

SIR HENRY DE LA BECHE'S ATTEMPT ON MONT BLANC IN 1819

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A FOOTNOTE by the Editor of the *Bibliothèque Universelle* (Marc-Auguste Pictet) in volume 14 of the series *Sciences et Arts*, page 234 (Geneva, 1820), referring to a French translation of van Rensselaer's ascent of Mont Blanc in 1819, said :—

' Une de ces tentatives eut lieu l'année dernière par MM. De la Beche et d'Houdetôt. Ils attaquèrent le Mont Blanc, par l'Aiguille du Goûté, mais ils éprouvèrent, dans l'ascension de celle-ci, des difficultés et des dangers auxquels ils durent céder.'

That Henry Thomas De la Beche had been to Chamonix in 1819 was also known from the *Transactions of the Geological Society*, volume 1, London, 1824), but no details of his attempted ascent. It was therefore thought that relevant extracts from De la Beche's MSS diary might be not without interest to readers of the *A. J.*¹

This is not the place for a biographical sketch of De la Beche, and it must suffice to say that he was born in 1796, and that, after commencing at his own expense to prepare a geological map of Devonshire, he persuaded the Government to establish a geological branch of the Ordnance Survey (later known as the Geological Survey), a Museum of Economic Geology (later the Museum of Practical Geology, Jermyn Street, and now represented by the Geological Museum at South Kensington), and the Royal School of Mines. He was knighted in 1848.

The main interest of these extracts from his diary lies in the fact that he was the first Englishman so far as is known to have attempted to ascend Mont Blanc by the St. Gervais route, although as will be seen, it amounted in his case to little more than a reconnaissance. He was one of the first English geologists to visit and pay careful attention to the geological phenomena presented by the mountains and glaciers of the valley of Chamonix. And lastly, his diary gives valuable little human glimpses of several of the chief characters of the epic period of Chamonix when Mont Blanc was first ascended in 1786 : Dr. Michel-Gabriel Paccard, Marie Couttet, and Pierre Balmat, who had been de Saussure's guide.

A few words may be added concerning De la Beche's companion on his attempted ascent. He was Comte Charles-Ile-de-France d'Houdetôt, born July 6, 1787, son of Cesar d'Houdetôt and his

¹ The diary is part of a large collection of De la Beche manuscripts accumulated by Dr. F. J. North (National Museum of Wales), with a view to preparing a biography of De la Beche. Most of the material was made available by the generosity of Mr. R. M. Dillwyn of Castle upon Allum and the late Col. J. I. D. Nicholl of Merthyr Mawr, both in Glamorgan, great grandsons of De la Beche.

Creole second wife, Constance Josephine Cere of Ile-de-France, *i.e.* Mauritius.

Cesar d'Houdetôt's mother was the famous Sophie de la Live, Comtesse d'Houdetôt, friend of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who made her the model for Julie in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Young d'Houdetôt's tutor in 1798 was Étienne Pivert de Sénancour, the author of *Obermann*. From two sides therefore there had played on him the influence of the most inspired mountain authors of the eighteenth century. A sailor in the French Navy at the age of 15, young d'Houdetôt fought and was wounded at Trafalgar, transferred to the Army and took part in the campaign in Russia in 1812. He became lieutenant-general in 1842.

The first attempt to find a route to the summit of Mont Blanc from the side of St. Gervais was the reconnaissance carried out by Dr. Michel-Gabriel Paccard on September 9 and 10, 1784. On the following September 16, Marc-Theodore Bourrit made his attempt by the Aiguille du Goûter, on which occasion his guides reached the Col du Dôme. On September 14, 1785, de Saussure and Bourrit made their joint attempt by the same route, but without success. Thereafter, for thirty years the St. Gervais route was abandoned, while repeated successful ascents of Mont Blanc were made from Chamonix. On June 14, 1815, the Austrian Colonel Baron Ludwig von Welden, starting from St. Gervais, reached the Aiguille du Goûter, where he and his party spent a terrible night in the snow.² On the following morning there was thick fog and as von Welden became convinced that none of his guides really knew the way to the summit, he gave up the attempt and descended by the side of the glacier de Tacconnaz to Chamonix.

