

CHARMOZ AND GRÉPON.

BY GEORGE H. MORSE.

I HAVE been asked to jot down some notes on the early history of these two peaks, which are probably the most popular in the Chamonix district to-day and of which some record may be worth preserving in the JOURNAL. I am writing with a certain amount of personal knowledge, but if I have omitted any early ascent by any member of ours or of any foreign club, I am sure that the Editor of the ALPINE JOURNAL would be very glad if it were reported to him.

Up till 1892, when M. Louis Kurz's *Climbers' Guide* to the Chain of Mont Blanc was published, these two peaks were classified as one and called the 'Charmoz,' but there is, of course, a very distinct gap between them, and gradually, at the Monteners anyhow, the two peaks came to be regarded as separate, possibly because the traverse of the Charmoz can be seen from that hotel, while the Grépon is behind and invisible. Both peaks are similar in character, a rocky ridge with several pinnacles, running roughly from N. to S., and in each case the highest point is the last but one to the S. But the 'steps' are not the same, since you can traverse the Charmoz either way with a 60 ft. spare rope, while on the Grépon at least an 100 ft. is wanted. The gap or col between the Charmoz and the Grépon is now known as the Charmoz-Grépon Col, and is flanked at the top by a *chevaux de frise* of rocky points, a sort of elongation of the Charmoz ridge. The col to the S., or rather S.W., of the Grépon is the Col de Blaitière,¹ and this must be reached if ascending the Grépon from the S.

The usual routes for both peaks are by way of the Glacier des Nantillons, which lies to the W., and both cols are reached by this glacier. To the E. of the peaks lies the Mer de Glace.

The early attempts are difficult to unravel now; they seem to have been mostly directed at the Grépon, but there is no doubt that the spot known as 'C.P.', a little higher than the

¹ This col is now called 'Col des Nantillons' (see Vallot Guide, I, *Les Aiguilles de Chamonix*, 1925, p. 75), but as it was still called 'Col de Blaitière' in Kurz's Guide, 1892, I prefer to retain that name.

Col de Blaitière, was reached many years before the first ascent of either peak. I have been unable to ascertain the date when the letters 'C.P.' were painted, but they are said to be the initials of the guides J. E. Charlet and Prosper Payot, who took part in the attempts made in the early 'seventies. Both were in the conquest of the Petit Dru, but Charlet was not Charlet-Straton at this time (*Kurz*, 3rd Edition, p. 268, footnote). Some height above the Charmoz-Grépon Col was also attained on the Grépon (see 'A.J.' **10**, 399, footnote), but I do not think that any attempt got higher than C.P. on the S. side, or the rocks at the foot of the slabs near the 'Mummery' chimney on the N. side, till we come to the ascent of a N. point of the Charmoz by Mummery in 1880.

AIGUILLE DES GRANDS CHARMOZ, 3445 m.—11,303 ft., *Vallot*.

The first ascent of any of the five main points of the Charmoz was made by the late Mr. A. F. Mummery with Alexander Burgener and Benedict Venetz on July 15, 1880 ('A.J.' **10**, 95 and **16**, 159). They ascended by way of the Nantillons Glacier. Going up the Charmoz-Grépon Couloir for a short distance and passing across the face of the mountain towards the N., they climbed the well-known ice chimney, reaching the gap between the two northernmost points. They first ascended the N. point, 3427 m. (*Vallot*, I., plate, p. 38), and finding it lower than the one to the S., returned to the gap and ascended point 3431 m. It is possible, although uncertain, that they passed this point and ascended the next one, 3435 m., but beyond this they certainly did not go. They returned by the route of their ascent (Mummery, 'My Climbs in the Alps,' p. 96 *et seq.*).

The next point to the S. is now called *La Carrée*, 3439 m., then comes the *Bâton Wicks*, 3444 m., and then some way further to the S. the true summit of the Grands Charmoz, 3445 m., and last of all the S. point, 3444 m.

Burgener left his axe on the highest point attained by them, which was not retrieved till 1885 by M. Dunod's party (*Mummery*, p. 110).

