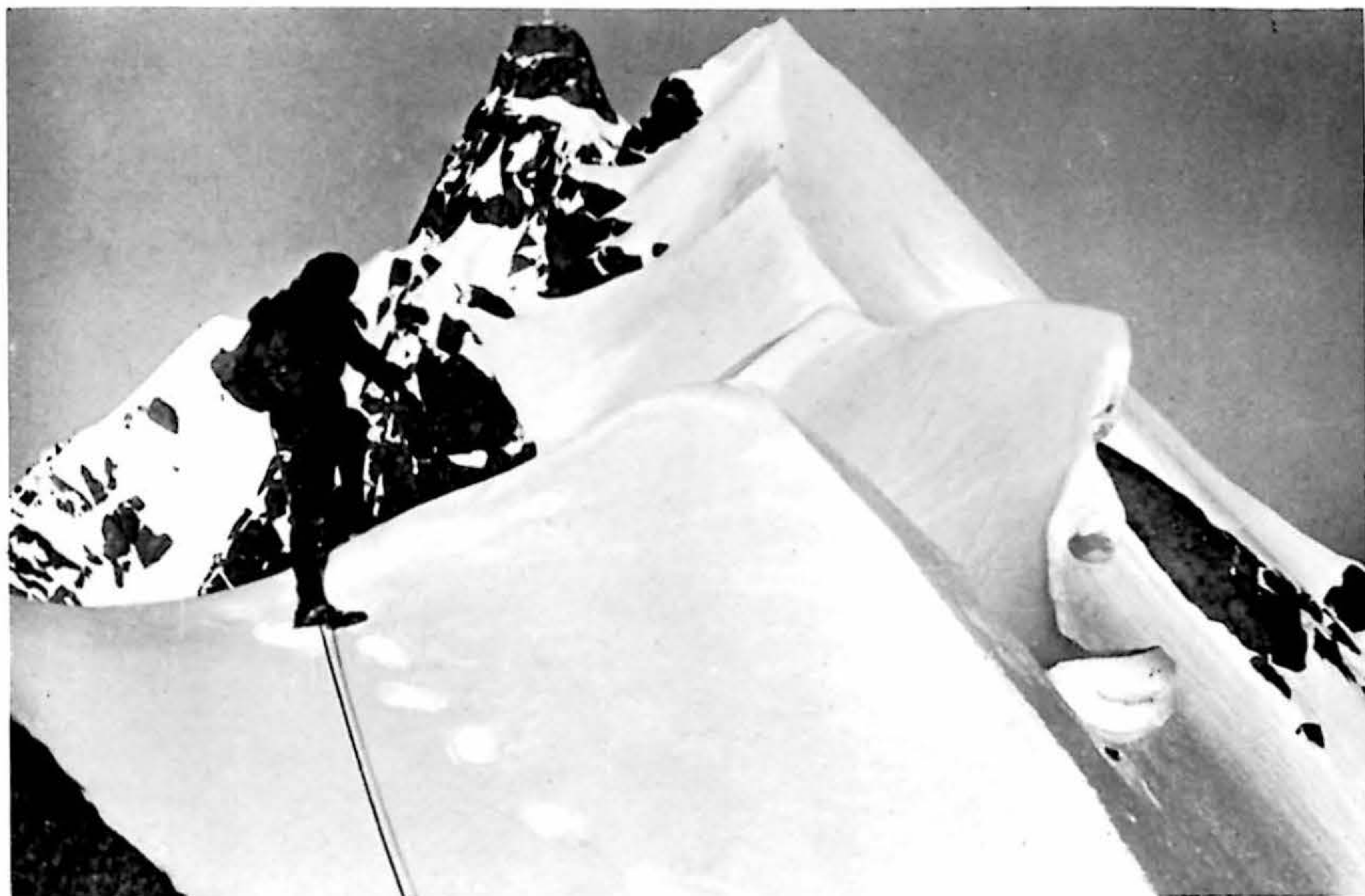
For the former I have personally a great affection. It did not succumb until the fourth attempt, and only then after as tricky a piece of climbing as the heart of man could desire. The peak has now been climbed from every side, but in my opinion the finest route is that by the N.E. ridge—the so-called ‘*arête Forbes*.’ The two routes opened up by the G.H.M. on the N. face are certainly more difficult, but they are cold and uninviting when compared with the narrow whiplash of the ridge.

