

THE WESTERN ARÊTE OF THE MEIJE.

BY HAROLD RAEBURN,

THE first route to be prospected up this grand mountain, the most formidably of the greater Alpine peaks, has been the last to fall. This is the direct route by the W. arête.

Appropriately enough, as the first ascent of the Grand Pic, or Pic Occidental, was made by a French climber, M. Boileau de Castelnaud, with Dauphiné guides, in 1877, this direct route from the Brèche fell to the unaided skill of two young men, one indeed a mere boy, of the Dauphiné capital, Grenoble, in August 1919.

As the elder of the two climbers was unfortunately killed last October through an accident on the football field, and the only published account of the climb is a short article in a local paper 'Le Dauphiné,' it may be of interest, and of use, to give a summary of the tentatives and ascents on this side of the mountain. The route is no freak 'variation. Since I first saw it in 1904 I have always considered it the correct, natural, and, given suitable conditions, the quickest way of gaining the summit of the Meije. In this opinion I find myself in good company: Dr. Coolidge, our most persevering explorer of the accesses to the highest peak, and who, with Miss Brevoort, was the first to stand upon the summit of the only slightly lower Pic Central, wrote of the W. arête, after examining the peak on all sides: 'There is one route which may very probably prove to be practicable.'

In 1877 the longer route by the 'Great Wall' was forced by the Gaspards, *who did not like ice*, and Dr. Coolidge made the second ascent by that way.

Once a channel is cut, waters, and men, tend to occupy it. Since 1877 few seem to have thought of the W. arête. Up to last year, only one ascent had been made in this direction, and this was mainly a 'marche en flanc' over most abominable, loose, and for a party of more than two, dangerous rocks, on the N. side of the arête, and an equally or more dangerous ascent of a stone-raked ice couloir leading above the Petit Doigt de l'Épaule.

Mr. Douglas Freshfield has likened Dauphiné to a smaller, barer edition of the N. Caucasus valleys. Those climbers

who do not know its chief glory, La Meije, have still something to learn of the Alps. There may be such even in the Alpine Club. This must be my excuse for describing shortly the W. arête.

From the summit of the highest peak, the Occidental, 13,081 feet, the arête plunges westwards with startling abruptness over the 'Chapeau du Capucin,' and the razorbacked clothes-horse—resembling 'Cheval Rouge,' one of the most dramatic situations on an Alpine ridge, where the climber, like Caesar, 'doth bstride this narrow world.' The route then leaves the arête somewhat, and proceeds more gently down to the glacier Carré. The ordinary route has then nothing further to do with the W. arête, but crossing the glacier Carré, goes down the S. wall, or Grand Muraille. The W. arête beyond the top of the Carré again bounds upwards and downwards over a couple of gigantic gendarmes. The first of these, sometimes made an objective of itself, is called the Pic du Glacier Carré, the second, and somewhat lower, the double-pronged Doigt, or Grand Doigt. From there the route will be described from the foot, as the descent has not yet been made.

The Brèche de la Meije, and the foot of the W. ridge, was first passed in 1864 by Messrs. Moore, Walker, and Whympfer, with Almer and Croz. None of the party thought the ascent from here possible.