In 1818, Monsieur Roux built a pavilion on the Col de Voza and published an advertisement claiming that, by starting from his house, it was possible and indeed easy to ascend to the summit of Mont Blanc and descend in the day without having to sleep out, and that many foreigners had performed this feat. This assertion presupposed at least that in 1818 the guides already knew the way; and it is therefore interesting to note that in the following diary of De la Beche, six 'chasseurs' were supposed to have discovered this new route in July 1819. At all events De la Bêche was advised to try this route by Professor Marc-Auguste Pictet, and it will be seen that the veteran guide, Pierre Balmat of Chamonix, also came up to see what sort of a threat it represented for Chamonix, which had hitherto enjoyed the monopoly of the only known route to the summit of Mont Blanc. In the following year (1820) Dr. Hamel was to be attracted by the same advertisement by M. Roux, and he reached the Dôme du Goûter on which he was seen from afar by Maria Edgeworth. Although Dr. Hamel soon recognised that Roux's claim that tourists could ascend and descend Mont Blanc from his house in one day was completely baseless, he accepted as true the statement that his guides, Jean-François Perroud and Maurice Mollard, had reached the summit by that route. It

² G. R. de Beer: 'Ascensions et tentatives oubliées,' *Les Alpes*, 24, 1948.

remained for Charles Durier to say that 'pendant plus d'un demi-siècle les ascensions par Saint Gervais présentèrent cette particularité que les guides seuls atteignaient le Mont Blanc.' It was not until 1861 that the ridge-route from St. Gervais was successfully completed by Leslie Stephen and Francis Fox Tuckett.

EXTRACTS FROM SIR H. T. DE LA BECHE'S DIARY WHILST
TRAVELLING IN FRANCE AND SWITZERLAND IN 1819

1819, *August 20.*

M. Pictet⁴ called upon me, and we went together to get one of my mountain barometers, and some thermometers repaired, which had suffered from the journey. He also lent me a portable hygrometer for my intended expedition to Mont Blanc. He proposed to me to take the new route, which six chasseurs pretend to have discovered this last July . . .

August 23.

I set out this morning with the companion that Prof. Pictet had introduced to me, Le Comte France d'Houdetôt, who wished to try the scaling of the heights of Mont Blanc with me, if the season for the attempt is not too far advanced . . .

August 24.

. . . At Four o'clock we left our friends at St. Gervais, and commenced our ascent to the Pavillon, situated upon one of the ridges that descend from Mont Blanc; the first part of our ascent was well wooded, and the road, though in some places steep, was always practicable for mules—the weather was tolerably good.

After ascending some distance among high valleys, the glacier of Bionassai burst upon us at the turn of a mountain.—A terrible storm now commenced, accompanied by thunder and lightning, which rattled nobly among the mountains. This continued until we reached the Pavillon, which is nothing but a small cottage, situated on the ridge of a mountain. The effect produced by the great rolling clouds, mostly beneath us, was most majestic; the rain was sometimes so heavy that it seemed as if it would wash us away—the dark clouds as they passed the white snows of the Aiguille de Gouté had a most singular effect . . .

There is every reason to expect that we shall have a noble view when the weather clears up.

August 25.

When I went out in the morning from the Cottage, the wildest scene that I ever before witnessed presented itself. From the Pavillon there is a perfect view up the valley of Chamonix, with all its glaciers.

An immense quantity of snow has fallen upon the Mont Blanc,

³ Marc-Auguste Pictet, F.R.S., 1752–1825.

so that there is some prospect that we shall be obliged to abandon our expedition to the summit . . .

While I was writing an Avalanche came thundering down the Glacier of Bionassai, which is not far from us.