The next ascent, and first ascent of the highest point, 3445 m., was made by MM. H. Dunod and P. Vignon with four guides on August 9, 1885, from the top of the Charmoz-Grépon Col, now the ordinary route. M. Dunod appears to have followed Mummery's route some three weeks later, Sept. 2, and retrieved Burgener's ice-axe ('A.J.' **13**, 197).



Phot. Alfred Holmes.

CHARMOZ AND GRÉPON.

A further advance was made two years later. On Aug. 9, 1887, Messrs. W. Muir and J. H. Wicks with Emile Rey and J. Fischer followed Dunod's route to the top (second ascent) and, continuing N. along the ridge, made the first ascent of the point now known as Bâton Wicks, 3444 m., returning by the way they ascended.

Then, on Sept. 10, 1887, Mr. T. P. H. Jose with F. Simond and P. Burnet followed Mummery's route and made the first traverse of the mountain from N. to S. ('A.J.' 13, 408).

After 1887 the peak was beginning to get known. I have been unable to ascertain who first traversed it from S. to N., still it was probably done not long after 1888. I was under the impression that Emile Rey, with M. Dunod, was the first to make this traverse. M. Dunod, however, states that he never traversed (Vallot, I, p. 32), so I hope that further information will be forthcoming.

I will add only four more items which may be worth recording. Probably the first guideless ascent of the Grands Charmoz (3445 m.) was made by H. W. Henderson, J. H. Wicks, C. Wilson and myself on August 3, 1889 ('A.J.' 33, 105).

On July 30, 1890, Wicks, Ellis Carr and I repeated Jose's expedition, making, I believe, the first guideless traverse from N. to S.

In 1892 Mummery records the same expedition (*Mummery*, p. 119) as the first traverse from N. to S. by ladies, Miss Bristow and Miss Pasteur being in his party, while on August 10, 1893, Wicks, Wilson, Kesteven and I with Miss Pasteur and Miss M. Pasteur traversed from S. to N., the first traverse, I think, by ladies in the opposite direction.

I have purposely omitted any new routes found up this peak in later years, such as Mr. Thorold's ascent in 1899, from the E., as they are all recorded in the ALPINE JOURNAL, and the Vallot Guide.

AIGUILLE DE GRÉPON, 3482 m. = 11,424 ft., *Vallot*.

The early history of the Grépon is perhaps even more fascinating than that of the Charmoz, partly because it is a more difficult climb, and partly because the Chamonix guides appear to have had superstitions about it.

As in the case of the Charmoz, a minor point was first ascended, the first ascent of any of the Grépon points being made by the brothers, Messrs. Francis M. and Gerald W.

Balfour² with J. Petrus and P. Knubel on July 19, 1881. They ascended the Nantillons Glacier to the Col de Blaitière, and, gaining C.P., crossed the chasm below, climbing to the gap between the highest point, 3482m., and the most southern point, 3475m. ('A.J.' 10, 397). They were unable to scale the highest point, but with difficulty got up the point to the S. of the gap, which is now known as *Pointe Balfour* (Vallot, p. 72).

The next attempt was made by Mummery with Alexander Burgener and B. Venetz on August 3, 1881. Their attempt was made from the N. They ascended to the Charmoz-Grépon Col and went up to the gap in the arête, discovering the 'Mummery' chimney some 20 ft. lower and to the W. of the gap. They climbed this, Venetz leading, and followed the arête to the N. point, 3478 m., beyond which there is a big drop in the arête. They returned by the same route.

They were doubtful whether a point to the S. was not slightly higher (*Mummery*, p. 131), so they returned on August 5, and following their previous route, descended the big drop—the Grand Gendarme of the Vallot Guide—using a doubled rope, and continued to the highest point, which they ascended with difficulty by the famous 'Venetz' chimney on the N.E. side which emerges directly under the summit. The easier way now followed is a few feet on the W. side. They returned by the same way, having made the first ascent of the Grépon, 3482 m. ('A.J.' 16, 166).

We next find M. H. Dunod with F. and G. Simond and A. Tairraz attacking the mountain in August 1885, described in a paper entitled 'A Month on the Grépon' in the 1885 C.A.F. *Annuaire* (see 'A.J.' 13, 197).

