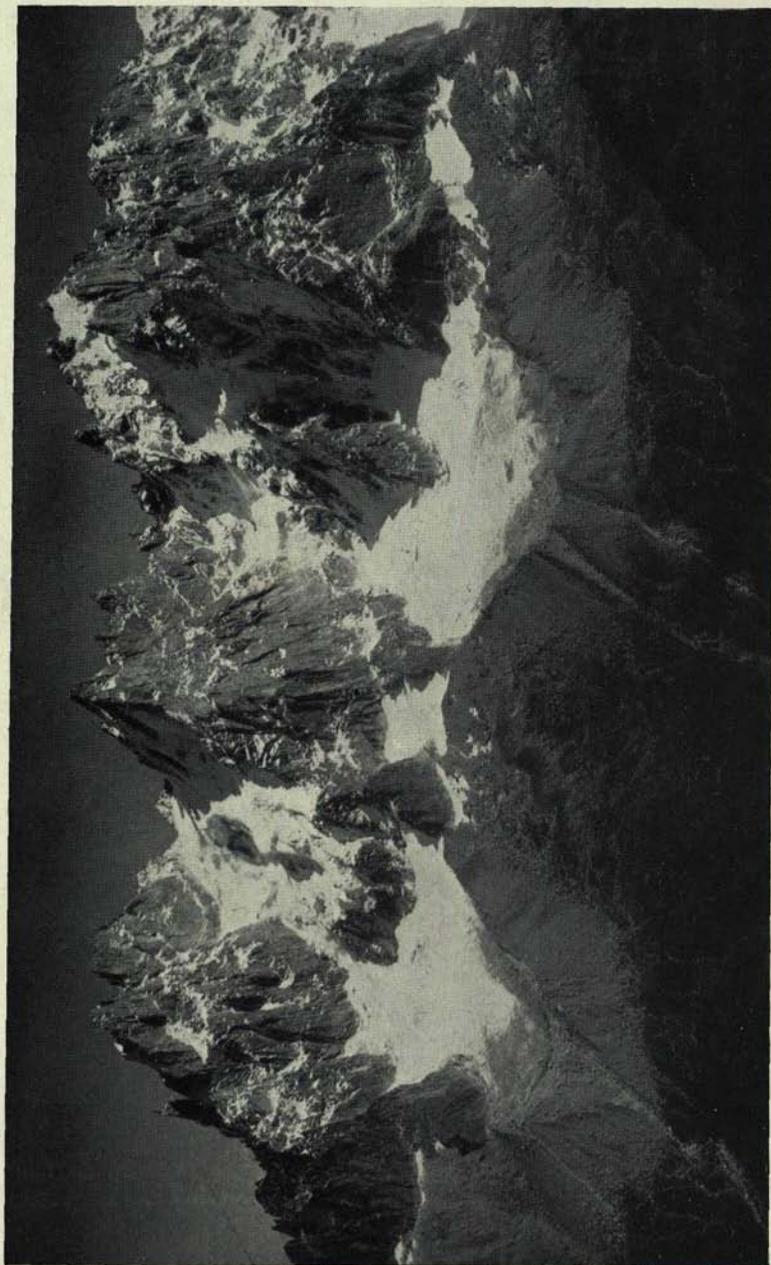


Charmoz-Grépon

Blaitière

Col Blaitière

Plan



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**AIGUILLE de BLAITIÈRE from the West.**

The Glacier Suspendu route mounts the hanging Glacier below the Col Blaitière and then bears upwards to the left, crossing the central ridges near the top of the north face.

*Société Graphique Neuchâtel*

## THE BLAITIÈRE BY THE GLACIER SUSPENDU.

By J. R. JENKINS.

Taylor, Barry and I made our first visit to Chamonix this season with a blissful ignorance of the region and no literature to assist us beyond Kurz' invaluable guide, a dog-eared copy of the Lépineys' "Climbs on Mont Blanc," and a fatherly letter from Brettell. Barry remembered reading somewhere about Mont Blanc and so was able to recognise the Grand Plateau through a clearing in a snow blizzard on the Col de la Brenva. Of course, all of us had read Geoffrey Young's engrossing narrative of the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon. Barry's tribute to romance in proposing the Knubel Chimney in place of the easier Lochmatter Slab was out-voted by a majority of one, but he made the Knubel Crack go without the artificial aids which assisted the first leader.

