



T. G. Longstaff.]

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THE INNOMINATA FACE.

From a photograph taken by Dr. Longstaff from Punta Innominata in 1933.

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THE FIRST ASCENT OF THE INNOMINATA FACE OF MONT BLANC, 1919¹

By S. L. COURTAULD

THE sun was shining brightly when the Simplon Express pulled up at the little station of Gampel in the Rhone Valley. The train stood there hissing for a minute, then squeaked and rumbled away leaving a solitary passenger, who had emerged from his sleeper dressed and equipped as the complete mountaineer—or so I hoped.

It was August 1, 1907, and my second season in the High Alps. J. W. Jardine, E. G. Oliver and I had planned a campaign beginning with a week in the Oberland and proceeding to Zermatt by way of the Bietschhorn. At the last moment I had been prevented from starting with the others from London, and was now hurrying out to intercept them at Ried. Straightway therefore I trudged off across the bridge and through the village and up the steep road into the Lötschental, delayed at one point by a red flag and blasting for the new Lötschberg railway. At Ried I found my friends with two good men from Innertkirchen, Kaspar Maurer and Heinrich Fuhrer, packing their sacks outside the inn. So a bite of lunch, and up and on again I must go, to the Bietschhorn Hut.

Next day we traversed the mountain by the West and South-east ridges. It seemed to me a hard climb, and in later years we used to call the Bietschhorn one of the three most difficult big mountains in the Alps (all three, curiously enough, just under the mystical height of 4,000 metres). I remember the long tramp down the Baltschiederthal—five hours from the bergschrund to Visp—because I began to see a series of apparitions in the deepening twilight: crouching and sinister forms, human or animal, lay in wait in front of us and resolved into common groups of stones or tufts of vegetation when we came close to them. These visions continued for perhaps half an hour; I saw them only on one other occasion, when descending from the Schwarzsee later in the same season; they were doubtless due to fatigue.

¹ This is the first published narrative of a famous ascent—the pioneer ascent of one of the ‘great routes’ of Mont Blanc and of the Alps. The only preceding account of this expedition is to be found in Mr. Courtauld’s technical note, *A. J.* 33. 129.—*Editor.*

Our train journey to Zermatt on the following morning was marked for me by my first near view of the Matterhorn, the scene so well described by Guido Rey in his book. The mountain has been spoilt for climbers, but surely it is one of the seven natural wonders of the world. J. P. Farrar was sitting on the wall in front of the Monte Rosa Hotel, and soon we were sitting at his feet listening to mountain wisdom. The great man was an inspiring and generous mentor, and to encourage us he commended our expedition on the Bietschhorn. 'It's a good climb,' he said. 'Your descent might be a new route. Put a note in the *Journal*.' So of course we sent one in and it appeared under 'New Expeditions' in the November number.² In February 1908 there was an article by Farrar on the East face of the Bietschhorn³ which began by referring to our note with the comment, 'This expedition, in point of fact, covered no new ground except when the party, on the descent, left the East arête for three quarters of an hour . . . which was unnecessary.' It was a reproof for our failure to verify history.

Anyhow, our meeting at Zermatt was the beginning of a long friendship, and it was Farrar who then first turned our thoughts to the South side of Mont Blanc. We asked the inevitable question, 'What is the finest climb in the Alps?' Farrar's answer was definite, 'The Péteret ridge.' He told us about his own and the five other ascents of the arête; and he impressed on us the need for more experience before trying it. Then and there I made a plan: after three seasons with guides on the usual mountains by the usual routes, and three seasons guideless in the less-frequented districts, we would rope in the best professional we could discover and address ourselves to the Péteret.

I was fortunate enough to be able to follow this programme. Accordingly, in 1912 Oliver and I engaged Adolf Aufdenblatten, recommended as one of the two soundest and most enterprising of the younger guides, and arrived in Courmayeur after a preliminary scramble through the West Oberland and a trial trip with our new man on the North arête of the Grivola. Luck then turned against us. Spells of hopeless weather were separated by odd days just promising enough to let us start or sometimes reach a hut or bivouac—only to be driven down by recurrent storms. We fled to Zermatt. In 1913 our experience was exactly the same, and again we retreated from Courmayeur to the east, where conditions were rather better. My memory does not now discriminate between those two seasons; once we went to Zermatt by the high level route, and once by the valley—by what the guides used to call (referring to the passage from Zermatt to Saas via Stalden) the 'Kartoffel Joch.' We accomplished a few expeditions with small satisfaction.

