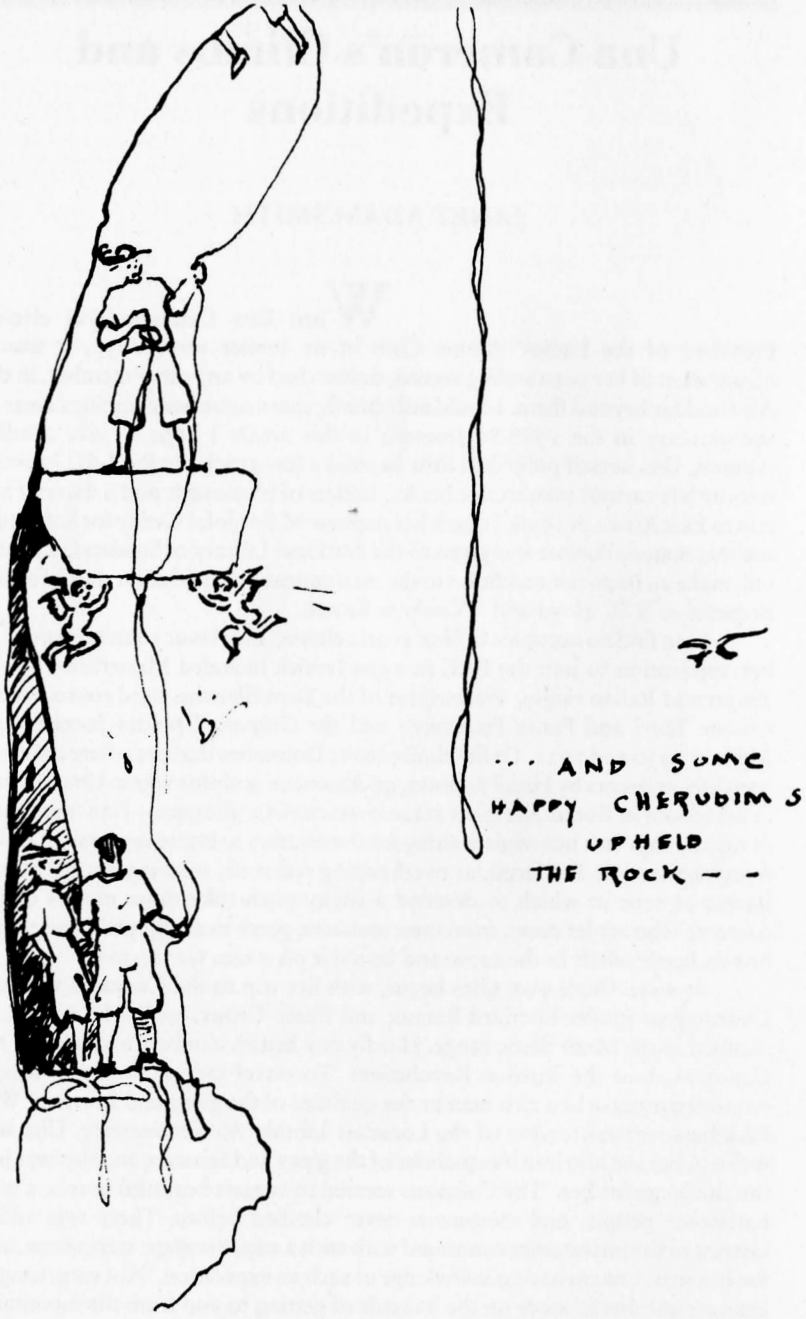
Una Cameron's Climbs and Expeditions

JANET ADAM SMITH

When Una Cameron was elected President of the Ladies' Alpine Club in its Jubilee year, 1957, it was a recognition of her outstanding record, unmatched by any other member, in the Alps and far beyond them. I could only briefly summarize her climbing career in the obituary in the 1988/89 *Journal*; in this article I hope to give a fuller account. Una herself published little beyond a few articles in the *LAC Journal*, but she left various manuscript books, folders of typescripts and a diary of her trip to East Africa in 1938. I thank her nephew Major John Getley for letting me use this material before it is given to the National Library of Scotland, where it will make an important addition to the mountaineering collection started by the bequests of R W Lloyd and T Graham Brown.

I can find no accounts of Una's early climbs: the classic routes recorded in her application to join the LAC in 1929 (which included Matterhorn by the Zmutt and Italian ridges, Viereselgrat of the Dent Blanche, hard routes on the Cinque Torri and Punta Fiammes); and the Grépon, Grandes Jorasses and Meije in 1930 and 1931. Of the climbs in the Dolomites that year there are some sprightly accounts by Hazel Jackson, an American sculptor whom Una had met at art school in Rome. She gives some characteristic glimpses – Una 'partaking of many grogs' in a hut while waiting for the weather to improve; cursing 'Hell's own highway' as she faced an overhanging red wall; weaving herself a little basket of rope in which to descend a tricky pitch (like those monks of the Meteora who are let down from their monastic perch in a net); picking up a big brown beetle adrift in the snow and laying it on a nice warm stone.