At [?] o'clock we commenced our ascent in order to have some idea of the road to the summit—the ascent was steep, and in some places among precipices, which my companion found very unpleasant, in consequence of his having been severely wounded in the legs—the views were superb—many glaciers were beneath us, and the eternal snows of Mont Blanc rose above.

From one situation, named Mont Lacha, where the vegetation began to disappear, we had a most noble view of the valley of Chamonix—from this place we had an ascent of about two hours and a half to the Pierre Ronde, during which we passed many precipices—we witnessed two snow avalanches, which thundered among the glaciers.—From this place we continued our ascent to the Tête Rousse,⁴ at the foot of the Aiguille de Gouté.

At the edge of the snow I made the following observations :—Barometer 22.05. Therm : Att. 56°. Det. 51°. Hygrometer 83°.

Continuing our ascent we were obliged to make use of our crampons, without which we could not have traversed the inclined planes of frozen snow.

While we were at this elevation we witnessed several avalanches of snow, and falls of large blocks of rock—one of the latter fell quite close to us.

The clouds becoming thick about us we were obliged to descend, which we did by the side of the Glacier of Bionassai . . .

From the snow that has fallen upon the higher parts of Mont Blanc, and the general character of the present weather, the guides are of opinion that it will be impossible to ascend to the summit of the mountain this year.

My companion the Count was much fatigued by the day's journey . . .

The ascent from the Pavillon took us five hours, the descent only three . . .

August 26.

. . . At break of day we were called by Pierre Balmat,⁵ who arrived last night and slept in the cottage with us ; he is the same man that De Saussure so often mentions in his *Voyages dans les Alpes* : he came to make arrangements, if the weather had been fine enough, to ascend the Mont Blanc by the pretended new route. Considerable jealousy prevails at Chamonix [over] this said new route, which they are afraid will, if practicable, in some measure injure them with travellers, be this as it may, Balmat agreed that his son should accompany us if the weather should be fine enough to attempt the ascent.

At break of day we commenced our descent, with Balmat, a muleteer,

⁴ The MS. has "Tete Russe."

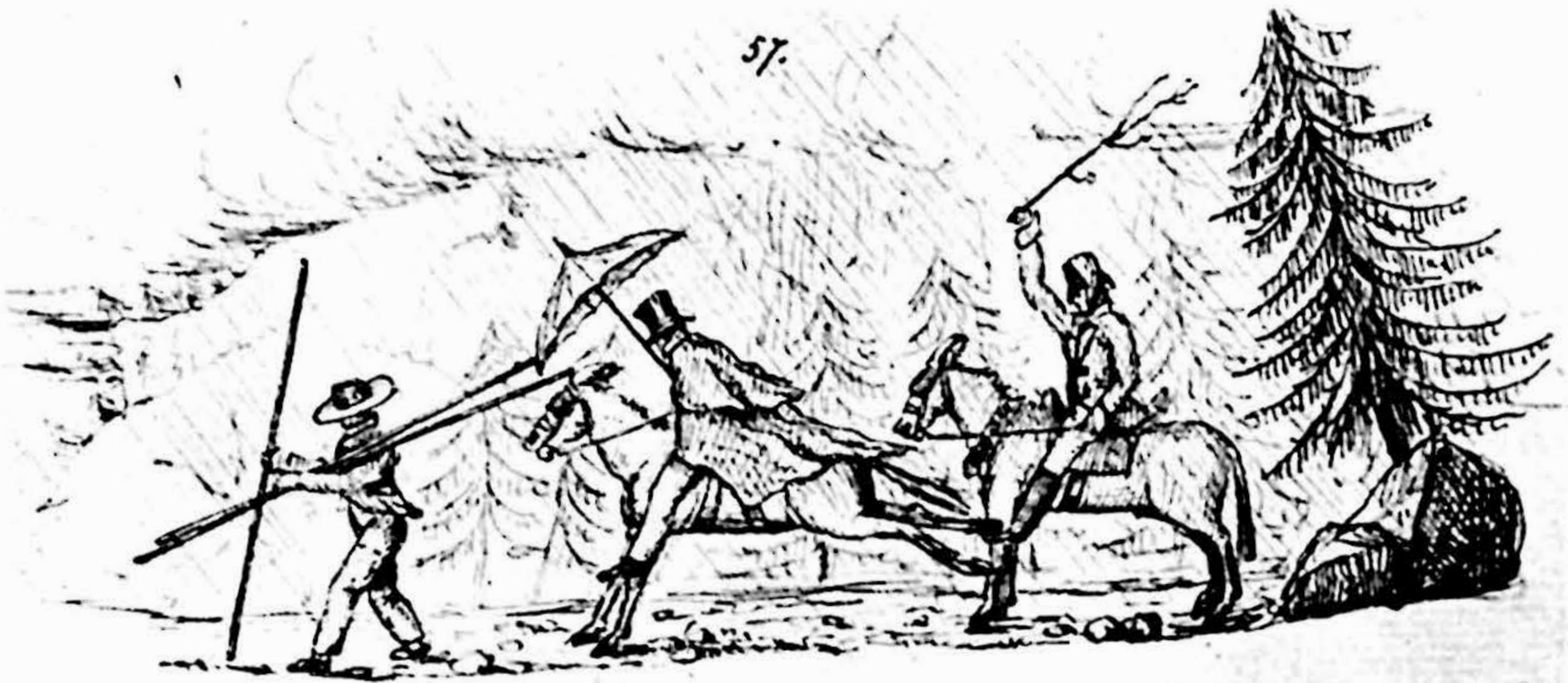
⁵ Pierre Balmat, *ob.* 1827, *æt.* 77.