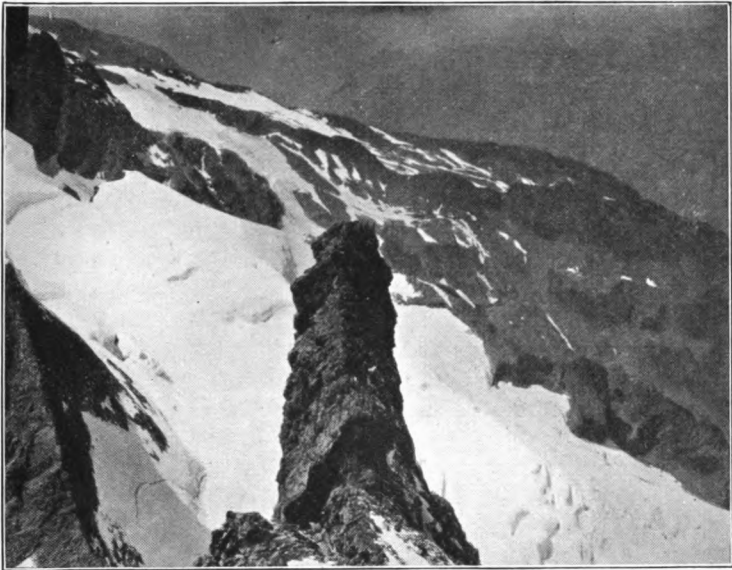
In 1875 Mr. Coolidge sent his three guides, C. Almer, C. Roth, and R. Kaufmann, to seek out a way up the W. ridge. They were absent from the bivouac about six and a half hours, and advanced a few hundred feet up the ridge with extreme difficulty.

In 1876 Mr. Oakley Maund, with Jean Maître, searched the locality for an hour with telescopes without discovering any possibility of ascending.

In 1877 Mr. Coolidge was back again on his quest. Earlier in the same year Lord Wentworth, with L. Lanier and Emile Rey, made, on June 29, an attempt on the Meije from the Brèche. They seem to have met with bad conditions, and did not persevere far.

On July 22 Mr. Coolidge and his guides made an advance on the height reached two years before, Mr. Coolidge's aneroid read 11,648 feet, but, as he remarks, 'this reading is probably too high.' The party were stopped by the almost vertical arête of the Petit Doigt de l'Épaule. Eight days later M. Paul Guillemin, with Emile Pic, made an attempt from the N. side of the ridge, but they appear to have greatly over-estimated the height attained.

The first and, till last year, apparently the only successful



[Photo. H. Raeburn July, 1907.]

Looking down upon Le Petit Doigt of the Brèche arête. The glacier below is that flowing from the N. face of the Râteau, Upper Western Meije Glacier. The ridge to left is the E. Ridge of the Râteau—not yet climbed. The Brèche de la Meije is directly below, and not visible owing to the steepness.

climb of this end of the Meije was made on July 2, 1885, by M. Verne with the four guides, two Pierre Gaspards, Maximin Gaspard, and J. B. Rodier. In 1880 Messrs. Coolidge and Gardiner, with the two Christian Almers, had on July 8 together, and on July 27 the Almers alone, attacked the ridge by the N.W. Couloir, but they did not reach any height.

M. Verne had already done some exploring on the ridge in 1882, and on June 29, 1885, his four guides and he gained the foot of the Petit Doigt, 'Barrière infranchissable.' From this they retreated for the time, leaving 120 metres of rope on the arête. After two days bad weather, spent in a gîte in the Vallon des Étançons, the party returned. Greatly aided by the ropes they quickly gained the foot of the 'Barrière.' From here they struck out across the dangerously rotten N. face of the ridge, reached the ice couloir, and ascended it to the 'Épaule,' and from thence easily gained the usual route above the 'Pas du Chat.'

For a party of five this was a very dangerous expedition. I do not consider M. Verne's description of it in the 'Annuaire' for 1885 of the Club Alpin Français, at all too highly coloured. He tells of their wounded hands, and the gash in the thigh received by one of the guides. In the Romanche valley this climb is ignored, or its reality denied. The reason is simple, all the guides came from the Vénéon side of the mountain. A parallel may be found in the ignorance or denial of the Zinal guides of the first ascent of the Dent Blanche from that side by Messrs. Anderson and Baker, with Zermatt and Oberland guides.

M. Verne's narrative seems to have acted as a deterrent to further attempts on this arête by guided parties; I cannot trace any published notices of it till the article by M. Claudius Main in 'Le Dauphiné' for September 7 and 14, 1919.