In 1932 Una's own tales begin, with her trip to the Caucasus with the Courmayeur guides Edouard Bareux and Elisée Croux, with whom she had climbed in the Mont Blanc range. Hardly any British climbers had been to the Caucasus since the Russian Revolution: 'To travel independently in Russia requires the purse of a rich man or the qualities of the gipsy and Spartan,' W R Rickmers warned readers of the Lonsdale Library *Mountaineering*. Una was well off, but she also had the qualities of the gipsy and Spartan, and this was just the challenge for her. 'The Caucasus seemed to suggest beautiful horses, a wild handsome people, and mountains never climbed before. There was added interest in the uncertainty connected with such a trip, the maps were secret, and the Intourist bureau had no knowledge of such an expedition.' Not surprisingly, her account dwells more on the hazards of getting to and from the mountains than with the climbs themselves. From Tiflis they went by bus along the Georgian Military Highway to Kasbek, where they collected a hunter Nikolai


... AND SOME
HAPPY CHERUBIMS
UPHELD
THE ROCK — —

to look after the horses. 'He had a hook nose, fierce slanting eyes and wore a fur hat and wrote poetry and best of all had a map. . . . When the horses finally turned up they looked quite presentable, but the minute anything was put on their backs, they sighed heavily and hung their heads.' The caravan lurched its way up roads that were really river-beds to Karkutchia, where the villagers presented them with 15-inch trout and warned them that 'the people beyond were wild and unfriendly, and they have no use for police or roads.' But though the men of Djuita carried swords, they did nothing more threatening than try to do a deal for Una's boots. The climbing began, the weather was mostly awful, and so was the rock.

> The mountains in that district are from 3800 to 4000 metres high, and the rock is very dangerous, a sinister mix of stone books and suitcases that rattle down just as you are about to put a finger on it, and it cuts the boots badly, which is worse. The grass grows up very high and so there is very little feeling of height.
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> Climbing on loose rock may be dangerous, but it has no comparison with being taken for a doctor as I was, and being asked to prescribe for someone with a high fever, whose heart and breathing have both gone wrong, and who lived too far away for me even to see if I had understood the symptoms correctly. We hoped aspirin was a universal cure.
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> Most of the nights sleep was impossible, hail rattled on the tent and everything was lit up with white lightning and thunder roared among the hills. The weather was always unexpected, a serene evening meant that the tent would be nearly blown away or punctured by hail in an hour or two, and a wild cloudy morning probably meant that we could climb all day and never have a drop of rain.

However, they did manage to climb five of the Tschauchee towers (all, as far as they could make out, first ascents), but blizzards thwarted their two attempts on Kasbek. The return journey presented a new hazard: no banks at Kasbek meant no money for the bus fare to Tiflis till they had sold their horses. 'We spent four days continually talking and making new acquaintances among the charming, friendly people, until the miraculous day when we managed to sell the horses and buy a ticket and leave for Batum. What an expenditure of time, money and patience for 7 peaks and 6 fine days! but I am going again.'

She never did revisit the Caucasus: the next climbing expedition beyond the Alps was to East Africa in 1938, again with Edouard and Elisée. This time she kept a full diary. They arrived at Mombasa by sea on 15 January, took a train to Nairobi where they hired a lorry, engaged a cook and driver, and set off for Uganda and the Ruwenzori – her aim there, she told the *East African Standard*, being to collect plants and seeds for her own garden from the Mountains of the Moon, as well as to climb them. Auspiciously, when they stopped at a hotel at Mubende, advertisements for Dewar's Whisky were prominently displayed beside royal portraits – Dewar's being the family firm which made such expeditions possible for Una. The five-day trudge up the

mountain with porters hired at Bugaye – 'hell-fire hot through elephant grass and banana trees' – wasn't much fun, but there were new flowers to note and porters to doctor. 'Anything with a bandage gives satisfaction, a poisoned hand looked very sinister, but hydrogen peroxide fizzed v. satisfactorily on all wounds.' On 1 February, from a bivouac at 4400m, they started for the Alexandra Peak of Mt Stanley.

