

Samivel—an appreciation

C. Douglas Milner

'Q'est que c'est que la grande vie? Une pensée de la jeunesse réalisée dans l'âge mûr'

Alfred de Musset

Samivel is a man of rich and varied talents, an important figure in French literary and artistic circles, by no means so well known here in England as he deserves to be. In his youth he was an accomplished alpinist—in later years a mountain traveller, explorer and historian. A Parisian by birth, he lives in Provence. The main object of this paper is to spotlight his skills as a wit and satirist of mountaineers, both in his drawings and his writings.

Yet first must be mentioned other achievements which have gained him so much honour in his own country, in Switzerland and in Belgium. He has written, and often illustrated with his own photographs, books on Provence, Egypt, Greece and Iceland. Three of these are available in English translations under the titles of *The Glory of Egypt*, *Golden Iceland*, and *The Glory of Greece*. Among his 'serious' books on mountains are *Cimes et Merveilles* and *Grand Paradis*. His parallel films on these themes have gained prizes at Trento International Festivals. *Hommes, Cimes et Dieux* is a work of scholarship from no less than 20 years of research. The field is vast—from the biblical myths of Sinai and Ararat, the Olympus of the Greeks, the Goddess Mother of the Snows of the Himalaya, to the terrifying realities of the erupting volcano at the hot end and the ice avalanche at the other. He even includes the instinctive respect paid by man to the mere idea of height indicated in the Pyramids, the Ziggurats of Mesopotamia and the comparable structures of Central America. This important book gained him a prize of the Academie Française.

Although a member of the *Société des Gens de Lettres* and the Pen Club International, he is too much the individualist to be fitted neatly into the narrow classifications of the French literary establishment. Even so, his novel . . . *Le Fou d'Edenberg*, satirizing the work of developers in an unspoilt Alpine valley, was a runner-up for the Prix Goncourt. His press notices have been favourable and he has held exhibitions of paintings in major Paris galleries.

His stance is clearly shown in an interview published in the September 1979 issue of *Connaissance des Hommes*. Freedom is costly, he says, and though fortunate in having several strings to his bow, that is to some extent a handicap *vis à vis* the pedants. He drily concludes that, whilst artists applaud his writing, the writers think more of his art. Asked what school of painting he followed, he said he admired Breughel, Georges de la Tour, Braque and the art of the Sung dynasty. He asked his interviewer if he knew what he meant, but no reply is recorded. It was a shrewd riposte . . . in short, Samivel admires quality rather than styles. His own style, based on thorough knowledge of mountain form, is one of elegant simplicity. Asked about exhibitions, he mentioned specially that of 1973 at Chamonix, 120 drawings and paintings, attended by . . . wait for it . . . 16,000 visitors in a month! Samivel himself was astonished but excuses the number on the ground that the weather in July–August 1973 was appalling and visitors were short on umbrellas. It clearly shows that Chamonix is a good place to keep out of.

Not surprisingly Samivel, whose love of solitude is well known, spent the next few years in Dauphiné or Oisans as it is more properly named. The result is his latest book (1978) *Le Grand Oisans sauvage*. Here again we meet the devoted

historian, and the lover of unspoilt landscape and its wild life. The illustrations alone, 60 of which are from his own camera, are of impeccable quality, ranging from close-ups of flowers and butterflies to great panoramas. Having worked in the area my admiration is reinforced by nothing less than bright green envy.

The region extends from Grenoble E to Briançon, and S to Gap, and includes the Barre des Ecrins, the highest peak entirely in French territory. Samivel records its long history from the Bronze age, the Romans, the various invaders of the Dark Ages, to the bloodstained history of the Roman Catholic Church in the 13th and later centuries. Mountain exploration is not overlooked, but I was a bit put out by Samivel's classification of the pioneers into Frenchmen and Foreigners. Surely an anglophile . . . as he undoubtedly is . . . should have allowed 3 categories: French; English; Foreign! The illustrations for the most part have lyrical titles, but for the factually minded an appendix of place names is provided. It is said that nothing gives a book such an air of importance as an Appendix (Mark Twain, I think) Oisans has 4. That mentioned above; a chronological history; a list of historical sources, and detail of the Ecrins National Park. This last is entirely appropriate since Samivel is Honorary President of the CAF Commission for conservation of the mountains.

