

ALPINE STUDIES

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The second ascent of the Meije (1878)

Alpine Journal, February 1879.

One bright summer morning in August 1877, shortly after my return from an unusually short holiday among the mountains, a foreign post-card was placed in my hands, which proved to contain the startling news of the conquest of the Meije on the 16th of that month by M. E. Boileau de Castelnau, whom I had met at La Bérarde some three weeks previously. As this card was written to me by my friend M. Paul Guillemain, from Vallouise, on his return thither from the inauguration of the Refuge Cézanne, on the Pré de Madame Carle, and countersigned by M. de Castelnau and several other French friends, it was impossible to doubt its genuineness, though I was on my guard, remembering the great "M. Stewenart" hoax of the preceding autumn, which also related to the Meije. This intelligence was all the more startling to me, because I had just spent two days examining the southern or Etançons face of the mountain, by which M. de Castelnau was said to have made his ascent, had made an attempt from the Brèche de la Meije along the western arête, and I had quitted Dauphiné fully convinced that if ever the Meije was climbed, it would be along that eastern arête which is so formidable in appearance, and which [till 1885] actually proved so in reality (see the accompanying illustration). Unfortunately, before M. de Castelnau was able to draw up a narrative of his ascent he was called away to serve his "volontariat" in the French army, and his time was too much taken up by his military duties to allow him to satisfy the great curiosity and interest which his remarkable exploit had excited in Alpine circles. M. Jullien, the Secretary of the Société des Touristes du Dauphiné, sent me a few particulars gathered from M. de Castelnau himself, and these, together with the tantalisingly meagre notice sent by M. de Castelnau to his own Club,¹ were published in the *Alpine Journal* for November 1877.²

It was perhaps to be expected that under these circumstances some doubts as to the reality of the ascent should be expressed ; and,

though not sharing in them myself, they confirmed me in the project which I had at once formed for the next summer of attempting to repeat the expedition, thinking that as I could not be the first on the summit, it was better to be second than nowhere.

Time passed on. M. de Castelnau sent me a few lines, promising an article for the *May Journal*, which promise, however, he was unable to fulfil ; and as a strike of the Paris printers delayed the appearance of the *Annuaire* of the French Alpine Club till late in the summer,³ the honour of publishing the first connected account of the ascent fell to the *Durance*, a newspaper of Embrun, the Alpine portion of which is superintended by M. Paul Guillemain. It published in the number for May 19, 1878, a narrative taken down from the lips of Pierre Gaspard (père), the leading guide of M. de Castelnau, which is very pleasing in its modesty and simplicity. On my way through Paris a month later (June 26) I called in at the rooms of the French Club in the Rue Bonaparte in hopes of getting my copy of the *Annuaire*. I did not succeed in attaining my object, but I got something which was more immediately valuable and useful, viz. early proofs of M. de Castelnau's article, for which I beg to offer my best thanks to the authorities of the French Club. Armed with these, I left Paris that evening, and rejoined my guides (Christian Aimer and his second son Christian) next day (June 27) at St. Michel, on the Mont Cenis road. After an attempt at exploration (June 28-9) round the Aiguilles d'Arves, which was defeated by bad weather and the great quantity of snow still on the mountains, I reached La Grave by the Col de Martignare (8531 ft.) on June 30. I need scarcely remind my readers that the Meije rises in all its magnificence just south of the village, or that La Grave has been the starting-point for most of the attempts made to scale that peak. We looked eagerly for the cairns on the summit, but were unable to distinguish them, because, as we later discovered, they were almost buried in snow. As I said before, I had quite made up my mind to be second on top, and I had fancied that so early in

¹ Published in the Troisième Bulletin Trimestriel du C. A. F., 1877, p. 303.

² Pages 328, 329.

³ M. de Castelnau's article will be found in vol. iv. (1877), pp. 282-94.

the season I should have the field to myself ; but as soon as I reached La Grave I heard of several mountaineers, whom I looked on as dangerous rivals, and who were reported to be already on the spot, or were shortly expected. Consequently, after crossing the Col de l'Homme (11,287 ft.) on July 1, we hurried over the Brèche de Charrière (10,699 ft.) from Alpe to La Béarde on July 3, where we found ourselves alone. There was still so much snow on the Meije, owing to the lateness of the season, that we were compelled, however reluctantly, to postpone our attack, and had to content ourselves with little else (on July 5 we went up the Sommet des Rouies, 11,923 ft.) than mounting guard at La Béarde.