> Set off in a mist – full of hope. Slowly, waiting every 100 metres to see if it wd. clear or where we were going, we came to some comic local seracs. V. light and decorative (black ice v. hard) like Christmas tree decorations and candles hanging wrong way up. In the dark we got to some sort of a summit which we thought might be Alexandra, but on trying to reach what might be Margherita we found a tin with Shipton and Tilman's names and a card from the Belgian expedition 1932 proving us to be on Alexandra. Waited ½ hour to try to get a view of Margherita but the mist only lifted a few seconds showing v. complicated ice formations and not far enough to show the connecting col. Came down in a thicker mist than in the morning following tracks gratefully and collected some wood at the regulation camping place to add to the defective Primus's usefulness.

Two days later, after much 'plunging over roots and fallen trees and sinking into green moss which becomes black mud' they crossed the Stuhlmann Pass to bivouac at the Leopard's Lair cave from which they climbed Mt Speke in mist, rain and hail ('we never climb on fine days'). On 8 February the Luigi di Savoia provided more interesting climbing, with a hole in the rock to be negotiated; three days later it was actually clear when they reached the top of Mt Baker by a new route from the Scott Elliott Pass.

> The rocks were comparatively clear of snow and beautifully steep, and in 4½ hours we were on the summit ridge, looking at our first clear view of the range as a whole, able to understand and see at

U.C.

> last how the mountains and valleys fitted into the map. It was the finest climb we did in the chain, and the first time that the mountain was climbed by this route. We followed the ridge across Semper Peak to the summit of Mt Baker, then traversing down reached our old track, where the plants were beaten down and the rocks peeled clear.

Una came out of the Ruwenzori with a gashed and infected leg which was dressed at the Fort Portal hospital; at Tororo she delighted in a hotelier who called his cat Rachel 'because she wept for her children', and warned guests that he charged '2/- extra for those who do not bathe'. She rested her leg with friends near Nairobi before making for Mt Kenya. The approach was from Chogokia to the east of the range; and how pleasantly the three-day walk up to Carr's hut contrasted with the struggle on the Ruwenzori. First, 'the grandest real African wood, enormously high trees and pretty flowers, monkeys and birds'. Further up, 'we never caught our faces on branches. Gosh! what a change!'; and when they got to the heather moors, the dry paths were a joy. And so was the rock on Mt Kenya after the wet snows of the Ruwenzori.

> *March 5*. Set off in a gale for Mt Kenya. This decided me to leave my hat at the foot of the climb and the 2 guides 'le casque touche partout'. It was v. hot until we reached the ridge where a fresh breeze improved matters a lot. The rock was good and the climbing interesting although it made us blow a lot – anything in the way of a chimney made me blow myself purple . . . The summit at 12.00 when we shouted down to our impressed friends but we were practically surrounded in mist. That fool Ghiglione had left an Italian flag and we found a new book for Batian left by the Carr (?) party so we set off down to the col. That made us think – having 2 prs rubber and 1 cloth pr boots, no ice-axe and no crampons! The wickedest ice with a thick layer of snow and sheer on both sides. Very cunningly the two fixed up a rappel and first Elisée went over with success, then self with less, and one wicked swing followed by *à cheval* down the ridge and we were all over and hurrying up good rock to Batian where the mist was thicker. Ate some marvellous tinned strawberries, left the book in tin and came down, crossed the ice col with relief, over Nelion and coming through hail and mist reached glacier in 2 h. Two v. nice Sladens camping here now, doing Kenya tomorrow.

The day after Una had been the first woman up Batian and on the Gate of the Mists (she had been preceded on Nelion earlier that year by Carol Carroll), she watched Geraldine Sladen and her brother repeat her climb, and as they clanked down the last stretch in the dark she went out to meet them with lanterns.

Plodding from hut to hut up Kilimanjaro was boring and induced bad temper. From the Kibo hut 'started off feeling sullen. Suggested after an eternity (5 mins. according to my companions) going back to bed. Slid about in leprous scree, stopping often and feeling short of air and ready to kick the cat'. But once

up, there was the 'interesting crater with queer ice-cliffs', though clouds hid everything else. Down at Moshi she met Dr Reusch: 'A King! Quite unbelievable. Small, king climber, hand-kisser and linguist and full of charm . . . One of the most interesting people I have met. Ex-Cossack officer, Georgian, D.D. of Leipzig, climbed Kilimanjaro 32 times.' Then they headed for home – rail to Tanga where Edouard and Elisée had swimming lessons and Una suffered the humiliation of being weighed before the flight to Mombasa and the steamer home.