What of the future? In the summer of 1979 Samivel was exploring the E Pyrenees, another region as yet unspoilt by excessive tourism, with herds of wild horses grazing below the snow-line. Perhaps we can look forward to another of his illustrated books, though at present, Autumn 1979, he is working on a follow-up to his *Contes à Pic* and resumption of his painting.

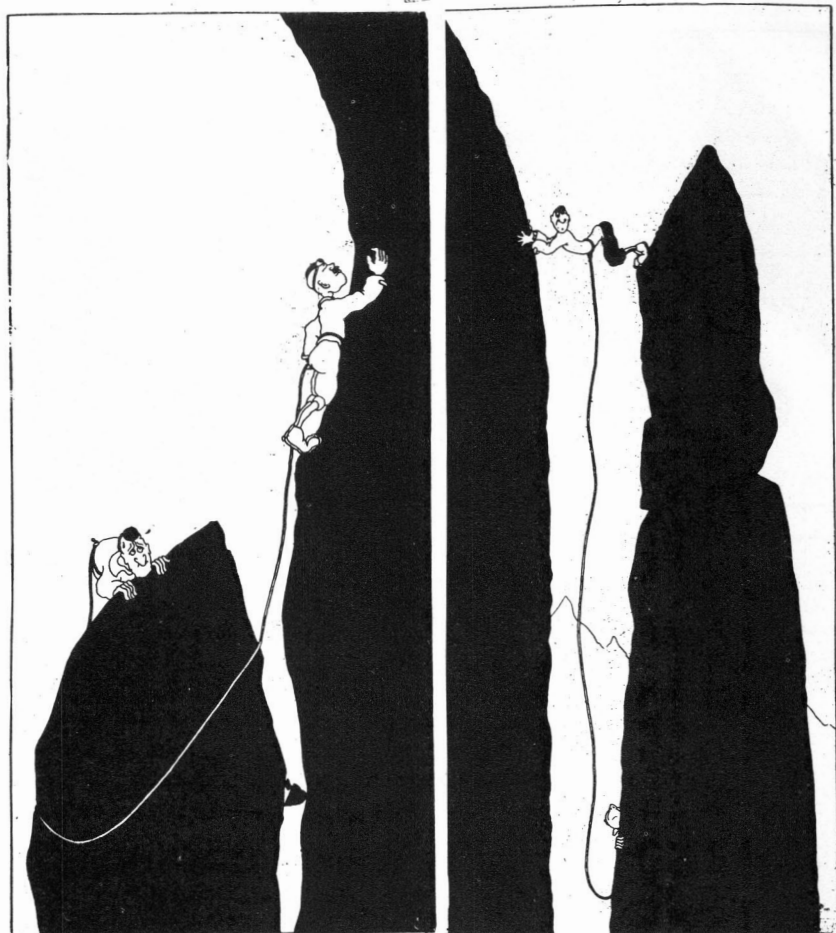
* * * *

So much for the Samivel of *l'age mûr*. What of his earlier days? The initial handicap of being born in Paris in 1907 was compensated for by his later education at the college of Chambéry, and by holidays in the family chalet at Les Contamines-Montjoie. To this he owes his love of the mountains and his understanding of the rigorous life of the mountain peoples. A random quotation from *Oisans* is relevant: 'the winter paradise for the skier is also the time when the old people, as well as the cattle, must stay indoors for 6 months'.

In this favourable atmosphere of the Val Montjoie Samivel became a good skier, and developed his icemanship in his teens. He has many first ascents to his credit in the Tré-la-Tête area, between 1926 and 1941. When I asked him about these he pointed out that, between the wars, especially in that area, firsts were 2 a penny. Nowadays, it is to be thought, one might be lucky to pick up a 19th.