Monsieur Dunod's energies were chiefly directed from the S. by the Balfours' route. On the first occasion, having arrived at the gap between the highest point and *Pointe Balfour*, they failed to reach the top; they seem to have recompensed themselves by making the second ascent of *Pointe Balfour*. They appear to have had ladders with them (*Mummery*, p. 135), and on Sept. 2, 1885, they made the second ascent of the highest point, or the first ascent by the S. route.

I think the credit of this ascent must be given to François Simond. The 'Dunod' chimney up which they eventually climbed is not visible from the Grépon-Balfour gap. It lies

² Brothers of Mr. Arthur J. Balfour, now Earl of Balfour, K.G., O.M.

on the Nantillons side and is separated from the gap by a buttress or little ridge running W. from the main peak to reach the foot of which you must descend a small rock couloir skirting the S. side of this buttress. Simond gained a point on the buttress well above the gap, and saw that the way up was by the chimney on the N. side of the buttress, and that the lowest step overhung. By means of an ingenious procedure (of which more anon) he was able to throw a doubled rope over a knob, some 20 ft. beyond him, so that it hung down the chimney. By the help of this they were able to pass the overhang and so reach the summit.

The next attempt was my own on August 1, 1889, with Ulrich and Hans Almer. The Charmoz was then getting talked about at the Montenvers as a good climb, and we knew that Mummery had ascended the Grépon from the Charmoz-Grépon Col, but we had little idea where his chimney was. We were somewhat ambitious and reached the Grands Charmoz top at 9 A.M. Returning to the Charmoz-Grépon Col, it took us one hour to cut steps in very hard ice to the gap near the Mummery chimney. We failed to notice the latter, and spent some time on the E. side looking for it. There we found a couple of plugs of wood stuck in a crevice on a great slab and concluded that there must lie the way. These plugs must have been left by some of the early explorers. From the top of the slab we got with some difficulty on to a very narrow ledge about 10 ft. higher. Hans was then pushed up as far as we could reach; he then wormed up another 12 ft. or so and stuck. He said he might bear off to the left if he could find a foothold. Ulrich was pushed up, and getting below Hans was able to stretch out his left hand and make the necessary foothold. Even then it was touch and go; but Hans slowly moved up, and, getting to better holds, reached the platform above the well-known hole, Burgener's 'Kanonenloch.' With the rope held above, Ulrich soon followed and all was well. It would be difficult to speak too highly of Hans's brilliant rock climbing on this occasion, for it certainly was a very ticklish place and I am not sure that I enjoyed standing, unroped, on that narrow ledge, with the two guides scrambling above me.

The moment Ulrich looked through the hole he pointed to the top of the Mummery chimney and exclaimed that there was the way we ought to have come up. We took it on our descent and found it far preferable to our ascent.

From the hole we traversed at once round to the Nantillons side, and swarming up one of those granite *à chevaux*, presently

got back to the arête. The view down the cliffs to the Nantillons Glacier from this point was most impressive and magnificent, and we duly reached the N. point, as Mummery in his first attempt, at 2.30 P.M.

The plan of carrying ample spare rope was not so much in vogue in those days, and the guides basing the difficulties on those we had passed, decided it was too late to try and go any further. As it was we only reached the Montanvers at 10 P.M.

The third ascent was made by Mr. J. H. Wicks with F. Simond and Zurbriggen on August 9, 1889, by the Dunod chimney. Wicks always told me that on this occasion, when they reached the Grépon-Balfour gap, Simond took him down to the bottom of the Dunod chimney, and told him to wait there till he, Simond, was ready. Simond got his doubled rope fixed fairly quickly, and they then made the ascent. Wicks had no idea how the rope was arranged, and that was the reason of our guideless attempts later.

In February of this year, 1927, Dr. C. Wilson kindly sent me a note-book belonging to Wicks, in which the latter wrote: 'I did not see how the guides got on to the ledge,³ they went together, Zurbriggen being left on it to put the rope as far forward as possible. It must have been fastened firm in some way. When François was up he pulled the thick rope after him and Zurbriggen returned without any rope. Was the ledge³ easy to reach and descend from, or had they a ladder stowed away somewhere on the Mer de Glace side?'

