

## THE CHAMONIX MEET, 1957

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The plan adopted for the main party was to walk from Martigny to Chamonix over the Col du Tour, climbing the Aiguille du Tour en route, and the Chardonnet from Cabane Albert 1<sup>er</sup>, to spend a few days at the Couvercle Hut where we had arranged a rendezvous with Norman Cochran's advanced climbing party and hoped to borrow some leaders for our much less experienced party, and to finish by traversing Mont Blanc and, if time permitted, climb Mont Tondu and Dôme de Miage as well. Only the first day went according to plan.

The eight members of the party who set off from Martigny on Sunday, 21st July, were met at Champex Lac by the Swiss guide Xavier Kalt and a young "aspirant," Romeo Bex, whom he had brought along for experience the first week and to help with the larger party during the second week. On the walk up to Cabane de Trient a heavy snowstorm began and we reached the hut in a blizzard. This lasted through the night and most of the next day, leaving some eighty centimetres of new snow and making the next week's programme impossible.

On Tuesday morning the snow had stopped but a thick mist over the glacier reduced visibility to about fifty yards. However, at 8 a.m. the party set off on a compass course for the Col du Tour, Romeo ploughing a furrow for the first rope and Xavier giving the course from the third rope. The smaller crevasses were all thickly covered and hardly distinguishable, but some large ones had to be crossed or avoided. After such a divergence from course Xavier frequently shouted "appuyez à gauche" (or "à droite") to which Romeo invariably responded with a sharp left turn (or right turn). It transpired later that Romeo, although a French-speaking Swiss, did not understand the meaning of "appuyer." Nonetheless, we made a good landfall on the Col du Tour and found much better weather on the other side. The Chardonnet in its thick white mantle looked magnificent but was quite unclimbable and we had to content ourselves with some fine photographs of the peak taken from Cabane Albert Premier as the sun set that evening. Throughout the afternoon we had frequent close views of a small helicopter engaged in a regular air-lift of building material from the valley to the site of a new hut. The round trip took ten minutes and the pilot obligingly took down to the valley not only our mail but even some rucksacks !

It was decided to cross to the Aiguilles Rouges and get some rock climbing there until the Mont Blanc massif was in better condition. We crossed the Col du Passon and walked down the Glacier

d'Argentière to Lognan and Chamonix. The following morning seven of the party set off for La Persévérance and enjoyed an excellent climb and a very spectacular descent. The "fatigue party" after completing necessary errands in Chamonix walked up to the hut at the Lac Blanc and were in time to savour the rappels on the Persévérance by telescope.

Sleep that night was almost impossible. This hut must be very uncomfortable when it contains merely its nominal full complement, but on this occasion there were about three times that number trying to get in. Floors, benches, tables, and even some high shelves were entirely covered by bodies. The conditions at least favoured an early start next morning and daybreak saw several long caravans winding their way up to the Belvédère which, alas, was our objective too. Mont Blanc and its attendant peaks were still wrapped in cottonwool clouds, but the weather was obviously improving and we decided to return to Chamonix the next day, after a short climb on the Index—a steep rock spike above La Flégère with a good ridge and some pleasant abseiling.

In Chamonix on Saturday evening, three more people joined the meet and for the second week we numbered twelve, plus Xavier and Romeo. Xavier served us well, not only on the climbs but also in planning how best to take advantage of the weather despite, when in the valley, having a taste for the best hotels !

On Sunday the party walked up to the Couvercle Hut, which we shared that night with only four other climbers and the warden's family and niece. The latter deserves special mention for her beautiful voice and excellent repertoire of English, French and Italian songs and for the charm which was certainly not lost on one member of the party. This was an evening which will long be remembered.

Next morning we set off for the Nonne, having been told that another party had already been over this route the previous day. Their tracks did not go beyond the *brèche* however, and the final section of the climb, the traverse of the ridge, and the descent were made much more difficult and in places somewhat dangerous by the remaining large masses of new snow. For some two hundred feet the

ridge between the Nonne and the Evêque is knife sharp and very exposed, especially on the side which falls down towards the Mer de Glace. Everyone chose to take this section *à cheval*. The rimaye, when we reached it, was rather insecurely bridged and had to be taken at high speed *à dos*.