He was a member of the GHM for 15 years and was probably at the height of his powers in 1936, when he was invited to join de Segogne's expedition to the Himalaya. However, this proved impracticable, but later he was able to join the first French Polar expedition, which he filmed.

He recalls the first ascent of the W slope of the Col de la Scie, and puts, so to speak, flesh on the bare bones of Vallot. The foot of the slope was reached at one in the morning, by a brilliant moon. The full 900m of it gleamed 'like a sheet of glass'. His sole companion, an alpinist who had 'the sombre prudence of age' was unwilling to go on, but Samivel at 23 was 'like an impetuous young colt', and pulled hard on the rope compelling his partner to follow. Happily, in crampons, all went well. He had his reward, for his partner was Mons E. Monod-Herzon, who influenced Delagrave to publish his first book of drawings *Sous l'Oeil des Choucas* in 1932, when he was only 25 years of age.



24 (Left) *The expert to the novice*—‘Now, my boy, at last, we are going to begin to climb’
 (Right) *Sans Guide-Samovar*: ‘and now what do I do?’

Baculot: ‘Haven’t a clue . . . the page of the guide is torn out’
 (These and next 2 pages of drawings from ‘*Sous l’Oeil des Choucas*’)

Since his formal art training had been, so he claims, as bottom of the art class at his college, this argues a great natural talent.

He adopted a pseudonym, as was common form at the time or even earlier. He instances Caran d’Ache, and we think of Fougasse, or even in the 19th Century Phiz and Boz, in the Dickens books. Samivel was an avid reader of Dickens, especially the *Pickwick Papers*, and his pseudonym is taken from Sam Weller, ‘as a modest gesture to an author who has not only greatly amused but also deeply moved him’.

Initially he thought of making his career as an illustrator, and among his work were drawings for the French editions of *Gulliver*, *Fables of la Fontaine*, *Gargantua & Pantagruel*, and . . . as an essay in the macabre . . . the *Poems of Villon*. But he also determined to become a writer and so began his long series of ‘Tales for children between 10 & 80’. Here and there he rewrote old stories, as well as inventing his own. Incidentally, in this vein, he illustrated *Trag le Chamois*, written for children by the late Micheline Morin.



25 *Specimens of Alpine fauna: (Top left) The north face climber. (Top right) The urban gorilla (alpinist patagon). (Bottom left) Lord Filaplomb. (Bottom right) The Alpine Clubman*

In *Choucas* the stylized simplicity of the drawings matched by terse captions came from a keen yet detached observation of the 'follies and weaknesses of mankind' in the mountains. Sustained wit and humour of this kind argues a delicate balance on the narrow ridge between two slippery slopes. On the one hand a descent into acid denigration and on the other into mere facetiousness or slapstick comedy.

Samivel laughs gently at himself, his friends on the rope, his compatriots . . . skilled or unskilled . . . and happily, at us, the English. Who else could be Lord Filaplomb or the Alpinist of his Club, or in *Bonshommes de Neige*, the Hon. Archibald Glassful, a devotee of Scotch? There seem to be no Germans or Italians, to my mind both potentially rich fields for satire. There may well be a good reason for this, but I do not speculate.

S



26 'Ah! la volupté de palper la roche vierge . . . l'ivresse de faire une première'

In the drawings here reproduced, I have translated the captions with one exception. The sheer gallic eroticism of '*la volupté de palper la roche vierge . . . l'ivresse de faire une première*' defies translation. At least if I ventured to explain, the feminists of the Club would, as we say N of Watford, demand blood for supper . . . mine!

One quite talented English cartoonist has tried to copy the idea, but with dire results.

What *Choucas* did for mountaineering, *Moins dix Degrés* did for ski-ing, yet for my money I prefer *Bonshommes de Neige*. As with *Choucas*, his basic heroes are Samovar & Baculot. Samovar the dashing thruster . . . Baculot the reluctant second. In this illustrated tale we have an incomparable send-up of the whole commercial and social racket of a winter sports centre.