Dr. Kugy's account in "Alpine Pilgrimage" had sent Barry in the steps of Croux up the great rock-wall guarding the head of the Argentière glacier to the top of Mont Dolent with us. The other peaks climbed in a bout of good weather, sandwiched in the middle of a disastrous season, were chosen because we liked the look of them, and we followed strictly Kurz' dotted lines, trails of rusty sardine tins, bottles and orange peel, the snow steps of previous parties, rotted rope slings and, in the case of the Géant, a chain of mighty hawsers.

We had climbed the Aiguille wall from the east; how about ascending it from the west? The last chapter of Lépineys' book was an incitement, and the weather still held. After speeding the departing Taylor, Barry and I proceeded to the Téléferique station, where we had to wait 2½ hours for the repair of a broken cable—an ill omen! Casual conversation with a guide left us with no delusions as to the reputation of our proposed expedition.

Arrived, slightly sick, at the Station des Glaciers, we had a race with the failing daylight, over boulder slopes and grass, to get a glimpse of our "glacier suspendu" by way of reconnaissance. After this temper-trying rush we reached the Plan de l'Aiguille hotel exasperated (and very much awed) only to find the view was better from there. A surprise meeting with Peacocke, Meade-King and Hodgkinson enheartened us somewhat that evening—literally, as they regaled us with a special brew of hot wine.

We left the communal floor-bed at 3 o'clock next morning, and in a crescendo of bad temper ate a breakfast served by the charming Alphonse, whose ignorance of the seriousness of our intentions aggravated us all the more. Stumbling over boulders and grass in the dark woke us to our senses, and in the half-light Barry flitted off into the distance, leaving me to a progress of solitary cursing. Dawn reached us on the level of the Blaitière glacier with our hanging glacier cupped in a rift in the crags 500 feet above, leering menacingly on us. A scattering of serac debris on the glacier below provided a warning, and this distant examination of the bared teeth of ice caused all high hopes to drain out of our extremities with a definite physical sensation, leaving a sick feeling in the pit of the stomach. The only weakness appeared to be an ice-cleft where the teeth met the rock-jaw on the left, and as nothing could be settled until we had actually rubbed noses with the problem, we roped up.

A snow cone at the base of an incipient couloir on the left gave access to a 150-foot stretch of hard rock work. After crossing the bed of this couloir, we got on to a series of ledges leading upwards to the foot of the serac wall. The topmost ledge ran out into a crack between a flake and the wall, and for a few breathless moments we hoped that we might be able to continue along this line, reaching the hanging glacier above the seracs. Barry, perched on the top of the flake, was disappointed to find a hundred feet of smooth, vertical wall separating us from our goal. We now had no choice, and descending, reached a ledge under the lee of the 60 feet of impending ice, where we strapped on our crampons.

From here, the position appeared hopeless. Our cherished ice-cleft on the left overhung. The whole serac mass appeared to be on the point of tottering over the scarred lip, 500 feet on to the glacier below, and the occasional *whirr* of a falling stone did nothing to improve our morale. An excursion to the right disclosed a narrow ice chimney choked with ice-blocks, which led up to a recessed shelf set in the ice-wall. The blocks came away at a touch, rattling about my ears. More had to be shifted, and in their downward path nearly took me with them, one in particular missing Barry by a hairs-breadth. Then I got jammed, and had to take off my rucksack in an awkward position.