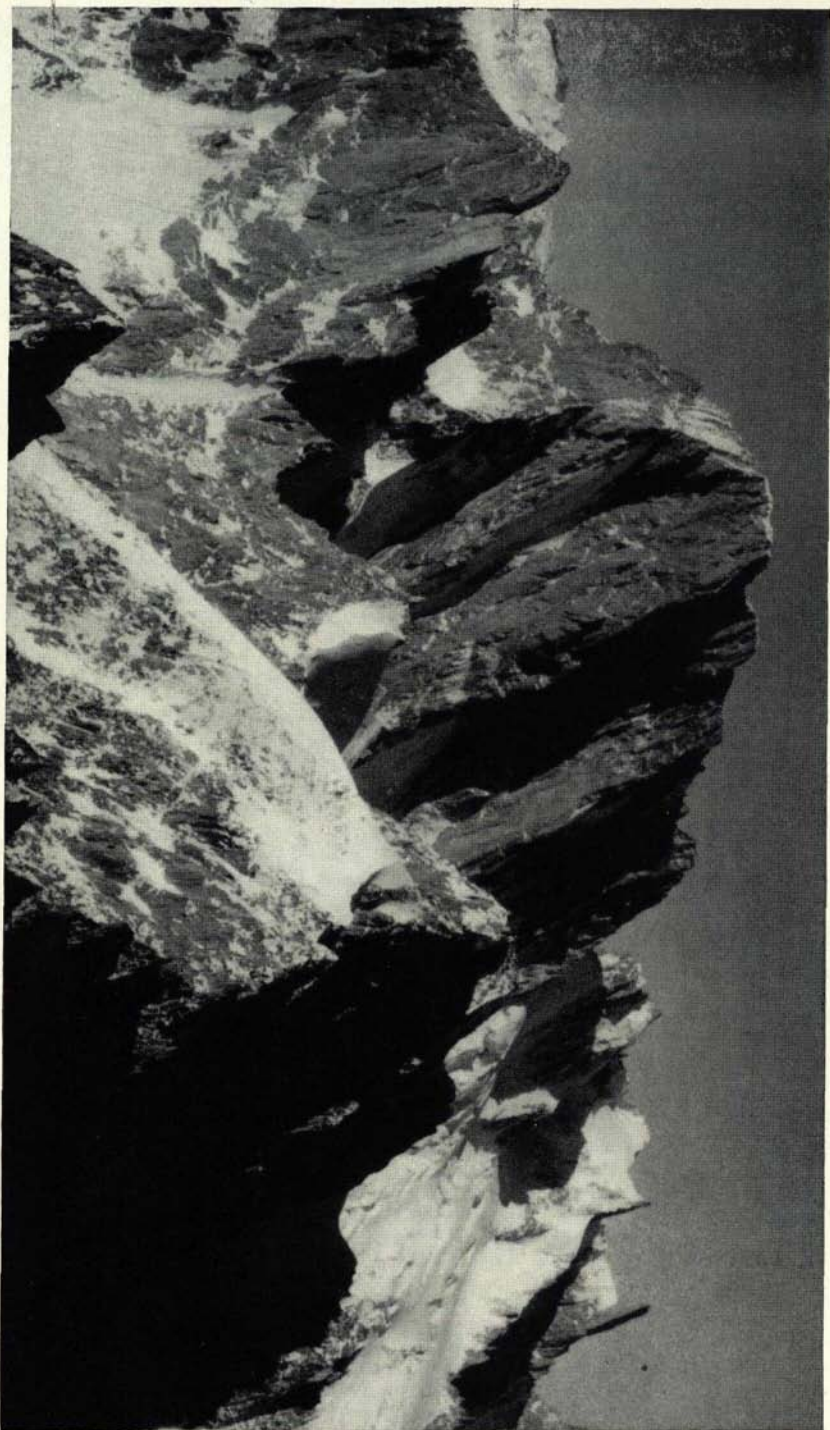
We had discovered that Xavier was an instructor in mountaineering technique to the Swiss army and since about half the party had little or no previous Alpine experience, we asked him to set aside one day for instruction in snow and ice technique and in rope technique. The second day at the Couvercle was spent in this way, first on the glacier and later on a convenient slab of rock and everyone seemed to feel that it had been well worth while.

More than a week of fairly good weather had now passed since the heavy snowfall, and it was possible to include Mont Blanc in the programme again. We decided therefore to cut short our stay in the Couvercle—comfort and *affaires de coeur* notwithstanding—and return to Chamonix on Wednesday afternoon. On Wednesday morning three ropes of three set off at 3 a.m. for a snow climb to the Pointe Isabelle. The morning was perfect and snow conditions very good for cramponning so Xavier set a cracking pace and we reached the summit well ahead of a party of *Chasseurs Alpins* who had left the hut immediately after us. It is true that they had their Colonel with them. The descent was even more rapid and we stopped for breakfast not far from the hut at about 9.30 a.m.