Initially our 2 heroes, being fed up with metropolitanism, existentialism, parliamentarianism, totalitarianism, drugs, democracy, atomic progress, computers and social security, set out for the solitudes of the snows, to re-discover themselves. Once over the hill, they are plunged into this maelstrom of activity. First they meet the flashy property developer, the so-called 'Baron' Bickford, his plump wife (née Razzolino) and nubile daughter. The Baron presents the 2 figureheads of the development company . . . the aged Marquis (signatory to the Treaty of Versailles) deaf as a post and susceptible to draughts, and the dugout General 'gloriously put on half pay in 1914, 17, 39 and 44'.

The boys are detailed to instruct mother and daughter in the principles, if not quite the practice, of ski-ing. The first is to get the planks ready to move, and the second to stay with them when moving. Baculot, as always, gets the short straw—the Baroness, who fails on the second, with chaotic results down the slope. Samovar, crafty fellow, instructs the daughter in certain unspecified principles in a secluded chalet.

Later they are required to impersonate two mitteleuropean ski champions, Toni & Rudi, who fail to turn up for the grand opening. This done, the boys manage to sneak out of the Hotel Miraculus for the wide open spaces, whilst the whole resort is wrecked by a blizzard.

* * * *

It is said that one picture is worth a thousand words, but not with Samivel, for fine as his drawings are, they are excelled by the word pictures of *L'amateur d'abîmes*. Here he reaches the zenith of wit, lyricism and indeed philosophy. Originally published in 1940, about the time of the fall of France, it was based on his adventures in the 20s and 30s. After no fewer than 5 editions, it is now in paperback.

The title itself is subtle . . . depths not heights. One can be a lover of heights from the valleys, but only the alpinist can savour the space below him. The author claims it is written mainly for adults, even for non-climbers. As to the younger climbers, he concedes he does not know if they are interested. He recognizes that these '*surhomautomates*' have their own special mountain pleasures, whilst deploring the commercial promotion of the new sub-culture. (Sounds familiar?)

For non-climbers there is a modernized glossary and a short selection indicates its value:

Artificial climbing includes any method beyond the use of arms and legs. For example, a man descending a snow-slope on his backside.

Bleausards. Parisians who visit Fontainebleau to climb, the Harrison's Rocks of the Ile de France.

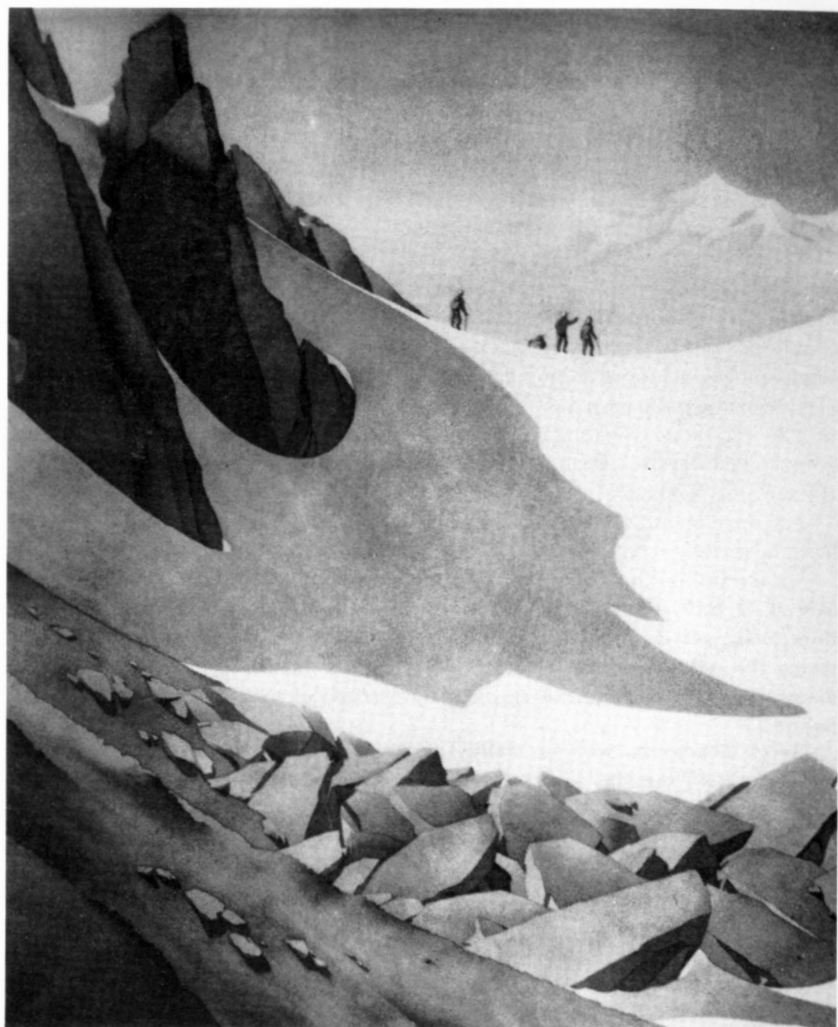
Lanterne a bougie. Prehistoric, but still used by sadists.