However, during those two visits to Courmayeur, disappointing as they were, we had at least been able to do some reconnaissance. A visit to the Dôme Hut with the idea of climbing the mountain from there and examining our route from above was literally a wash-out, as were two heavily-laden tramps to the middle Brenva Glacier en route for the bivouac place; but on one occasion from the Tour Ronde, and on

² *A.J.* 23. 651.

³ *A.J.* 24. 87.



Photo, S. L. Courtauld.]

FIG. 1.

[August 9, 1921.]

[To face p. 128.]

another from the Punta Innominata (1913), we did get some useful glimpses, through rents in the storm clouds, of our ridge and the adjacent cliffs. The unexpected result was that we changed our chief objective. The Péteret ridge now took second place, while at the top of our list stood the Innominata face of Mont Blanc: the glamour of a new route prevailed. I do not remember when or by whom this was first suggested, probably the idea grew out of numerous discussions and conversations; we certainly knew little about the previous history of the face which has recently been so thoroughly investigated and recorded by Graham Brown in this *Journal*.⁴

From 1914 to 1918 I was concerned with such hills only as Mont Kemmel and Aubers Ridge on the Western Front, but at length, in 1919, we could start again. Oliver and I joined Adolf Aufdenblatten and Adolphe Rey in Dauphiny, arriving at St. Christophe during the Quatorze Juillet fête. The weather was quite unsettled and our programme of peaks—Pic d'Olan, Les Bans, Les Ecrins, etc.—had to be forgotten, but we crossed four or five passes and these were hard enough to provide useful training after five blank years; the Col des Sellettes I thought remarkably 'schlimm.' At the beginning of August we moved to Courmayeur and atmospheric conditions began to improve: threatening storms did not break, threats grew feebler and perfunctory, clouds packed away, and a proper spell of sunny weather melted the robes and warmed the limbs of the giant ranges. Meanwhile we climbed the Aiguille des Glaciers, Mont Blanc from the Col du Midi, the Rochefort ridge, and on the 13th of August, Mont Blanc again, by the old Brenva route. Our Innominata face must be getting into first-rate order, so on the 15th we ascended the Punta Innominata to make a careful and final inspection.

One perches aloft there on a slender pinnacle. Below to the left the uneasy length of the Brouillard glacier is bounded by the sombre cliffs and jagged skyline of its mountain. On the right, the Péteret ridge surges upwards in four tremendous crests which seem almost to lean over the Glacier du Fresnay. For our delectation that year the little glacier had contrived the most fantastic ice-fall I ever saw: underneath the lip of its snowy upper bowl a huge blue cavern had been hollowed out, and from this plunged the vertical frozen cataract down to the middle reach. (After writing this, I read Eccles' account of his ascent in 1877⁵; mentioning the prospect from his gîte he says, 'I will not inflict an inadequate attempt at its description.' Wise man. But let mine stand, if it may induce even one visitor to go up and look for himself.)

Turning away from these spectacles, our attention was fixed on the great face in front of us. With the help of our glasses we had at length traced out an apparently feasible route when we were startled by the sound of voices and the clink of an axe, quite close at hand. We had been sure that no other party was near, and looking down could see no one; and then, far off beyond the Col du Fresnay, almost half a mile

⁴ *A. J.* 52. 254; 53. 46, 144.

⁵ *A. J.* 8. 409.

away, we descried three tiny figures descending from Pic Eccles. (G. W. Young has written somewhere of the whispering-gallery formed by that vast cirque ; indeed magic dwells there, bewitching ears as well as eyes.) We ran down ⁶ to Courmayeur and learnt later that we had seen the Gugliermi brothers and Francesco Ravelli—they were reticent about their movements but had probably been reconnoitring 'our' face.