I never saw this note of Wicks's till this year, and it quite bears out what he told me as mentioned above.

On August 1, 1890, Ellis Carr, Wicks and I started off to solve the problem of fixing the rope. Wicks knew the way and we soon arrived at C.P. The plan previously followed there was to leave a short rope hanging N. of the stone bridge; you then descended a little way, using a hand traverse to cross the gap and get on to the peak proper. This route was, I believe, always used till Captain Farrar's descent in 1893. We soon got to the Grépon-Balfour gap, and not seeing any way of fixing a rope, went down the little couloir to the foot of the Dunod chimney, but failed utterly to pass the overhang.

We returned to the gap and proceeded, like M. Dunod, to climb Pointe Balfour, which we estimated as about 15 ft. lower

³ I think that Wicks ought to have used the word 'ridge' or 'buttress' here.—G. H. M.

than the true summit. We had our reward, for on the top, looking across at the Grépon, we spied a piton fixed high up on the opposite wall, some 20 ft. above the gap.

This gave us so much hope that we returned to the charge on August 4, and were a very long time in getting to the piton ; in fact we only succeeded by one of us going to the end of a wide ledge which lies on the Mer de Glace side just through the gap and is immediately under the summit. We then slung the climbing rope over a small bulge in the rock face, which gave some sort of hand-hold for the right hand. We put the rope through the piton, then doubling it, threw it over a shoulder on the buttress, but although it came to the bottom of the Dunod chimney, it did not hang down the centre, coming instead in a slanting direction from the right and being consequently useless. Wicks was sure that there was something more to be done. It then began to snow heavily, so we gave it up and returned.

Shortly after this Carr went home, and on August 12 Wicks and I determined to try again. We took a porter up to C.P., and, leaving him there, quickly went on to the gap. After some time I managed to get to the piton and threw the doubled rope over the buttress, where it hung as in our former attempt. Wicks then went down to the bottom of the Dunod chimney and held it tight. By its aid I passed up from the piton on to a shoulder in the buttress, and found a nice flat place about a foot wide and four or five feet long. After several tries I managed to throw the rope over the brown bulge at the top of the Dunod chimney and it reached down to just where it was wanted. It was tiring work fixing this rope and we were only two. Wicks being fresher had first shot, but could not pass the overhang ; being taller I managed to do so, but unfortunately in my struggles I jerked one of the ropes off the bulge ; it flew 20 ft. to the right, and as I was holding both ropes I was gradually pulled out of the direct route. I had to give it up, slid down the rope, and we returned to our porter. Two is not enough for a guideless party by this route.

On August 14, 1891, Wicks, J. H. Gibson and I tried again. It was a very cold and windy day, and we were nearly four hours getting the rope fixed. Neither Wicks nor Gibson managed to pass the overhang, and as it was then past 4 P.M. we thought it prudent to return.

On August 5, 1892, Dr. C. Wilson, C. H. Pasteur and François Simond, who had led the two successful ascents from this side, made the next attempt. They spent three hours

at the gap, but could not get to the piton, so had to give it up and returned. The failure of François on this occasion makes me wonder whether Wicks's surmise about a ladder being there in 1889 is correct or not, or was François anxious not to unfold his secret?