In Chamonix that evening we got our first news of Norman Cochran's party but they were not to be in Chamonix till next day so we did not see them. We also telephoned the Cabane du Goûter (all modern conveniences) to warn them of the impending arrival of our party of twelve, a precaution which led to our being given the old hut almost to ourselves next night—a doubtful advantage, however. The evening at Cabane du Goûter was one to be remembered. It was August 1st—the Swiss national day—and from the Aiguille du Goûter we looked hopefully into Switzerland for fireworks, while Xavier regaled us with historical anecdotes. The sun set above a sea of clouds which the 11,000 ft. peaks below us were just able to pierce. Breakfast the next morning was not a leisurely affair and we got away about 3.30 a.m.

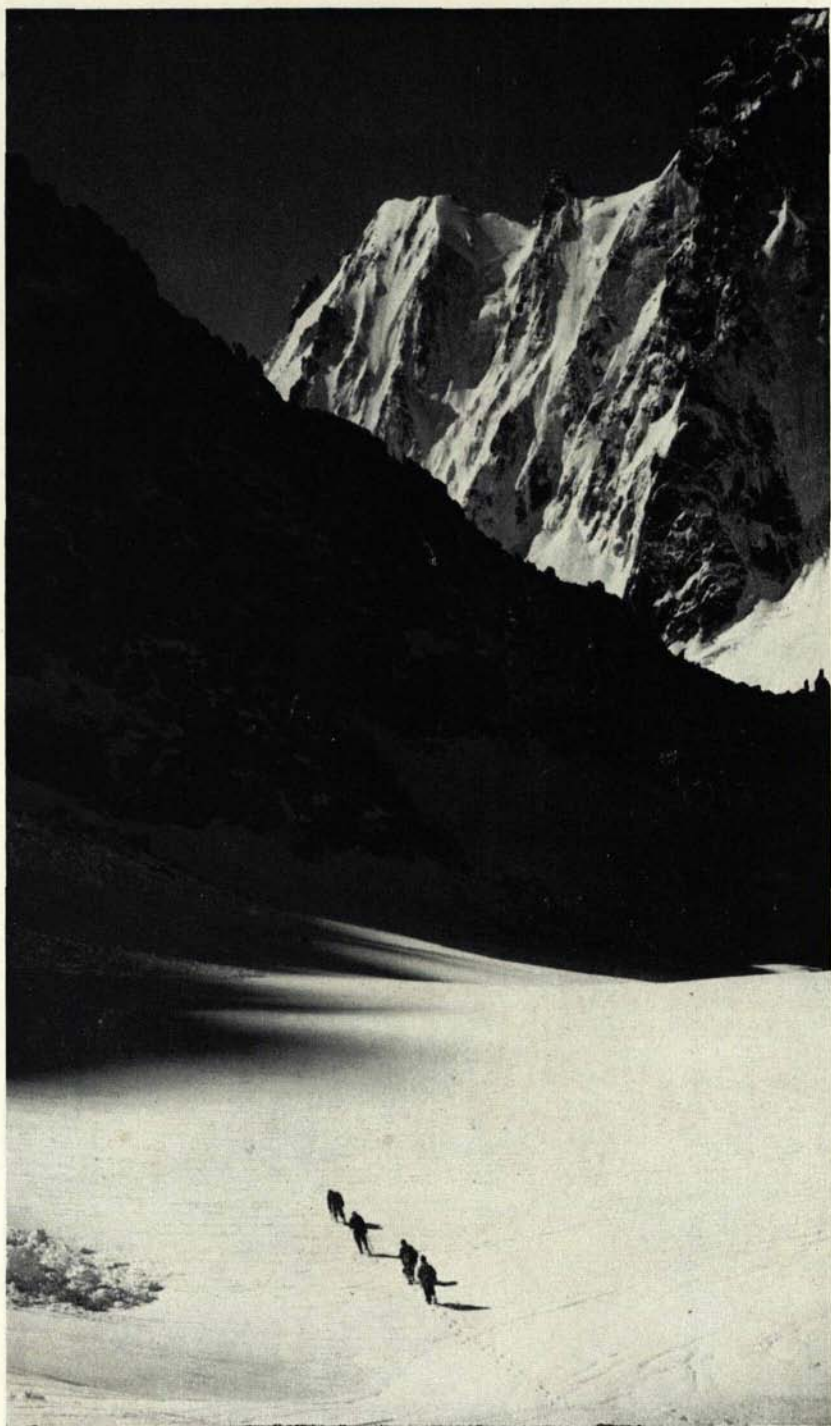
The route ahead was pinpointed here and there by the lanterns of earlier parties. Xavier was not content with his place in the queue and his rope was presently to be seen wallowing at high speed through soft snow at the side of the "piste" as it passed some relatively aged or infirm party. On this classical and technically easy route up Mont Blanc one is not surprised to meet some tourists who would be going by *téléférique* if there was one, but it seemed odd that one couple should have reached the Gouter Hut almost by accident, and without food, and only then decided to bag the peak !