The climb by the ‘*arête Forbes*’ is a short one; it took Armand Charlet and myself 4 fast hours from hut to summit in the abominable conditions prevalent last summer (1931). The final slope leading up to the ridge was ice and demanded considerable step-cutting, while the ridge itself when we reached it proved to be composed of slobbery snow that slid down in large masses impartially on either side if treated ungently. I imagine that in good conditions the frequent rock gendarmes with which the ridge is studded provide entertaining scrambling, but we found them snow-plastered and revolting. The ordinary way down, usually almost a rock climb, was in even worse condition, since it had received the full brunt of a westerly gale of two days earlier, leaving it in a condition where the snow that covered everything was too hard for cramponless climbers to descend without cutting, so we blessed the name of Eckenstein and hurried down to get out of the wind. (I need hardly say that after two fine days the weather was breaking.)

The Aiguilles Dorées are perhaps best attempted from the Dupuis hut, but they are perfectly accessible from the Refuge Albert I<sup>er</sup>. They provide rock-climbing on granite as sound as anything in the Aiguilles, and one step (on the Javelle) which is to me harder than anything on the ordinary Charmoz-Grépon routes. The traverse of the whole group is a splendid expedition, but it naturally needs reasonable weather. If, however, the weather is threatening or the party lazy, it is still possible to acquire a pleasant feeling of achievement and fatigue by climbing only the Javelle, with or without its two satellites the Trident and the Tête Crettex.

As I have already said, the Javelle contains one step sufficiently difficult to chasten all but the most advanced rubber shoe experts. It begins with a deep chimney of the uncomfortable variety—too wide to jam and too narrow to back-and-knee. This section is associated in my recollection with the loss of much skin from unwisely bared elbows. Above the chimney there lie back two slabs meeting at a very obtuse





*Photo, D. L. Busk.]*

N.E. RIDGE OF AIGUILLE DU CHARDONNET.



*Photo, D. L. Busk.]*

AIGUILLE DU CHARDONNET FROM REFUGE ALBERT IER.

*[To face p. 257.]*



angle. At their point of juncture there is an excessively narrow crack, and above the crack, at the top of the slabs, a U-shaped notch. It is customary—so says the guide-book—for the leader to tie a large knot in the end of the rope and lodge it in this notch, which is only some 10–12 ft. above. The rope can then be used as a handhold. The crack can, however, be climbed without this artificial and, I should have thought, precarious aid, the solution being a handhold so far out to the left that a leader must forget his nerves when using it.

As I do not wish to frighten prospective visitors off the Aiguilles Dorées, I must add that it is a matter of no difficulty to work round the Javelle on the S. slope and continue the traverse of the ridge from the succeeding gap.

The traverse of the Aiguilles Dorées from the Col Droit to the Fenêtre de Saleinaz is a full day's expedition for most parties, but a glance at the map will show that having got thus far, it is a pity not to return next day to the Fenêtre de Saleinaz and complete the *Gratwanderung* via the Fourchette, Petite Fourche and Grande Fourche to the Fenêtre du Tour. Here again the rock is as good as one could wish, and the views magnificent.

The Petite Fourche is the meeting-place of three ridges, and though overtopped by its neighbours is well worth a visit. I had the feeling, as I looked along the narrow containing ridge of the Tour Glacier towards the Grande Fourche, that at any minute this slender wall might crumple under the strain and loose the upper snows of the Tour in a devastating avalanche on to the Saleinaz Glacier. One has the same impression on the Col du Midi,<sup>1</sup> where it is only a few feet down to the Glacier du Midi on one side and several thousand to the Chamonix valley on the other.

The Grande Fourche is not precisely easy from the Col des Fourches. To keep strictly to the ridge appeared to Armand and myself impossible, and we edged off, unwisely, on to the chilled slabs of the N. face, soon to find ourselves involved in the crossing of a narrow gully not unlike the 'pendule' on the Grand Dru. We quested up and down its containing rib but failed to find a convenient way down. Finally Armand slid down a loop of the climbing rope into the gully, crossed an evil slab, and climbed far up the other side to protect my descent. There was not enough rope for me to follow Armand's method,

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<sup>1</sup> The better-known col of that name, *not* the one mentioned later in this article.



and I cannot really pretend to have enjoyed those 12 downward feet. A slip would, of course, have been more uncomfortable than dangerous, for Armand was well placed 50 ft. above me, but the rope was no help since the pull was slightly diagonal. Armand whistled tunelessly between his teeth—as he does when he disapproves of me or of himself—and under that spur I effected an ungraceful but safe passage.