It appears that M. Main, though the elder of the two climbers, had done no climbing before the winter of 1918-19. His companion Plossu, though so young—under seventeen—was already a keen and good mountaineer, and had already been up the Meije's S. wall as far as the 'Pyramide Duhamel.' It is curious that in studying photographs and routes M. Main, not knowing anything of the mountain, selected the W. ridge as the usual way up. His better instructed friend burst out laughing at this. Presently, however, the idea began to appeal to him; it was resolved that their attempt should be made direct from the Brèche.

The two friends reached La Grave about 11 A.M. on Friday, August 1, 1919, and left at 11.30 for the Promontoire Hut.

The Brèche de la Meije was reached at 6.10 P.M., and the Refuge at 6.45.

They left the hut next morning, Saturday, August 2, at 5.45 A.M. wearing crampons, and at 6.30 the ascent of the W. arête was begun from the Brèche. They followed at first the slope below the arête on the Bérarde side, then turning to the left, N., a chimney was climbed and the actual arête gained. This was about one third of the distance to the ledge above the 'Pas du Chat.' From this point, writes M. Main, 'Nous tenons l'arête : aussi nous ne la lâchons pas.' They now had to ascend about 100 metres of smooth steep slabs, which M. Main found by far the hardest part of the ascent : but he admired the way in which his young friend, Plossu, overcame them. Plossu, as throughout, led. This 100 metres is the thin steep edge of the Petit Doigt de l'Épaule, the 'Barrière infranchissable,' which has hitherto stopped every one of the famous guides who for many years had tried this way of conquering the Meije. After a strenuous struggle they at length gained the top of the Doigt. The depression behind this, on the E. side, is inconsiderable. I shall explain the structure farther on. The party now left the arête for a time and traversed over very loose rocks a few metres down on the La Grave side. At 12.30 they regained the arête where it butts up against the foot of the Grand Doigt. From here an easy, if narrow, ledge leads round in a few minutes to the broken rocks above the 'Pas du Chat.'

The young climbers had achieved a notable victory, they had opened a new door, one in my opinion which is destined to remain open, by which the defences of 'La Terrible' may be stormed. They might well have been content. Friends however awaited their arrival at the Refuge de L'Aigle, on the other side of the Pic Central, and after a short rest at the scene of so many benightings, they left for the Grand Pic. At 3.30 this was gained. Unfortunately M. Main had dropped his axe in getting over the 'Chapeau,' and they could not risk the traverse. At 4 they started to descend by the S. wall, and in an hour and a quarter reached the top of the 'Pas du Chat.' By 7.15 they were down at the Pyramide Duhamel, but at 7.50, going too quickly in the fast gathering darkness, Main slipped in the Grand Couloir and pulled Plossu after him. Main was able to stop himself about 10 metres lower, and to hold Plossu who had shot past him, but the latter was badly bruised, and had also received a deep cut in his chest from the point of his axe. Main had now to go behind Plossu to sustain him, and the rest of the descent was rather in the

nature of a nightmare for the two almost exhausted youths. The hut was eventually gained at 11 P.M. after 17 hours of heavy climbing. Next day they returned to La Grave over the Brèche, where Madame Juge was most kind, and skilfully dressed young Plossu's wound. The pair returned home the same evening.

Naturally this expedition is not very heartily believed in by some of the La Grave guides, who know nothing whatever about the W. arête. M. Main explains that they forgot to put their names in the summit receptacles. The present writer has no hesitation in giving the fullest credence to every word of M. Claudius Main's modestly written and perfectly clear narrative, as he has some knowledge of the route. Moreover he not only watched the same party, this time in company with a young Grenoble lady, finishing at the end of last August the traverse they had wished to make in the beginning of the month, but later on saw their cards in the summit bottles.

To me it is rather surprising that this route has been neglected so long. *Given suitable conditions*, I do not think that it will be found of any extraordinary difficulty.

I have myself had bad luck with the arête, and my acquaintance with it is, to the extent of the '100 metres' stretch, incomplete.

I first saw the arête in 1904, when crossing the Brèche with Mr. C. W. Walker, A.C., then, like myself, a member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. It was Walker's first season in the Alps, my own second on the great peaks, and we were content with the ascent of the Grand Pic by the Great Wall. As a proof of our Scottish prudence I may mention that though we gained the top at the excellent time of 8 A.M. the traverse was not attempted in view of Walker's inexperience on ice.