By the 18th all was prepared and our party went up to the Gamba Hut. We had often engaged Henri Rey for previous expeditions, and now again he came with us to reinforce his brother and Aufdenblatten ; he complained half in jest that he was too old for such escapades, but his strength and experience were valuable. On the 19th we walked in leisurely fashion up to the Col du Fresnay, ascending the Brouillard glacier for the most part between its centre and true left bank ; crevasses provided some interesting passages, but I do not remember any special difficulties. An excellent place for our bivouac was found just above the Col, a small level floor with stones on one side forming a fragment of low wall—probably the spot where Grüber, Emile Rey and Revel had bivouacked in 1880. Oliver, Henri and I spent an idle afternoon while the two younger guides went on to look at the morrow's route. They returned highly pleased with it and themselves—they had crossed Pic and Col Eccles, scaled a steep bit beyond, and were confident of success. The primus cooked us our soup, tea, and grog, and we turned into our sleeping-bags with great content. (My bag, made of waterproofed silk quilted with eiderdown, combined lightness with warmth to a remarkable degree ; I used it for many years and was never really cold, either in a damp dugout in mid-winter during the first World War, or under the stars at 4,000 metres.)

August 20th. A comfortable night and a fine morning got us away to a good start at 06.05, climbing on two ropes. We had first to mount the blunt ridge which rises from the Col du Fresnay towards Pic Eccles. This was ice in its lower part and rocks above, pretty steep but in no way difficult. Keeping rather to the left we passed a little below the top of Pic Eccles on the Brouillard side, where I remember an awkward stride across a gully. At 07.55 we arrived at Col Eccles, a short, level, narrow edge of hard snow which lands one fairly on to the face of the big mountain.

Easy broken rocks led up to the foot of a red tower which presented the first of the two difficulties of the climb, and the only place that required acrobatics. The walls of the tower were smooth and nearly vertical, and where it joined the face of the mountain on the left it made a re-entrant angle with another smooth steep slab ; there was no large crack in the corner, and although it was not high, the pitch would have been very difficult for one man alone. The two Adolphi had escalated it the evening before, Rey, as neat and nimble as a cat, standing on

⁶ Mr. Courtauld's party descended from Punta Innominata by its then unclimbed N.W arête to the Col du Fresnay ; the Gugliermi party made the first ascent of the arête a little later that same day.—*Editor*.



Photo, S. L. Courtauld.

FIG. 2.

[August 20, 1919.]

Aufdenblatten's head ; they had left a rope dangling so all we had to do that morning was to swarm up. Immediately above this was a second tower which looked extremely formidable, but it stood a little to the left of the line of ascent and we were able to pass it by climbing the crest of the main rib on grey rocks that were very steep but sufficiently furnished with holds. After some easier going for another twenty minutes we found a roomy ledge and sat down to a breakfast of sardines, bread, salami and marmalade. It was an opportunity to report progress and look ahead ; the time was 09.50 and the height by aneroid 13,600 ft.

The Innominata ridge properly ends at Col Eccles, from which point a discontinuous rib ascends in three or four great steps composed of buttresses or towers. We had surmounted the first step and were higher than the ugly slabs that are so conspicuous above the head of the Brouillard glacier. The second step now confronted us and its lofty and precipitous ' riser ' appeared most uninviting, but to the left (or west) lay a broad couloir with a rib on its further side which offered a much better route ; we had in fact decided to use this during our reconnaissance on the 15th. Of course, stones can and do descend the couloir in question, but we saw none ; moreover, we could trace a quick way across, there were no troughs, and rocks were available for cover.

The ascent was resumed at 10.25, first over a little level edge of snow and then up tumbled rocks which lay at the foot of the west flank of the second step, along the true left bank of the couloir. At about 11.00 we reached the selected point and turned to the left to make the crossing.⁷ The ice we had to traverse sloped at a moderate angle and was adorned with helpful patches of firm snow, so that Aufdenblatten, a champion step-cutter, could make swift progress. We halted for a breather below a sheltering islet ; then another stretch of snow and ice brought us to a second reef which led upwards and conveniently curved round to join the true right bank. An evil-looking gully slanted down towards us from the crest of our rib, but its chute of black ice and sheer sides were deceptive ; the sun had melted the ice away from the northern wall uncovering some nice stones and steps down in the crack, and these, with a few notches cut in the edge of the ice, made an elegant staircase. The crest was gained at 12.30 close to a conspicuous red turret with an overhanging top.

For the next hour we were on the heights of enjoyment. The way was steep and narrow ; sundry towers of good red granite connected

⁷ There seems to have been some misapprehension about this point. G. F. Gugliermi (*A.J.* 35. 90) and F. S. Smythe (*A.J.* 52. 19), both say that our party crossed the couloir at the point where one first reaches it. This is not correct. Our technical note (*A.J.* 33. 130), which exactly follows a pencil memorandum I wrote the day after our climb, says ' easy rocks were climbed on the left bank of the couloir for about half an hour ; the party then crossed . . . ' i.e. 300 to 400 ft. higher. There may be some interest in this for future climbers, as I have no doubt, judging from accounts of subsequent ascents and their times, that our route is best if there are not too many stones coming down the couloir.