Once across we found no further difficulty as far as the shoulder, from which the summit can be reached in a few minutes.

The long ridge down to the Fenêtre du Tour is an easy but entertaining climb on sound rock. The Aiguille du Chardonnet is always before you, the Aiguille d'Argentière a little to your left, and, framed in the notch of the Col du Chardonnet, there is a magnificent view of the amazing crescendo of the Courtes, Droites and Verte seen across the trough of the Glacier d'Argentière.

I do not seek to write a guide-book to the neighbourhood, so I will pass over the other climbs and merely mention that the Aiguilles du Tour are among the finest view-points in the Chamonix district, and that the Aiguille Purtscheller runs them close while providing better and less crowded climbing. The latter is best done from the Refuge Albert I<sup>er</sup>, *via* the col between it and the Aiguille du Tour and the N.E. face. The descent can then be made by the ordinary S. face route.

It is a peaklet for which I shall always cherish an affectionate feeling, since it was the first I did with Armand after a ski-ing accident in which he had been seriously injured.<sup>2</sup> His leg still pained him whenever he made a wide straddle, so he had put me on to lead; and, since we had unwisely left our axes at the foot of the rocks, I had some uncomfortable moments chipping ice from the handholds of one slab with a knife. However, the descent of the S. face was warm and comfortable to chilled fingers, and an abiding miracle as far as Armand was concerned. It was impossible to believe that less than eight months previously he had been found, four hours after an encounter with a buried tree trunk, crawling down to Argentière with a broken thigh and, as far as I remember, two cracked ribs and a broken collar-bone!

I should like to conclude by mentioning that the Tour and Trient Glaciers provide good ski-ing at almost all times of year. The Refuge Albert I<sup>er</sup> is equipped with passable summer skis, which can be hired for a small sum, and late in August 1931

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<sup>2</sup> *A.J.* 42, 337.



Armand and I enjoyed some splendid runs. We dragged skis up to the Col du Midi and then round *via* the nameless col between the Aiguille du Pissoir and the Pissoir to the foot of the Aiguille du Tour. We left them at the schrund, climbed the N. peak, and then ran down roped to the Col inférieur du Tour. There was a breakable crust and our straps kept slackening as they got wetter, an evil combination I found it impossible to cope with successfully. Our resultant antics, as we learned later, caused no little amusement to some friends on the Purtscheller, who wondered who the nameless lunatics could be who derived any pleasure from the somewhat intermittent form of locomotion we were compelled to adopt.

At the col we unroped and engaged in a protracted struggle with the recalcitrant bindings. We started down wondering whether we were doomed to struggle with more trap-crust, and found perfect spring snow: hard crust superficially softened by the sun, on which any turn was possible. On good snow, summer skis are fantastically easy to turn, and we ran fast and confidently between the rare crevasses and finally down a perfect slope, where the invitation of linked christianias could not be refused, to within 50 yds. of the hut. We reached it in 20 minutes from the col, which included some halts wasted in more futile attempts to persuade our bindings to stay put.

We spent the afternoon in a determined and this time successful effort to arrange the *Huitfeldts*, and next day, as I have related above, traversed the Chardonnet. We dragged skis to the bergschrund on the ordinary route and then traversed under the N. face to the foot of our climb. On the descent we picked up our skis and had the satisfaction of converting what would have been a long and painful trudge into a perfect run.

In a fine season the ski-ing would probably not be good so late in the year, but there is no need for climbers who visit the hut in July ever to walk a yard downhill on their own feet. If one chose one's time carefully, one could enjoy first-class unroped runs from the Tête Blanche, the Col du Passon and the Fenêtre du Tour (which might be combined with an ascent of the Grande Fourche or the Aiguille Forbes), as well as those I have described.

The ski mountaineer is apt to pack his skis away with distressing finality towards the middle of June, but if he goes to the Refuge Albert I<sup>er</sup>, there is no reason why he should not taste the delights of his favourite sport—seasoned with the additional relish of rock and ice work good enough to tickle the most jaded palate—for another month at least.