In 1907 I was again in Dauphiné with my friend, Mr. W. N. Ling, A.C. The month was July, but the weather was bad. We spent four nights in the Promontoire Hut, latterly on rather short commons.

The previous week had occurred the frightful disaster to the party of Italian climbers, Sig. Eugenio Moraschini, Giovanni Bertani, and A. Rossini of the C.A.I. (Milan). The first two, who had gone up to the foot of the Grande Muraille to explore the way, slipped on the iced rocks and were of course killed, falling about 1500 feet. A preliminary run up to this place, above the Campement Castelnau, showed Ling and me the Great Wall hopelessly iced; we resolved to have a look at the Brèche Arête.

Snow lay outside the hut and more threatened, as we trudged up the steep little *Étançons* glacier to the *Brèche*. The beginning of the *Brèche Arête* is steep though probably quite climbable. There is however an easy slope on the *Étançons* side, the only trouble loose rocks, which we followed as far as a steep chimney leading up to a gap in the ridge.¹ This we ascended. Owing to the fresh snow we now preferred to cut the ridge again for a time on the *La Grave* side. Regaining the arête some way higher was difficult. Very loose rocks covered with several inches of new snow made very delicate hand and foot work on the part of the leader necessary. We eventually reached the foot of the '*Infranchissable*' and the beginning of *M. Verne's* traverse. The arête was to-day, higher up, quite impossible. The traverse did not appear seriously difficult. Snow lay here and there, and the rocks do not fall off unless carelessly touched. The weather was, however, getting worse. The conditions, the mist, the cold wind, the falling snow, and the snow-covered rocks, put both of us in mind of climbs at *Easter* on the steeper ridges of the *N. Face of Nevis*. We knew that the *S. door of the Meije* was locked. Prudence counselled a retreat, we went back to the hut.

Two days later found us lunching, somewhat lightly, in the broken rocks above the '*Pas du Chat*.' The good sun was out at last, but we had lost such a lot of time waiting at the foot of the *Grande Muraille* till his powerful fingers had peeled off enough of the iceplating to let us pass, that the traverse, or even the *Grand Pic* was beyond our grasp. We had instead a look at the top of the *Brèche Arête*. The photograph was taken from here. To read it aright the book must be laid flat on a table, and the photograph viewed through a reading glass.

Like most so-called gendarmes on an ascending ridge the *Petit Doigt de l'Épaule*, on the upper edge of which one looks down in the illustration, is really only a step or steep shoulder on the arête.

Photographs of these taken from below are apt to be extraordinarily deceptive. For a striking example of this in the present case, the fine photograph of the *Brèche Arête* by *M. Champenay* in the '*C.A.F. Annuaire*' for 1885 may be cited. In this the *Petit Doigt* appears as a thin and towering *aiguille*. It is certainly thin enough, but it is not a true *aiguille*. Beyond going a little way along the ridge above to get the photograph,

¹ The portion of the ridge thus cut off is sometimes styled the *Petit Doigt*, the higher part of the arête the *Petit Doigt de l'Épaule*.

no further exploration of the W. ridge was at this time attempted, and continued bad weather drove us off to the Tarentaise and Italy.

Twelve years elapsed before I saw the Brèche Arête again. At the end of August 1919 I found myself again in Dauphiné. As I had never done the traverse of the arêtes of the Meije, I intended to try it from the Brèche. At La Grave I learned that this, or at any rate the Grand Pic, had already been done by the W. arête by the two young Grenoblois. It would be perhaps more interesting and useful to reverse the route.

At the beginning of September the weather was bad, the La Grave guides declared the arêtes impossible, and the Meije closed for the season. Nevertheless the sun shone out, and through the enthusiasm and enterprise of a young officer of 'Blue Devils' and his American aunt, (how history repeats itself!) the passage was again opened.