Henriette d'Angeville, the first lady (though second female) up Mont Blanc in 1838 called herself 'The Fiancée of Mt Blanc'. Una would have scoffed at such romantic notions – but she was indeed passionately devoted to the mountain under which she built the Villa Cameron at La Palud above Courmayeur. From 1933 it was the centre of her climbing: between then and the war, with Edouard and Elisée, she climbed most of the peaks in the massif and traversed Mont Blanc itself again and again by different lines. In 1933, between 10 and 29 July, the party's tally was Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey, Aiguille Rouge de Triolet, Col de Rochefort and Col du Midi on ski, up Mont Blanc from the Col du Géant and down by the Dôme route, again up by the Brenva Ridge and down to Chamonix, three of the four Dames Anglaises. Una has left no description of these, but two of next year's expeditions are fully recorded in a manuscript book: the Innominata and the Brouillard. For the Innominata, their base was the Gamba hut (which in comfort and provisioning easily trumped any hotel in the Caucasus).

> Rising early being such a tedious proceeding we decided to sup late and not go to bed at all . . . Outside it was very black and the going over the scree in the dark was pretty lousy, so we were glad to get on to the glacier and put on our crampons, lightening the sacks and giving me the feeling of my feet being all melted into one with the iron toes, without noticeably adding to their weight.
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> The glacier was steep and complicated in places, so we decided to wait for the dawn somewhere near the base of the rise to the Col Emile Rey. As usual Edouard was a comfort to others. Elisée and I draped ourselves over him and put a sleeping sack over our knees and went to sleep, while he sat up stiff and cold.

When day dawned they succeeded in finding a way through the maze of crevasses.

> It was an interesting sight, the towering ice teeth and great blue-green caverns. I was in poor training and had plenty of time to take it all in. As we came up the steep slope to the Col Eccles and looked down towards the glacier it was an impressive sight to see the snow loosened by the sun rolling down in avalanches. We cleared away some snow on the rocks and sat in the sun on the Col. We could see for miles all the hills we knew and interested ourselves in three men

on the Aiguille Blanche who were going along well, while we discussed possibilities and plans for the future. [These may have included the Aiguilles du Diable and the then unclimbed E face of the Grandes Jorasses. A postcard from Elisée to Una that September describes his reconnaissance of these two routes; but there is no record of any later attempt by Una's party on them.] It would have been easy to have stayed as long as the sun lasted in that blissful spot, but the climb was just beginning, so I knocked out my pipe, Edouard put a brown cigarette end in his pocket for future use, and Elisée woke up; how easily he sleeps and with what accuracy he finds the only place possible to stretch himself out in full comfort.

Then we started up the rocks. Gosh! and they were steep too, but what lovely rock, not a great many holds but sufficient and good. There was still a lot of snow, more than the guides cared for as they had to clear out most of the holds, I only got the snow down my neck and good clean places to put my hands much better! Later we turned a corner with a steep fall beside it and our rucksacks playfully bumped against the rocks seemingly doing their best to knock us down the hillside and yet the difficulty was not grand enough to warrant us pulling them along on the rope; each was muttering to himself or herself a very degrading family tree for the rucksacks and when that difficulty was over, a sinister hole appeared that had to be got through. Holes are always more accommodating than they seem but I was relieved to find myself through and not needing to be dislodged with masons' tools.

It was such a glorious day that we took it slowly and it seemed that we had the world to ourselves. Plenty of handy drips that we mixed with lemonade powder at every step. It was a luxury trip. After we had crossed the broad wicked couloir that was constantly being swept with avalanches, it seemed to me that the summit could not be far away, but the guides said that that was merely a lovely fancy.

From then on the route was less interesting, and we reached the Brouillard ridge at sunset; it was colder and there was a slight wind blowing. We slugged along the ridge and across the snow, and the wind blew harder, then Harder and HARDER. We stalked along with heads down muttering. I felt that it was handy to be heavy or we might be blown away and still we walked over the snow, and glory, the last pull in a gale is unending seemingly.

At last we could climb no higher. Far below were the lights of Chamonix signalling cheerily but we only blinked through an ice-fringe of eyelashes and passe-montagne and went down as fast as the wind would let us, digging in our crampons and ice-axes and feeling like flags on a house-top. Still the gale blew but we could distinguish the Refuge Vallot and soon we were at the door and inside. No one there, how comfortable the shelter was, and what a

Una Cameron

Miage Glacier from the Gonella hut

> fine lot of blankets. Edouard soon had the Primus going and Ovaltine was made and we ate some of anything handy, foie gras and hard bread lying on a shelf below a heap of blankets while the wind howled outside.

Next day, down by the Dôme and over the Aiguilles Grises to the Gonella hut where 'all tiredness vanished like a hat blown off in the wind and we came in and got our clothes mended and dried and sat round the table in blankets and were social'.

A few days later they went up to the Quintino Sella hut where they found 'two Everesters' also bound for the Brouillard. (*AJ46*, 410, 1934 records an ascent of Mont Blanc by the Brouillard by Messrs Crawford and Brocklebank, members of the 1933 Everest expedition. 'They consider the difficulty to be greater than what is commonly stated.')