Photo, S. L. Courtauld.]

FIG. 3.

[August 20, 1919.]

by short slim arêtes of rock or snow presented obstacles stiff enough to rouse interest and excitement, but of no uncomfortable severity. Willink's delightful illustration in the Badminton volume on Mountaineering entitled *On the Messer Grat* reminds me of the place. At 13.30 a halt was called to strap on crampons at the point where the arête becomes broader and snow-covered. The view was sensational: the general steepness of the mountain-side did not allow us to see much of the route by which we had ascended—between our feet we looked down on the Fresnay and Brouillard glaciers lying side by side in their twin beds, and beyond them the moraine-encrusted, pincer-shaped snout of the Miage.

Further progress involved kicking or cutting steps, and soon the snow was very bad. This passage constituted the second difficulty of the climb, though now no gymnastics were needed or even permissible—it was a place where experience was useful and great care essential. It seems that the surface here is often in a treacherous condition: Gugliermi in 1921 found ice with a thick unstable layer of a fine hail,⁸ and Smythe in 1939 found waterlogged snow and hailstones resting upon ice.⁹ I did not recognize any hail, but there was no doubt about the waterlogged snow resting on harder stuff below. I suppose one should expect it—this part of the mountain must catch every downfall and all the sunshine too. After a time we inclined to the right to seek an anchorage on some exiguous protruding rocks, as other parties have done, and higher up the surface became more trustworthy. The slope sharpened to an arête of better snow and ice, and we stepped on to the main Brouillard ridge at 14.45, at a point about two-thirds of the distance from Pic Luigi Amedeo to Mont Blanc de Courmayeur.

Henceforward all was plain sailing. A scramble over storm-shattered rocks and a traverse or two in good snow just below the crest on the north-west side landed us upon the last outcrop of the ridge, perhaps ten minutes below the top. It was 15.20, and high time for lunch. Getting under way again at 15.40 we steered across the snow slopes to the west of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, passed along the saddle now called Col Major, and by 16.20 the summit of Mont Blanc was under foot. The ascent had occupied ten hours and a quarter, including three halts totalling about 1 hour 15 minutes.

While we were plodding up the final incline to Mont Blanc a party of three or four stood on the top watching us. As we arrived one of them stepped forward and spoke. It was Ravelli. When he heard where we had been he paused for a moment, then shook hands and very handsomely congratulated us. He and the Gugliermi brothers had long been planning to make that ascent and must have been disappointed, but they are good sportsmen with many another fine route to their credit.

We left the summit at 16.30, passed the Vallot Hut at 17.00, the Dôme Hut at 19.30, got off the moraine of the Miage glacier just as night was falling, and reached Courmayeur at 01.00 on August 21.

⁸ *A. J.* 35. 91.

⁹ *A. J.* 52. 20.



Photo, S. L. Courtauld.]

FIG. 4.

[August 20, 1919.]

We knew the way—it was the third time we had gone there in a fortnight.

There is no need to praise our three excellent guides, whose reputations are secure. A pleasant feature was their unfailing courtesy and co-operation, both with the amateur members of the party and with each other: one of them, of course, was a German-speaking Swiss and the other two French-speaking Italians. (The mixture does not always work well: Jardine and I climbed the East face of Monte Rosa in 1920 with one man from Macugnaga and one from Zermatt, both of them I think good men taken separately; they bickered or sulked the whole way from the Marinelli Hut to the Grenz Gipfel, an unhappy memory.)

We called our route 'Mont Blanc by the South Face.' That description is terse, but not accurate: the face is more South-east than South, and a purist would say that it does not belong to Mont Blanc but to Mont Blanc de Courmayeur. G. F. Gugliermina in his account in *Vette* of the second ascent in 1921¹⁰ calls it 'Monte Bianco per la cresta dell' Innominata.' He may have so described it because his party climbed along almost the whole of the Innominata arête, but it is a misnomer, since that arête ends at Col Eccles and the actual ascent is really a face climb: as Lagarde says in the *Guide Vallot* (p. 69) 'L'arête qu'il est convenu d'appeler ainsi (L'arête de l'Innominata) ne mérite proprement son nom que jusque vers 4,000 m. A cette altitude, elle se soude à la muraille S.-E. du Mont Blanc de Courmayeur . . .' Both our President and our Editor in recent letters to me have written 'Innominata face of Mont Blanc.' Let that name be adopted as correct and authoritative.