I watched through M. Juge's big telescope several parties on the arêtes. The young Grenoblois, with a lady, completing their conquest. Two English friends and their guides, Messrs. Tucker and Frazer, and a young French officer and his two guides.

For a party of three amateurs the Meije traverse will, unless they already know the mountain, or have extremely favourable conditions, almost certainly result in a night out. The young Grenoblois spent the first night above the 'Pas du Chat,' they gained the top of the Central at 8 p.m. on the second night, but got down all right to the Aigle Refuge by midnight.

After this the weather again became dubious. Mr. and Mrs. Tucker and Mr. Frazer went off to the Chalet de L'Alpe.

On Friday, September 12, I set off for the Refuge de L'Aigle, getting a young man, a son of Emile Pic of Col fame, to help me with a rather heavy load as far as the foot of the Tabuchet Glacier. At 3 p.m. on Saturday, I found myself on the ledge above the 'Pas du Chat.' This was a good deal later than I had hoped for. Friday night was bad at the Aigle. The wind howled and moaned through its steel rigging, and the hail seldom ceased to rattle on the windows and roof. Not till after 7 a.m. was it possible to make a tentative start in rather thick mist. It cleared somewhat on the Central, though the wind was still high and cold, and I went on over the arêtes.

After three o'clock the weather again got very thick, and it hailed rather heavily. I went down the W. arête, mostly traversing a few metres down on the La Grave side till just above the Petit Doigt de l'Épaule. Prudence and the hour, the weather

looking decidedly nasty, now counselled, that as I knew the Great Wall well, it would be wise to drop, not literally of course, down the Muraille to the Promontoire Hut before the early darkness of mid-September came on. I therefore scrambled up again having spent 35 minutes over the descent and re-ascent. Possibly the warning whistle of 'The Spirit of the Meije,' an ancient *corneille des Alpes*, or Alpine Chough, which has greeted me here on both my visits, may have hastened my decision. I quote from M. Verne's article the guides' superstition regarding this bird: 'Je ne suis jamais monté à la Meije sans la voir, et je n'en ai jamais vu d'autres. Celles qui ont essayé d'y venir ont dû s'en retourner bien vite ou périr.'

The Muraille is uncompromising, but honest. It does not permit of much variation till near the bottom, when it is necessary not to get too far to the E. under the overhang of the Glacier Carré. It seemed quite familiar after 12 years, the only troubles were the swinging sack, and the iceaxe stowed away in the palm of the left hand occasionally got in the way of suitable finger-grips.

At 5.50 P.M. I opened the door of the welcome Promontoire, just as a livid and evil-looking evening was closing in. The actual traverse, going time, occupied rather under 9¼ hours. Next morning I returned to La Grave for breakfast, taking just under 4 hours for the passage.

It may be as well to note that the Meije is now *unroped*. This reduces the times when the climb is possible considerably. There is, it is true, a thick cable still remaining at the Pic Zsigmondy, but this is very 'pourri' and should not be touched.

The hut at the Bec de l'Aigle is first-rate, clean and comfortable. There is however no wood, and the position is very exposed to wind. This new refuge renders ascents of the Oriental and Central summits very easy, and is also suitable for the fine Pic Gaspard, from a distance the most important point on the Meije massif.

It seems, however, to be very little used by the traversing parties, unless by exhausted climbers coming over from W. to E.

La Grave guides seem to much prefer going over the Brèche to the Promontoire the first day, and thus doing the traverse from the La Béarde side. For this preference there are probably two reasons. The really stiff climbing is thus done in the earlier part of the day; also, no doubt, the guides dislike the task of getting tired climbers down such an impressive-looking place as the Grande Muraille at the end of many hours climbing. The really dangerous part of the descent is that of

the Grand Couloir, below the Muraille. The angle lies for the most part between climbing and walking, at which angle it is much less easy to stop a man who slips, than were it much steeper. The rocks are also loose in places, slabby, and lubricated with small débris in others. This is where M. Main slipped. The Grand Couloir was also the scene of the fatal fall of M. Thorant, a famous French climber, and his friend, a number of years ago.