A Chamonix Char-a-Banc.

“A CHAMONIX CHAR-A-BANC.”

57.



Seeing Mont Blanc and the Valley of Chamonix.

“SEEING MONT BLANC AND THE VALLEY OF CHAMONIX.”

Sketches by Sir Henry De la Beche, 1819.

and two mules, to the Valley of Chamonix—many noble views presented themselves and we several times observed the Mont Blanc quite free from clouds—the long chain of the different Aiguilles of the Mont Blanc was the most striking feature in this extraordinary scene.

As we descended it became much warmer, and we joined what is called the main road to Chamonix, near the small village of Les Ouches. The descent from the Pavillon is very steep and practicable only for men on foot and mules; the main road from Sallenche to Chamonix is passable in small char-a-bancs, in which travellers sit sideways.

When we came opposite the beautiful Glacier de Boissons, we ascended the mountain on foot, for about half an hour, in order to traverse it. The pyramids of ice are the finest in the valley of Chamonix—we traversed this glacier upon that part where the ice was not much broken in *crevaces*, as they are termed.—It was a magnificent sight to see the grotesque forms of ice mounting towards the summit of Mont Blanc—we found the crampons of great service; in the steeper parts, Balmat cut steps in the ice for our feet, this person informed us that all the glaciers on this side of the Mont Blanc had decreased during the last two years . . .

After having crossed the glacier, we descended to the road, where our mules waited for us, and continued our journey to Chamonix . . .

Shortly after our arrival at Chamonix, we proceeded with our guide, Pierre Balmat, to the bottom of the Glacier of the Mer de Glace. The manner in which glaciers advance is here clearly seen: A great cliff, composed of masses of ice advances into the heart of the valley, upsetting trees and everything that opposes its progress, besides pushing forward immense granite blocks of many tons weight . . .

Chamonix is now quite crowded with people, the greater proportion of whom are English, one or two did not do much credit to my country. Why persons should come to a place that cannot possibly be interesting to them, I cannot imagine—Among the rest we have some complete Bond Street loungers, who talk as much small talk, and care as little about the majestic scenes that surround them, as if their empty skulls were still in St. James's Street.