> We put our crampons on and cut practically directly across to the base of the couloir Emile Rey by the light of the moon. Neither the rocks nor the ice were in any way difficult and the couloir looked quite as long as the previous instructions had described it to be. We plodded up, very very slowly, and as we reached the top day was dawning and my inside was dead, stomach-ache accompanied by a sullen tiredness. However, we cleared away some snow, ate something and looked at the slabs uncomfortably covered in ice and very unpleasant looking . . . . The slabs were very steep and they seemed to me very difficult and I can't believe that at any time I would rush up them with a happy laugh. After that the going was easy but tedious, there was a lot of snow everywhere and quite a strong wind blowing from the ridge. On the Pic Luigi Amadeo we stopped a while and roared down to the hut, but the wind was against us and our voices did not carry any distance.
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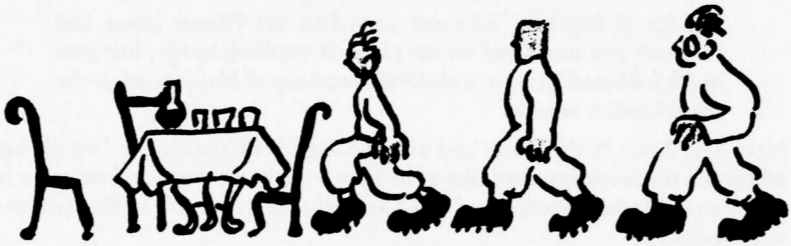
> Realising that there were several rock towers to be climbed or traversed there could not be much lagging. At last we reached the final ridge and it was as cold as the last time and we felt the wind even sooner but we were all in better trim and so did not need to stop though I would have liked to have explained to the company my views on strong winds in the hills but luckily I didn't bother them as I'm sure they thought them as leprous as I did and even worse if I'd compelled them to stop! 'Let us bivouac,' I suggested (having a good sack and being tired of fighting against the wind). 'Ough,' they said, 'the Vallot hut's not far and we'll be better there.' Of course they were right and the minute we could start off downhill I agreed with them, bivouacing on Mt Blanc is a poor game.

This time they had to share the Vallot with three Frenchmen, and next day went down by the Tête Rousse and round by train to Chamonix. 'It had been a good party and we never felt more unsafe on our feet than we did skidding across the parquet-floored dining-room to our table before the bulging eyes of high society!'



1935 was Peuterey year. The plan was to traverse the whole ridge in one expedition: the first bivouac would be near the summit of the Aiguille Noire, the second (provisioned by porters) at the Brèche Noire des Dames Anglaises. In the event bad weather forced them down from the Aiguille Noire to the Brenva glacier – an unplanned first descent, paid for by two extremely uncomfortable bivouacs. Here they are starting from the first, intended, bivouac near the top of the Aiguille Noire.

AIGUILLE NOIRE DE PÉTÉRET AND DAMES ANGLAISES

Woodcut by Una Cameron

It was tiring getting to the top, even after a good night's sleep, bivouacing takes it out of you; pushing knowledgeable faces over the ridge at 20 metres from the summit the guides decided to descend. The Germans they said had kept to the Frêney side, so we chose the Brenva instead. The rappel was fixed, Edouard went down the steep wall, gosh! there was a lot of snow, I followed, the rope would not run, Elisée followed me, and no faster either. Slowly two rappels were run out. We had not been able to get any idea of the amount of snow and it was deep everywhere. Periodically someone said, 'Are you sure you are holding on well?' and Edouard advanced in a wonderful way clearing snow away with his hands and then cutting the ice into holds where it was not possible to reach the rock, while Elisée equally miraculously came down from above, the last man. We were of course wet with the snow so was the rope and coming down, though sure, was many times slower than normal climbing. How about going up again, I suggested, but apparently that was only angels' or birds' work so perforce we had to go down. We tried to pretend we didn't notice the rain developing into snow, but Elisée saw what looked like a fine bivouac at about 2 p.m. and we made for it, glad to be off the steep wall even if the bed-chamber were not true comfort. The best-looking place from above was a chimney for wind and full of snow and no good for anyone, so we roped down a few metres where there was shelter, a sloping roof, room to sit down and protected from the North and West, facing East so we would get the first of any sun. We used the remains of the *Daily Sketch* to sit on, economised with the one day's provisions we had, smoked and sucked prune stones. Edouard lay on a sloping ledge and put on a passe-montagne, thought he was on his bed at home, closed his eyes and went to sleep. I put my feet in my rucksack, gave anyone who wanted them my boots for a pillow, put on all the extra things I had and considered my surroundings and slept fitfully. Elisée suggested a change of position. We shivered quite a lot, after a while having more fat I suggested he slept on the inside, so we changed places. Luckily I did too, only the shoulders of the outer occupant were on solid ground and the feet tied in a rucksack were so very vague in their movements that they hardly counted and the great beam had air all round! It just jutted over the edge. We rested or slept by turns and the lights from the valley shone in an aggravating manner seeming to speak of mattresses and plenty of room to spread oneself. Well, if the weather were to break, we'd be safer where we were than moving towards a real roof and shelter – still, blast!