It is also not easy to hit the exact place where the couloir can be best left for the Promontoire ridge, especially if the light is beginning to fail. The other reason is probably because by far the most technically difficult piece of climbing on the traverse is the first 20 feet up from the Brèche Zsigmondy on the Grand Pic.² This passage was originally led by Purtscheller in stockings, and in the absence of ice should still be done, I consider, in this way. It may be useful to remark here that if the leading climber is wearing, as he ought, socks under the stockings, these must be removed before getting on stocking soles.

The descent of this place is perfectly easy, as by slipping a rope through a rope-ring on the rocks above, one can walk down the holdless slabs in perfect security.

As regards foot aids, kletterschuhe or crampons, neither of these are, I consider, worth while using on the Meije if one has to carry them oneself. Walker and I used kletterschuhe

* Klucker and I were the first to follow the Purtscheller-Zsigmondy party (July 19, 1893). We took from bottom of small Brèche to summit of Meije 35 min., as against 2 hours of the first party. My note reads: 'From small Brèche by the ridge and then 6 m. traverse to right, then ascend 6 m. in a *Rinne*, then traverse to right of cord, and finally cross cord to left and gain summit by a short E. & W. ridge.' At that time a fixed rope hung below the summit, running first E. and W., then turning at a right angle and dropping in the direction of the Brèche. It was quite unnecessary, and we never touched it. Incidentally, I think ours was the only traverse from La Grave to La Bérarde (valley to valley) within a day, 12.30 A.M. to 10 P.M. = 21½ hours, less 3½ hours total halts = 18 hours actual going.

Much as I respect my good friend Raeburn's opinion on any mountaineering matter, I do not agree with his estimate of the difficulty of this particular bit, which I have twice since descended, once in 39 minutes (4 men), the second time held up an unconscionable time by a party ahead. I look on the Meije, before the huts were built, as an exceedingly *strenuous* climb offering *continuous* but not *very* great technical difficulties. Now that you rope in the Promontoire hut the demand on one's powers is much less.—J. P. F.

on the Grande Muraille in 1904, but though pleasant and comfortable for the feet, the additional load of the boots on one's back renders the gain a minus one (+ and - = -). The rock, protogene granite, is so good that it is not easy to slip in properly nailed boots.

As for crampons, if the mountain is in a fit state to climb at all, these are quite unnecessary. On September 13 last the Glacier Carré was hard owing to absence of sun, and showed few traces of steps, but the 10 or 15 minutes crampons might have saved here would have been dearly bought by the extra labour of carrying their clumsy bulk for many hours.

I trust nothing here written will convey the impression that I consider the Meije an easy mountain, to be lightly attacked by inexperienced parties. Though its hardest bits of rock work would not be considered very difficult in the English Lakes, and though its ice work, generally speaking, is easier than what the North Face of Nevis can show in April, the scale on the Meije is very large, *and there are no easy ways down*. There is no great mountain in the Alps whose doors are so easily locked. Young Main and Plossu deserve the greatest credit for their enterprise in opening a new possibility.

THE EARLY SWISS PIONEERS OF THE ALPS.

BY DR. H. DÜBL.

(Continued from p. 99.)

HANS CASPAR ROHRDORF.

HANS CASPAR ROHRDORF, or Rordorf, as he sometimes spells his name, was born at Zürich on August 17, 1773. We know little of his early life, but in 1800 we find him practising as veterinary surgeon at Seebach near Zürich, and in 1805 he qualified as operator and accoucheur. His recent biographer,¹ tells us that in 1811 he made himself guilty of a professional misdemeanour, was imprisoned for some time and banished for six years. After an adventurous life that brought him into the cantons of Thurgau, Glarus and Schwyz, and even to Milan and Florence, he landed at

¹ Dr. A. Lechner: *Hans Caspar Rordorf (Rohrdorf) aus Zürich und Gottlieb Studer in Bern*. Solothurn, 1915.