August 27.

. . . We left Chamonix before breakfast for the Montanvert, the great lion for strangers after their arrival, they therefore go there, without much more reason than that it is the fashion to do so, for it is not by any means the principal *low* beauty of Mont Blanc . . .

We dismounted from our mules about half way up, and climbed the rest of the distance to the pavillion on the Montanvert, where a fine view of the Mer de Glace, situated among some of the aiguilles, breaks suddenly upon the traveller.

After having taken our repast we descended to the Mer de Glace, in order to walk on it, it is full of fissures, or *crevaces*, as they are here termed—the pyramids of ice are very fine, but not equal to those of the Glacier de Boissons, the ice not being so pure. The Mer de Glace is



Part of the Glacier de Boisson, Valley of Chamouni.

“PART OF THE GLACIER DE BOISSON, VALLEY OF CHAMONIX.”
Sketch by Sir Henry De la Beche, 1819.

composed of two separated bodies of ice, which fill up a considerable valley, the ice that descends from the Mont Blanc (properly so called) is to be distinguished by its greater whiteness from that which comes from the opposite direction—the line of colour, which separates them, is curious.

We took a considerable tour among the ice—travellers in general content themselves with a short trip on the edge. There are many fine valleys of ice in this glacier, which, when the traveller is at the bottom of them, have a most singular and uncommon appearance.

We then coasted the glacier for some distance further up among the mountains—Everlasting winter reigns around, and the ruins of the higher parts of the Mont Blanc are scattered over the ice, not in small pieces, but in blocks, equal in size to a small cottage; these sometimes form bridges across the fissures in the ice . . .

August 28.

My fellow traveller, Comte France d'Houdetôt, left me to my great regret this morning; I found him an excellent companion, and although not very scientific himself, he was well informed, enterprising and courageous. He has been in many battles, and had been wounded in many places. I shall ever remember with pleasure the short time we passed together . . .

The morning was very unfavourable, so that it was past nine o'clock when Pierre Balmat and I set out, we first went to the foot of the Flégère,⁶ which is on the same side of the valley as the Mont Brevens, and opposite the Mont Blanc. I here found a micaceous slate, in nearly vertical strata, having a direction east-north-east and west-south-west—in one place there is part of a compact grey blue limestone stratum, which appears to be interstratified with the slate.

The view which we should have had from the Flaigère, had the day been fine, was nearly destroyed by the quantity of cloud that hung upon the Mont Blanc. After descending and crossing through a thick wood of Firs, and over the Arve, we found ourselves at the bottom of the Glacier de Bois. From this we ascended the mountain on the left of the glacier, part of which is known by the name of le Chapeau; having won this point, we advanced considerably higher, until we were far above the level of the Montanvert. From hence there is a most enchanting view of the valley of Chamonix, the range of the Mont Blanc, and the mountains opposite . . .

August 29.

Early in the morning I commenced the ascent of the Mont Brevens in company with three Englishmen . . .

My guide to-day was Pierre Balmat, the son of the old man of the same name, he is a fine healthy strong young man; the guide of the three young men was Marie Coutet,⁷ called the Chamois, from his great activity.

⁶ The MS. has "Flaisir."

After ascending for about three hours and a half, we found ourselves at the foot of a place called the Chimney, from its being a perpendicular fissure, this difficulty is overcome by climbing with the hands, knees, and back for about 80 ft.—having accomplished this, a fine view of the mountains extending to Geneva suddenly broke to us—peaks rising above peaks in wild confusion. The great attraction to the summit of Mont Brevens is the commanding view it affords of the whole Mont Blanc range . . .

August 30.

. . . At six in the morning I left Chamonix with Pierre Balmat, the son, in order to try experiments where the snows commence at the foot of the Aiguille de Blatiere . . .