It was possible to start, we were stiff and had nothing to drink except the whisky which was naturally being kept until it was really needed. We ate a little dried fruit and talked of Canadian breakfasts [they had been skiing in the Rockies that spring]. I was

sorry for the men but, for myself, I hardly eat in the hills, it is only cities and doing nothing that make me a food-hog, but I looked round for a handy drip – everything still frozen stiff, though thank goodness for the rather pale yellow sun.

We were still damp, the rope was wet, the fresh snow that had fallen had melted away but far too much still stuck to the rocks. Soon we also were as wet as the snow and rocks, each rappel made our wet trousers wring themselves on to their unfortunate owners. We found drips to drink from, Edouard found a really lovely crystal and all the time we were on the face with offensive stones whizzing past, it was difficult to lie flat without a preliminary glance to see where the whistle was coming from. All the time Edouard and Elisée were the same good company of the Café Gay, even when a great stone landed on Ed's rucksack breaking his pipe and bending his tobacco tin he retained his good humour; during half-an-hour's rain-storm we sheltered pressing out our knees in a shale couloir and began to realise that we would have another night with the full benefit of unadulterated mountain air and not a chance of completing the ridge.

The snow, ice, loose rock and flying stones were all trying and I was glad to be across the steep couloir intact. We made for the old bivouac below the Dames Anglaises, and found a choice of several, we were far lower down and were sure to be warmer, also it was quite safe to go about unroped which made for added comfort and convenience. We were all entirely soaked as compared with the damp of the night before and in various ways tried to make for comfort. As I knew my company I considered my skin, or wet clothes. No one turned a hair when I decided after trial to retain wet trousers, with a drawing book inside for a seat. The floor was nearly flat carefully arranged with stones. I found a foot shelter but it was rather cramped though dry so when I was shifting about rattling stones when another rain-storm came on Edouard said, 'Elisée isn't here, you can have his place now.' Down I flopped full-length pullman comfort after the previous foot-hole. Next thing was down, by then we were sure to be back in Courmayeur that day so we waited to get warmed with the sun.

We had a real drunks' breakfast, whisky and smokes and started off down the snow couloir to the Brenva glacier. We were glad we had not attempted that frightfully twisting, rhymeless and reasonless glacier at night.

What will I eat? What will I drink?? What will I do any minute now??? I thought comfortably to myself because soon anything would be possible. Elisée ahead said, 'Hullo, who's that?' Mario and Messilia appeared panting up the hillside. 'You're all right?' they said, 'my, we're glad, how we called yesterday and today and no answer. We met old father Croux and he said you weren't back so we started right up in case you needed help, but told no one in Courmayeur.'

BIVOUAC—BRÈCHE N. DES DAMES ANGLAISES

So sound! And as well as the telescope they had fetched at Messilia's house hot coffee and chocolate and bread. In a moment Messilia was off again to get Alexis to bring the car up to Entrèves and if possible as far as the little beer-house, what a thoughtful pair, and just so pleased to see us we felt gratified. We lay up on the spiky grass and looked up at our bivouacs, it had been an interesting experience and for me goes to show how little I really mind sleeping out and that it does no harm beyond stiff joints in old age and you'd probably get that anyhow living in England.

How we'll sleep tonight! we all said, a great meal when we get down, a hot bath, and then arrears of sleep to be made up for. Not a bit of it, we slept our usual and met again next day at eleven for a friendly drink and went round to get my photos developed.

The Peuterey ridge from one end to the other still remains for me, the bits and pieces only whet the appetite.

How that appetite was satisfied a few days later is told by Dora de Beer, who with Mario Rey and Mario Cossa joined Una for the expedition. The quotations are from her account in the *LAC Journal* for 1936.

> I had never climbed in that district, so when she suggested that we do the Peuterey ridge, I thought it was just one of the usual routes . . . Possibly because of this preconception, and also no doubt because of ideal weather, the climb did not strike me as very difficult, though certain parts were too giddy for my liking. It was not till afterwards, when we were down at the Dôme hut, that I learnt we were the first women to go up Mont Blanc by that route.