Leader. Even if unblessed by the Academie Française, it is evidently accepted français.

Refuge. A hut built to shelter (a) alpinists and (b) those who are not alpinists. This combination results in shelter often being found only outside.

Vierge. A summit or other part of a mountain not hitherto climbed. Very rare these days, but with a little care 2 or 3 'firsts' can be claimed.

* * * *



27 Mountain painting by Samivel

R. L. G. Irving, in his gracious review in *AJ* 58 of the 4th edition, comments that 'among the many flowers of language the author chooses from his rich vocabulary, most English readers will make some new discoveries'. Yet even on a first reading, the ambience transcends the eloquence and we are tempted to return, again and again, dictionary at hand, to garner the flowers.

Initially, it is a nostalgic account of 3 young alpinists from Paris, taking . . . as to 2 of them . . . the night train from the Gare de Lyon. Many of us who went to the Alps between the wars or in the 40s can recall that long train of coaches variously labelled for Chamonix, Brigue, Venice, Belgrade and ultimately Stamboul, all to be noisily shunted round at Dijon.

In the book, Alain and Jacques are bound for Chamonix on holiday. Alain has a

weakness for the girls and chats up any who enter the carriage at various stations, mainly without success, yet occasionally achieving a near miss.

Jacques is our author his mind on higher things. He broods on the frivolity of his life, the neglect of his family including all those to whom he failed to send a New Year card. In the small hours he is filled with remorse. Happily, after Cluses, along the valley of the Arve, he is distracted from these sombre self-accusations in watching the splendours of the landscape . . . the Alpine meadows, the cascades and the distant snows. Alain sees nothing of these.

They reach Chamonix, not to stay at one of the great tourist hotels, but at an obscure and third-rate Pension (sic) de famille, where hard up young climbers mingle with visitors with large families. The single scruffy maidservant bustles round meeting family requests such as for 17 glasses and one bottle of lemonade. The climbers, a moveable population, sleep 4 to a room, in the corridors, even outside between the barn and the laundry. At times a party leaves for some N face, with 30 kilo sacks, twinkling lanterns and the 'delicate tread of a herd of elephants going to drink at the Limpopo'. (Here I remind our aspirant members that this was the age of nailed boots.)

The third man, Bob, owns what is obviously an old banger and arrives later. At least, he arrives. Before he comes, Alain and Jacques set out . . . after minor crises . . . for a training climb on the Clochetons. At one point, the ever susceptible Alain executes a swift abseil (almost a free fall) to impress some girls on the pinnacles. Plus ça change—I'm reminded of the young John Auldjo, on Mont Blanc in 1827, seeing through his telescope 'some female forms' on the distant Brévent . . . 'a discovery which renewed our courage and excited us to still greater efforts than before'.

As to Chamonix, with its traffic, its shops and its crowds, Jacques finds it picturesque for one day . . . no longer. He comments on the human comedy . . . here a peroxide blonde . . . there a fat woman in loudly flowered dress . . . a family group . . . porters with heavy sacks . . . all moving towards what he calls lechemindefermontenversmerdeglace. And high above this small world of travel agencies, bistros, telescopes, trashy souvenirs and pâtisseries are the hard, grim aiguilles where the clouds drift freely.