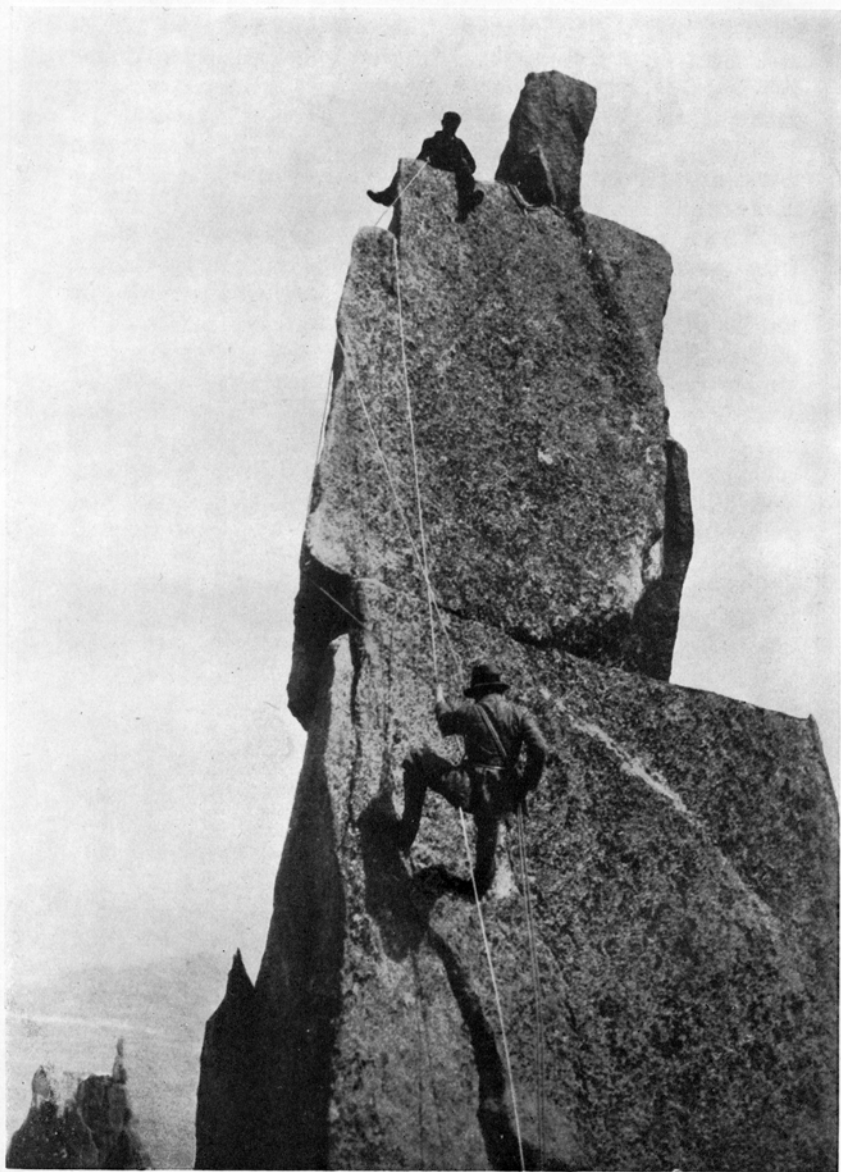
Three days later, on August 8, Wicks having been suddenly recalled to England, Gibson, Pasteur, Wilson and I set off again. We left the hotel at 2.45 A.M. and reached the gap at 8.15. Here we fed, and knowing the tricks of the trade by now, the rope was fixed by 10. We all went to the bottom of the chimney and, one of us putting his whole weight on the rope, to prevent any more jerking off the bulge, pushed Gibson up over the overhang. The fourth ascent of the Grépon, guideless, was made by 11.15. After half an hour's rest, we let⁴ Wilson down on the Mer de Glace face to the wide ledge next to the gap, to see if any route could be spotted on that (E.) side but he reported that it seemed impossible. Wilson sent up his axe, which we left, with a handkerchief attached, on the summit. We returned to the gap, collected our ropes and sacks, and reached Montenvers at 5.30 P.M. The axe did not remain there long, for on August 18 Mummery, Collie, Hastings and Pasteur went up from the Charmoz-Grépon Col and retrieved the ice-axe (*Mummery*, p. 140) and descended via C.P., making the first traverse from N. to S.

This axe has a curious after-story attached to it. Wilson had returned to England before it was retrieved, and Pasteur took it back a week later. The up boat-train stopped for a minute on Charing Cross Bridge, and at the same time a down train, with Wilson in it, stopped also. Their two carriages were opposite to each other. Both happened to look up, so Pasteur passed the axe across, and Wilson took it home.

On August 4, 1893, Mummery, Hastings and Miss Bristow repeated the N. to S. traverse. Three others of their party went by the C.P. route, and Mummery let a rope down the Dunod chimney by which they ascended. First ascent and traverse by a lady.