After a rather nightmarish ascent to the Brèche Nord des Dames Anglaises – 'a nasty place, very steep, with no good holds and rocks on either side that moved at a touch', they bivouacked in the tiny cabin. Progress was slow next morning, for Una 'admitted to feeling like death', so they sat in the sun till she recovered, then continued up, mainly on the Brenva side. It was clear that at this rate they would have to bivouac – the guides contrived a sort of platform 50 metres below the first summit of the Aiguille Blanche . . .

> . . . where we could all six lie in a row with all our toes projecting

> into space. The two Alpine ropes were our mattresses, and as a bivouac had not been contemplated, there were no extra coverings beyond the usual windjackets etc and no means of making a hot drink . . . U.C. appeared a trifle surprised when I spoke of the temperature. Before we met she had been playing about on the Aiguille Noire with three nights out in bad weather. She seemed to regard this bivouac as true comfort.

The long narrow ridge up to the Aiguille Blanche was 'sensational, falling steeply away to the Frêney and Brouillard glaciers' – then an hour of step-cutting down to the Col Peuterey ('a wonderful spot, a little level breathing-space in the middle of tremendous peaks').

> After a short rest we roped up again and attacked the steep snow slope that led up to a band of greenish rock. From now on the snow was good and steps could be kicked, except for one or two icy patches; the rocks were good, in spite of some loose stuff; in fact, everything was good but my breathing. Above the rock came more steep snow and yet more, all the way to the top of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur . . . From below the route looked like a delicate shaded line, curving this way and that as it mounted upward, but when on it, one realised the line was a well-defined ridge. It was not really windy . . . We kept on and on and at last, about 6 p.m., poked our heads through the cornice just below the level top. A cold wind was blowing up stormy-looking clouds, so we pushed on again and down to the Vallot Hut. It was half full, grimy and uncomfortable, with ice on the floor, but I for one slept soundly.

Down next morning to the Dôme hut, a day's rest there, then across the Miage glacier to the Quintino Sella hut, up Mont Blanc again by the Rochers, down again to the Dôme hut. Six full days of Mont Blanc! And three days later Una was off again, to the Red Sentinel.

This route on the Brenva Face, and the Route Major, had been pioneered by T Graham Brown and F S Smythe in 1927 and 1928: Graham Brown lectured on them to the LAC in 1932. Una was the only British climber to repeat the routes before the war. I have found no account of these splendid climbs beyond the laconic entries in a small notebook about Mont Blanc. But among the Graham Brown papers in the National Library of Scotland I came across a letter to him from Una, with slightly more detail.

> *23 Feb 1936*. Thank you very much for your letter and the print, so much improved, of the photograph I took on the Sentinel Route. I have asked various people about times and dates etc as I do not take much notice of them myself, and the Sentinel Route information is as follows.
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> > *July 31*. Torino Hut to Col de la Fourche 2 h.
> > *Aug. 1*. Left bivouac 3.20 a.m. Reached position of the photograph, i.e. across wide snow couloir after the red

> sentinel on the rock rib about 9 a.m. Summit about 2 p.m. – very strong wind once we reached the snow.

She goes on to give Graham Brown news of other climbs by her own and other parties in the Mont Blanc range in 1935: owning to 'a singularly unimpressive performance' by herself on the Aiguille Blanche where she had felt like death.

Her notes on the Route Major climb on 2/3 August 1938 are slightly fuller than those for the Red Sentinel:

> Left Col de la Fourche fixed bivouac approx 2 a.m. Passed other party at Col Moore. Crossed couloir after sentinel. Much step-cutting. Fine day, rocks dry, snow and ice in crevices and cracks. Two pitches required consideration. Steep throughout. Snow covered the ridge – much step-cutting. Tracks led to ice-filled chimney – impossible without piton. Traversed round at base of rocks, piton in rock face left by others no use to us – hours of step-cutting – began to snow. Decided to bivouac in the shelter of the rocks. Left in the morning when the sun had warmed us along below rocks then straight up to seracs and through them to saddle between summits, hence to Mont Blanc. Smoked in calm and sunshine. Igloo on summit, 2 inmates. Vallot (observatoire and tea) new hut unfinished, approx. midday. Slept. Left about 3 p.m. Glacier du Dôme v. bad, crevasses, miles of detour.

'The most enjoyable climb I have ever done,' she told Graham Brown. Una hoped to complete what he had called the Triptych of the Brenva Face by climbing the Pear route, pioneered by him and his guides in 1933, but the war intervened. Afterwards, she would tell visitors to the Villa Cameron that she was 'getting in training for the Pear' – but that was as far as it went. She did traverse Mont Blanc again in 1947, and also climbed the Tour Ronde, Aiguille de Rochefort, Aiguille Rouge de Triolet, and Monte Rosa (which she had climbed in 1937 from the Italian side by the Marinelli couloir). But climbing friends were now more likely to find her at the Villa Cameron, ready to hear about their doings and suggest expeditions. I remember a most enjoyable day on the Aiguille Joseph Croux above the Gamba hut as one of her recommendations.