Victory had been won, and elation was succeeded by the flatness often experienced when an object long planned and striven for and dreamed about is at last attained. The Péteret arête remained, and that we achieved in 1921, as recounted elsewhere by G. I. Finch.¹¹ We had then completed the programme drawn up under Farrar's inspiration fourteen years before.

One naturally compares the various routes on a mountain. Of the seven that I have done on Mont Blanc, four—those over the Aiguille and Dôme du Goûter, from the Grands Mulets, from the Col du Midi, and by the Dôme Glacier—are for the most part snow walks, very magnificent (specially the Col du Midi route) but without much difficulty in good conditions. The other three are among the top-rankers of the Alps. Our route just described has the merits of directness and variety; it includes several kinds of climbing and no one stretch is long enough to be tedious. The Péteret I enjoyed less; I thought the couloirs dangerous (but they can usually be avoided) and the climb up the final ridge, three hours or so, is wearisome because its whole monotonous length is always in full view. Best of all for me was the old Brenva route; glacier and ice-slope and rocks, and at the top, the riddle of the séracs—anything between easy and impossible; we found

¹⁰ G. F. and G. B. Gugliermina and G. Lampugnani: *Vette*, 1927, p. 235.

¹¹ *A.J.* 34. 117.

them difficult but solved the problem by the most exposed, airy and exhilarating ice-climb I ever did.

I reckon sixteen essentially different ways to Mont Blanc. I wish I had done them all!

NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

FIG. 1.—This was taken from the inner end of Col Eccles in 1921 during the ascent of Mont Blanc by Eccles' route. Pic Eccles is seen high on the right, and the top of the Aiguille Noire de Péteret just shows over the left flank of the Pic.

FIG. 2.—This was taken from the Innominata face in 1919 during a halt at 13.30 on the crest of the branch rib. The skyline shows the Aiguille Blanche de Péteret on the extreme left (a snow cap), with Punta Gugliermi at the right end of what appears to be a level summit ridge but really descends steeply. On the right of the deep gap is the Aiguille Noire de Péteret with the middle section of the Fresney glacier below it. The snow-sprinkled rock mass in the right lower corner is Pic Eccles—a bird's eye view.

FIG. 3.—This was taken at the same time as Fig. 2, with which it joins. Pic Eccles is again seen, in the left lower corner. To the right of it, in the middle of the view, is a near part of the branch rib, and above that is seen a bird's view of the Punta Innominata with the Aiguille Joseph Croux further off to the left. The Fresney glacier is on the left, whilst the Brouillard glacier fills the right half of the picture. Beyond its snout are dimly seen the great terminal moraines of the Miage glacier which there fill the floor of the Val Veni.

FIG. 4.—This was taken in 1919 from the highest rocks on the main Brouillard ridge at the top of the Innominata face. The rock mass in the middle distance on the left is the Eckpfeiler of the Péteret arête of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur. The snow cone on the right is the summit of the Aiguille Blanche de Péteret. The dip between these is the Col de Péteret, beyond which is seen the Brenva glacier in bird's eye view.

This photograph of the Col de Péteret is of peculiar interest because it is perhaps the only one ever taken from this near point of view before the massive rockfall of November, 1920 (see *A. J.* 33. 433), by which the Col de Péteret and the ridge of the Eckpfeiler above it were greatly changed.

NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF THE INNOMINATA FACE OF MONT BLANC DE COURMAYEUR

By T. GRAHAM BROWN *

THE paper mentioned in passing by Mr. Courtauld earlier in this number¹ was an attempt to reconstruct the history of the exploration of the climbing ways to Mont Blanc de Courmayeur from the Innominata Basin.² It dealt only with the earliest phase of

* The writer of this footnote is probably not the only reader of this *Journal* who has found that articles 'by the Editor' in old volumes, and the necessity of turning to another page to find who he was, were alike aggravating: hence this breach of tradition.—*Editor*.

¹ See p. 129.

² *A. J.* 52. 254; *A. J.* 53. 46, 144.