Then, on August 6, Captain Farrar with Daniel Maquignaz and Christian Klucker followed the Mummery route. The latter's chimney was still rather unknown, and they missed it as I did in 1889. However, they spotted the wooden wedges, and had the same exciting experience as I had in making the

⁴ *i.e.* by the chimney now called after the guide Josef Knubel.



Bâton Wicks.

THE 'BIG DROP' OR GRAND GENDARME

second ascent of the slabs.⁵ They traversed the mountain, and discovered that one could get to C.P. by keeping to the left and passing over a stone bridge. This stone bridge, or arch, was mentioned by the brothers Balfour as affording a possible route from C.P. ('A.J.' 10, 398). This route then became the usual way, as it obviated leaving the short rope necessary to re-ascend to C.P.

Two days later, August 8, Wicks, Wilson and I ascended from the C.P. side, hoping to find a rope hanging at the big drop. We left the Montenvers at 1.35 A.M. and were on the top at 10.10. We presently moved on and reached the foot of the big drop by 11.30. Unfortunately the rope which Mummery had left on the 4th had blown over to the Nantillons side and was jammed, so it was of much less use than we had hoped for, still it helped in the first part of the climb, which is the most difficult. We struggled up and were all on the N. peak by 12.20. We left at 1 P.M., and going down the Mummery chimney reached Montenvers at 8.15, thus making the first traverse from S. to N.

Early in September of the same year, Pasteur, H. A. Beeching, and P. A. L. Pryor, Miss Pasteur and Miss M. Pasteur with Alfred Simond tried from the C.P. side again. Pasteur writes to me that he 'showed Simond how to fix the rope, which he eventually succeeded in doing, but none of us managed to get up after the rope was fixed.'

Further, on Sept. 6, 1893 (Captain Farrar writes to me), the late Mr. Gerald Arbuthnot with Jean and Antoine Maître also missed the Mummery chimney and ascended by the slabs (Antoine leading); they were benighted after completing the ascent.

My early history of the Grépon is finished, having carried it to the same date as the Charmoz. There may have been other attempts or ascents of which I have not heard; still, I think I may add that on July 5, 1894, Miss M. Pasteur, T. L. Kesteven and I with Alfred Simond (who was most anxious to ascend the Grépon) started again by the C.P. route. I made Simond fix the rope, Kesteven led up the chimney, and we were on the top by 10; the first ascent by a lady from the C.P. side. We went along to the big drop and found the hanging rope gone, so returned by C.P.

Two days later, July 7, Simond satisfied his ambitions with

⁵ Now deservedly known as *les plaques Morse* (Vallot, I, pp. 58-9).
—Editor.

Kesteven and myself by leading up the Mummery chimney, and we traversed the mountain, returning to Montenvers in twelve hours.

The later history of this fascinating peak with variations of the two routes above described, and especially the ascent in 1911 from the Mer de Glace side by Mr. Winthrop Young's party, are all noted in the ALPINE JOURNAL and the Vallot Guide, so there is no necessity for me to recite them.

How are the mighty fallen! There is a constant stream *via* the Mummery chimney over the Grépon nowadays, but I believe that few, if any, of the *voyageurs* declare that the expedition has failed to fulfil their expectations, and the Grépon of old is THE Grépon to-day.

[On July 31, 1922, Sir George Morse made his sixth ascent of the Aiguille de Grépon, accompanied by his daughter.—*Editor.*]

ILLUSIONS.

BY GEOFFREY E. HOWARD.

(Read before the Alpine Club, May 3, 1927.)

WHEN our Honorary Secretary commanded me to write a paper on what he was pleased to call an abstract subject, my first mental comment was that it was a pure illusion on his part to imagine that the Club likes, or even tolerates, papers without slides. Indeed I have a ghastly remembrance that when once before I essayed something of the kind in this room, while seated nervously during the Presidential preliminaries, my natural agitation was hardly allayed by over-hearing several eminent Members expressing the opinion that papers without slides were a great mistake and calculated to produce the nadir of boredom.

But anyhow, the idea of Illusions in general wove into my mind a somewhat disorderly train of thought on the subject of the remarkable number and variety of illusions connected since the dawn of time with mountains and mountaineering. Undoubtedly there is something about mountains which