Having passed the line of grass a scene of magnificent desolation presents itself—the ruins of the mountain appear mixed with glaciers—and blocks of enormous dimensions are scattered in all directions. The Aiguilles from which these granite masses have been detached proudly rise their heads on high, their sides so steep that the snow cannot rest upon them—at their feet are glaciers of various sizes.

While seated contemplating the grand general effect, I had the pleasure of seeing an immense avalanche of ice and granite blocks—the noise was like thunder and the effect quite sublime—we afterwards passed the place over which this had fallen—this part of the journey was rather too dangerous to be pleasant, being immediately under the glacier and the Aiguille, avalanches fall here frequently—my guide and myself clambered over the rocks as quickly as possible—his great object was to get from one large block of rock to another, so that if anything of no considerable size had fallen, we might have secured ourselves from it, by getting behind it, and the piece of stone or ice might have passed, either on one side or the other of us.—I never climbed so fast in my life—we had scarcely passed the dangerous place, and had turned round to look and take breath, before a large piece of ice was detached from the Glacier, and fell with a horrible crash, about the middle of the passage, over the part that we had crossed about eight minutes previously—this place is dangerous for at least a good quarter of an hour's hard climbing—we determined not to repass it, but to go down another way . . .

While taking some refreshment, and thus employed behind a large granitic block, which sheltered us from the wind that blew strongly, a heavy storm accompanied by thunder and lightning came on; this we did not at first perceive on account of the granitic block behind which we were placed—a tremendous clap of thunder gave us the first warning—the cloud that was charged with the electric fluid was drawing towards us in a straight line; the clouds beneath were rolling in a confused and majestic manner—no time therefore was to be lost, for even supposing that the thunder did not injure us, the thickness of the cloud could have effectually prevented us from finding our way, for in

⁷ Jean-Marie Coutet, 1764–1848.

these regions there is not even the resemblance of a path—we therefore descended with as much rapidity as the rocks would permit, and fortunately soon came to a rapid declivity which the guide knew well—we slid down this snow upon our poles with a rapidity which almost took away our breath—we had scarcely attained the bottom of this declivity before a tremendous clap of thunder broke above us, at this moment an extraordinary sensation was felt both by my guide and myself—an extreme difficulty of breathing—probably occasioned by the rarity of the air at the time of the electric shock—we were so close that the crash was awful.

We continued our descent as quickly as possible until we found a goats' path, known to the guide, it was well for us that we found it, for we were shortly enveloped in a thick cloud, which only allowed us to see about three yards of the path at a time, this was however, quite sufficient. We ran down this until we came to the line of fir trees, when we found to extreme delight, that though enveloped in clouds, which had descended the side of the mountain more rapidly than we had, we were some distance beneath the thunder, which still rolled among the heights of Mont Blanc that we had left, causing, of course, many avalanches.

Continuing our route to the valley we soon got out of the clouds, but so wet that, truly speaking, we had not one dry thread about us—a heavy rain accompanied us to Chamonix . . .

August 31.

. . . I this morning formed an acquaintance with the celebrated Dr. Paccard⁸ who was the first to mount to the summit of Mont Blanc, this he accomplished with only a single guide (Jaques Balmat). He is a fine old man, remarkably lively, and still continues his profession at Chamonix, where he resides in a house not superior to the rest; indeed it could not be distinguished from any other of the peasants' houses. Dr. Paccard is above the common size; and is strongly made, his nose is aquiline, inclining to be large; his hair which has only turned grey with time, and has not fallen off, is dressed in the old fashion with a tail. After I had looked at his minerals, etc., he came to visit me with his son, in order to see the instruments I had brought with me. His son is a clever young man, and has made a good collection of the plants of this part of the Alps . . .

September 1, 1819.

Although the weather was very unpromising, I set out with my guide for those places near Servoz, where copper and lead mines have been worked—we followed the road that passes by les Ouches to Sallanche . . .

September 3.

. . . The common heart's ease violet was abundant between Chamonix and the base of the Col de Balme . . .

⁸ Michel-Gabriel Paccard, 1757–1827.