There were also two winter ascents of Mont Blanc on ski. 'Feb. 33 as far as the Vallot from the Dôme hut, v. cold, windy,' and 'Feb. 1937. Traverse Dôme hut up to Vallot, down to Chamonix.' Nothing more on these; but she wrote full accounts of ski-tours in the Silvretta group (January 1934), the Monte Rosa massif (April 1934), the Ötztal (over New Year 1935), the Canadian Rockies (March–April 1935) and the Monte Viso region (March 1936). In the Silvretta and Ötztal she took a local guide; the other tours were with Edouard or Elisée or both; Hazel Jackson (and dog) joined them on the Monte Rosa trip. Una kept clear of skiing centres and didn't care for piste skiing; she always hoped to take in a summit or two. In her narratives she does not flatter herself as a skier. 'You would get on better if you did not get so angry when you fell,' Edouard told her in the Rockies. At Ochsenbergscharte in the

Silvretta, 'the others whizzed off down, while I set off in great stem turns, stately and slow, rather like mother on a bicycle', but she does allow that she executed some stylish christianias on the way down from Monte Rosa to the Val d'Ayas, and records one compliment, from a local who came with them to Monte Viso: 'I had no idea that a great fat person like you could go so well.' (She enjoyed mocking her appearance: 'I looked like a rich Eastern potentate with my red flannel waistband round the bulging middle and a shirt on my ski-sticks keeping the sun off.') But she had great strength and endurance and she could travel light: 'A few days skiing soon discovers that a spare ski-tip, an extra pair of socks, tobacco and a book are all that is needed.' One supposes that her companions carried the food.

What comes out of these accounts is her immense enjoyment of so much more than the actual skiing. She relished the conviviality in huts and inns:

> After supper all Compatsch came in. We were an excellent free entertainment and they sat and watched with fascinated interest while we conversed internationally with a dictionary and bits of any language that made our meaning clearer.

In the course of one such polyglot evening a Dutchman congratulated Una: 'You speak English well, where do you come from?' 'I was completely winded and could only reply in a stately manner, "I am Scottish . . ." The Dutchman asked what was exactly the difference between a Scot and an Englishman, and he heard for the first time that Scotland had never been conquered.'

Above all, it was the sheer happiness of being in the mountains. On the Col des Cimes Blanches: 'Gosh! and that was comfort and a foretaste of heaven in this so-called vale of tears, warm flat rocks, the sun shining in the blue sky, and all around the high hills.' At the Quintino Sella hut on Monte Rosa after a stiff climb from Fiéry: 'It was one of the best evenings in the mountains that I have ever enjoyed, glaciers and snow all round, only kindred spirits, "snows and skis and dear gentlemen" [one was Hazel's dog Argos]. A hoot for cities!'

Una was for once skiing alone on an afternoon in February 1933, up the Val Ferret, when she came on the Courmayeur guide Othon Bron, also on his own, who had fallen and broken a leg. He couldn't get himself out of the snow, and a cold night was coming on. Una gave him first aid, ski'd back down the valley to give the alarm, and a rescue party brought Othon down on a stretcher. The local papers made much of '*la famosa signora Una Kamerum, la nota esploratrice del Caucaso*'; and when I first met Othon Bron next year he had much to say of his rescuer. It was only slowly that I realized that this spirited female '*qui porte le pantalon et fume la pipe*' was the Una Cameron I had known slightly at school. My first real meetings with her were after the war when I came over from the Graians with a mixed party of veterans and schoolboys, and Una helped us find cheap quarters at the inn near her villa. In the years since Othon had first spoken of her to me, he and Michael Roberts and I had climbed from Courmayeur, Chamonix and Zermatt, and in the Dauphiné, always – as Una was with Edouard and Elisée – more as friends climbing together than as clients with a guide; then Othon was killed in 1938 when a snow-bridge gave way on the Glacier du Géant; and Michael died in 1948.

Othon's grave was in the cemetery at Courmayeur; Michael's was in London, and I wanted a memorial of him among the mountains. I mentioned this to Una, who at once offered to help. With Edouard Bareux's assistance, she got the necessary permissions from the cemetery and from the Bron family, and dealt with the stone-mason; so now on a small plaque beside Othon's memorial is engraved: 'In memory of Michael Roberts 1902–1948 who climbed these mountains with Ottone Bron.' I owe Una great thanks for this help so readily given, and I hope that in compiling this record of her splendid climbs I have made some kind of repayment.