Eventually emerging from the crack on to the shelf, I glanced around. The serac wall above was impossible—the only break being a slanting crack running out under an ominous ice-bulge on the right. Up came the rucksack and Barry, glad

to be out of the line of fire. I set to work hacking rather hopelessly at the crack, but our pecker was up and it had to go. I soon had enough holds, and wedging in, I drew myself up until the ice-bulge was sticking in my chest. At head level was a tiny exposed ledge on to which I had to get my feet. Then I had an idea; burrowing in the rucksack Barry produced an ice-piton which he threw up to me. Hanging on precariously with one hand, I drove the piton into the ice-bulge with the flat of my axe. Steadying myself with the piton, I was now able to leave the crack and make a landing on the little ledge. I still had to get over the bulge and, by reaching up, found holds mercifully weathered in the ice above, which would possibly take a momentary pull. Cutting a toe-hold or two in the bulge I went at it and got up, to our united exultant shouts, thirty feet above Barry in a cave among the seracs.

The crux was passed; in high spirits we scrambled up a comparatively easy oblique ice-crack out of the cave, and incidentally out of danger. From a bay above, we rounded a corner to the right on to the open glacier; our troubles were over, crampons biting on hard snow. A second serac wall above caused us some uneasiness, but a detached snow-covered pinnacle providing a delicate bridge, brought us on to the upper *névé*.

To our right the famous north face of the Plan stretched up to a jagged skyline in ice slopes of alarming steepness. Ahead the Col Blaitière separated the Fou and Caïman, and those inaccessible towers looked within easy striking distance from where we stood. This snow is only crossed by parties attempting the north face of the Plan, the Blaitière from the west, or the Col Blaitière, so we trod carefully, so as not to disturb the sanctity of a place reserved only for a favoured few among these crowded Aiguilles.

We now took to the rocks to the left of, and below the schrund; a chimney, a hard slab to the right and further chimneys leading to a snow shoulder whence the Couloir Regnier stretched up to the final red wall of the Pointe de Chamonix (North peak of the Blaitière) in an unbroken ribbon of hard snow. It was now 8 o'clock and the weather perfect.

We scampered up the steep snow at great speed, now zig-zagging crablike, now toeing it on our front spikes, using the axe-point as a hold. Soon the couloir above narrowed into a steep gully seamed with ice, and just as we were beginning to search for a point to break out to the left, a branch suddenly

disclosed itself and took us panting on to an upper snow shoulder. From this remarkable eyrie our eyes plunged down a great sweep of slabs to a dolls'-house Chamonix below. We were now below the final peak on its south-west side, and a horizontal traverse round it had to be made, as the route finished up the north-east face. Steep snow took us to a brèche between the Pointe Knubel and the main summit, and into brilliant sunshine for the first time that day. Across the Nantillons basin towered the Charmoz and the Grépon, echoing to the shouts of climbing parties.

It was now 9.30, and according to Lépiney we were 87 metres from the top. The north-east face to our right was in the best "Nordwand" tradition, steep ribs intercepted by shallow couloirs, the whole plastered with wind-borne snow and ice. We continued the traverse in some trepidation, and saw that three ribs connected by glazed slabs had to be passed. For the first two a delicate ribbon of snow helped us, but the last brought us to a full stop. Retreat was out of the question, and after much deliberation a line of action came to us. Belaying Barry over a knob of rock, I lowered him like a sack for 20 feet. Then, swinging in an arc, his crampons clawing the thin snow covering, he clutched holds on the next rib. Climbing up to my level, he was able to lower me over the same knob, to repeat the performance. Steep rocks led on up to the left to an ice-filled couloir which gave access to the final rocks. Now the issue was certain. After half an hour's cutting, the rocks above were gained, and we raced to the summit at 11 o'clock.

After a prodigious meal, we dozed blissfully in the hot sun for two hours. Through half-closed eyes we appraised the breaking wave of the Grandes Jorasses, the snow dome of Mont Blanc, the terrifying mass of the Verte, and all around us the pointed spears of Aiguilles. A guided party was straddling the Ciseaux, and figures moved in and out among the Charmoz and Grépon crags.

A care-free scramble down the north-east arête landed us among the crowd on the Rognon. A boastful party of guides were exchanging experiences. "What had we done?"

"The Blaitière."

"Ah, le Blaitière. Par quelle route?"

"Par le Glacier Suspendu."

"Par le Glacier Suspendu!"

The amazed looks on their faces made up the sum total of our satisfaction.