The weather is fine and the party sets off for the Couvercle. First on the railway. Here our friends are rather naughty . . . a lady asks for Mont Blanc . . . certainly, madam, there it is, with the Jungfrau just to the side, and the Matterhorn a bit further left.

Then along the glacier, at the *Heure de la marée* so well drawn in *Choucas*, up by the rock steps to the hut. The complete chaos (how well one recalls it) at the hut, is one of the best word pictures in the book. Antoine, the guardian, knows them of old, and unburdens himself about those who don't like his cuisine. He is based on Arthur Ravanel, who succeeded his father 'le rouge', as guardian in 1930.

Here we may gather one of the author's flowers of language '*la cour du Roi Pétaud*'. No, I won't tell you—look it up, as I did, in Larousse.

Later we have the vibrant picture of Aubert and Delaroche, each individually charming, but always at odds when roped together. Yet when Aubert marries, and gives up climbing, Delaroche himself has to pack it in, despairing of ever finding another enemy to climb with.

One chapter of fantasy, *La prison de vide*, was inspired by a dangerous descent of the Droites with his friend Keller. Here the demons of the mountain constantly

tempt the climbers with loose holds and they are (just) saved by the wiser advice of the distant voices of affection.

Bad weather. They tap the hut barometer, re-read the warnings to climbers and skiers posted up by the CAF, dip into the club log book, and eventually decide to return to the valley. At the Monteners they are thoroughly drenched, and having nothing more to lose, descend by the forest paths. All they meet is a bedraggled squirrel and a small girl, under a vast red umbrella, guarding a large cow.

Back at the pension, the library of which 'resembles that of Alexandria after the fire', Alain gets up a 4 for bridge. The ascetic Jacques complains that this game has ruined the art of conversation in France; others contend that to be the main advantage.

Jacques looks over the company of thwarted alpinists. The little chap over there, with an 8-day beard and a shirt worn for the same length of time, is an expert in solitary climbing. He is also a nudist, a vegetarian and a theosophist. The thin boy in spectacles is a talented rock-climber, the only one capable of doing a certain crack at 'bleau, but he needs careful watching when crossing the Mer de Glace. Another youngster with a girlish face is not, as might be thought, a novice, but the conqueror of a dozen N faces.

The bad weather continues. They are driven to visit the Chamonix museum (now closed) and Jacques reflects on the kilogrammes of paint lavished on kilometres of canvas to little effect. Yet he does give Loppé 9 out of 10 for effort and sincerity. The old dame in charge reels off her spiel, 3 pages of the book without a single pause and concluding . . . 'will all please write their names in the golden book of the museum with any remarks suggested by the splendid pictures thank you very much the exit is by the staircase.'

My space is now almost filled . . . I cannot even outline the many other situations in the book, still less deal with Samivel's *L'Opéra de Pics*, *Contes à Pic*, or *Bon Voyage M. Dumollet*.

Finally, in the present edition of *Abîmes*, Samivel has written a preface. Perhaps he might hear from Bob, he of the banger, who is probably now Director of a company making cars or is it refrigerators? Doubtless he has a large family and hundreds of patents to his credit. Alain may well have successfully chatted up a bird at last, made a good marriage, be related to ministers and become slightly condescending. As for the Couvercle, it now has showers! Even if no one uses them, they remain evidence of decadence. Should there be reunions of old comrades? Perhaps not . . . it is best to live with the memories of 30 years ago. True, he wrote *Abîmes*, but has not as yet read it. He now intends to do so.

So I hope some members will follow his example. Better still, persuade a publisher to produce an English translation.

Acknowledgements

To Nea Morin for a very helpful letter. To Samivel for a hilarious correspondence May–November 1979. To Samivel and his publishers for permission to reproduce: (a) drawings from *Sous l'œil des choucas* (Messrs Delagrave), (b) painting (water colour) *Haute Montagne*. (Ed. Mithra Chamonix.)