Only one member of our party suffered from altitude sickness and had to await us at the Vallot Hut, but all were considerably affected by the intensely cold wind, which prevented our really enjoying the brief summit rest or indulging in much photography in spite of the splendid views in all directions. We descended via the Grands Mulets and thence, in leisurely fashion, to Chamonix. Though our achievements had been even more modest than our plans, they had at least been enjoyable and we had all gained much useful Alpine experience.



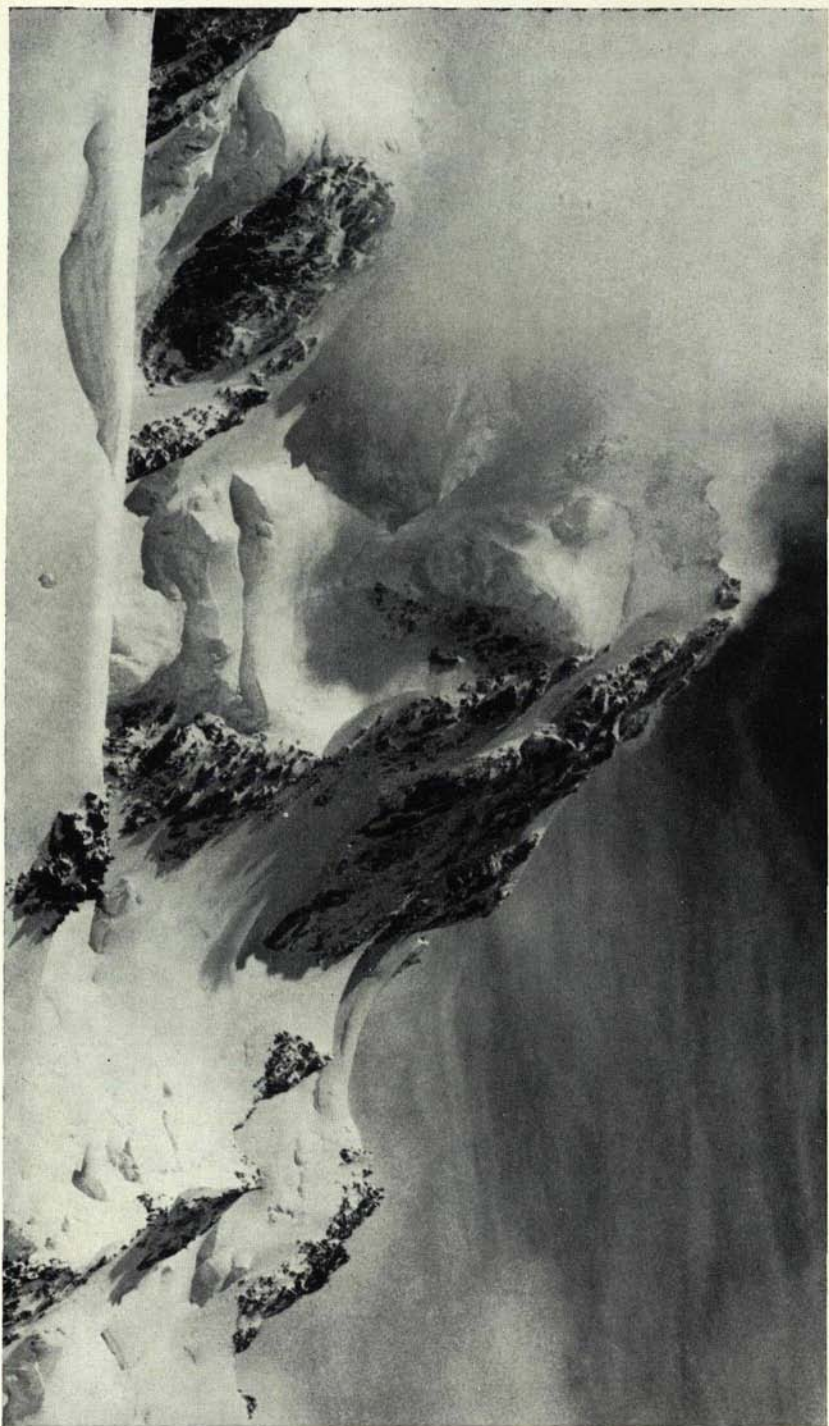
*Les Grandes Jorasses*

*D. G. Smith*



*Glacier du Passon*

*D. G. Smith*



*Aiguille du Chardonnet*

*D. G. Smith*