At length my patience was exhausted, and we camped out in the Vallon des Etançons on July 7 ; but next morning the weather was undecided, and, as we had resolved to start only if it was "beau fixe," we returned with heavy hearts to La Béarde. I should not have mentioned this abortive attempt were it not that we discovered on this occasion a bivouac which is far more sheltered and roomy than the great boulder (on the "oasis") known as the Hôtel du Châtelieret, the usual camping place in the Vallon des Etançons. It is situated almost immediately opposite, on the western side of the valley, and consists of a deep recess in the cliffs, which affords space for a large party, and is *perfectly* sheltered from rain. The opening is only partially seen from below. It is a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes from the Châtelieret, and is strongly recommended.

On July 9 the weather seemed more promising ; we bivouacked again in the spot just mentioned, and lay down to rest with every prospect that our patience was at last about to be rewarded.

In order to make what follows clear to my readers, I must ask their attention for a few minutes while I endeavour to give them some idea of the appearance of the Meije as seen from the south side, that is, from the head of the Vallon des Etançons.

The main ridge of the Meije runs very nearly E. and W., and is crowned by four principal peaks, overhanging the Glacier des Etançons, which are (from E. to W.) the Pavé, rather to the S.E. of the highest ridge (3831 mètres = 12,570 ft.), so called from the singular arrangement of the blocks of a moraine on the Glacier des Cavales at its S. base, a rocky point. Beyond a rather deep depression [the Brèche Maximin

Gaspard, 12,435 ft.] we see the Pic Oriental of the Meije (3911 mètres = 12,832 ft.), climbed by M. Duhamel in 1878, and then the sharp pinnacle of the Pic Central (3970 mètres = 13,026 ft), which leans over to the south in an extraordinary fashion, as shown on our illustration, and from here, as from many points, seems to claim the supremacy. It was first climbed from La Grave, June 28, 1870, by my aunt, the late Miss Brevoort, and myself.⁴ Farther to the left, or west, is a very jagged arête in which four great rocky teeth may be distinguished ; and then rises, though not very steeply, the true summit of the range, known as the Grand Pic de la Meije (3987 mètres = 13,081 ft.), the whole being one of the most splendid mountain masses known to me.

I will now go on to describe the south face more in détail in order that my readers may follow my route. The north and south sides of the Grand Pic are precipices, pure and simple ; it is probably possible to descend the east side to the first gap [the Brèche Zsigmondy] in the ridge leading towards the Pic Central ; on the west side, however, our peak is more accessible, for a comparatively gentle slope falls down to a large snow-field known as the Glacier Carré. Below the Glacier Carré a sheer precipice falls very nearly to the Glacier des Etançons. Above the Glacier Carré, and separated by a gap [the Brèche du Glacier Carré] from the Grand Pic, is the Pic du Glacier Carré (3860 mètres = 12,665 ft.), beyond which is the sharp, double-pronged pinnacle called "Le Doigt." Following the ridge towards the west, we come next to the "Epaule," or "Petit Doigt d'Epaule," while a long way farther down, to the left of a slight notch, is the "Petit Doigt." Thence we descend to the large depression of the Brèche de la Meije, beyond which the ridge rises again to form the fine peak of the Râteau.⁵

From the base of the "Doigt," and a short way west of the Glacier Carré, a long and jagged spur stretches to the south, cutting the Glacier des Etançons into two parts. This seems to offer the natural route to the summit ; but its appearance is so forbidding that it long deterred every one from trying it. It is, however, by this

⁴ *Alpine Journal*, vol. v. pp. 130-1.

⁵ A map constructed from observations taken on the spot in 1878, by my friend M. Duhamel [appeared in 1879 in the *A. J.*, vol. ix., opposite p. 293]. It is the first *accurate* map of this group which has been published, and contains numerous corrections of the existing maps.

way that the only two recorded attempts on the south side of the mountain, and the three successful ascents of the highest peak, have been made. On September 27, 1876, M. Duhamel, starting from the route of the Brèche de la Meije, attacked this buttress from the west, and succeeded in gaining its crest, but was only able to advance a very short way farther ; he estimates his highest point at about 3480 mètres, which is probably too high.⁶ M. de Castelnaud, on August 4, 1877, by the same route reached a higher point, estimated at about 3485 mètres.⁷

Finally, a few days later, August 16, 1877, M. de Castelnaud, with the two Pierre Gaspards, père et fils, succeeded in reaching the highest summit⁸ by this route, which was also followed by my party on July 10, 1878, and by MM. Guillemin and A. Salvador de Quatrefages, with the two Gaspards, on August 12, 1878. In each case the crest of the southern buttress was attained, the wall climbed rather to the west of the precipices below the Glacier Carré, the Glacier Carré reached and crossed, and the final peak climbed from the west.

After this long digression I will now resume the narrative of my own ascent. The night of July 9 was fine, and at 3.20 A.M. on the 10th, while it was yet dark, we left our bivouac, carrying, in addition to a good stock of provisions, a rope of 100 ft., besides our usual one of 40 ft., as M. de Castelnaud was reported to have left two ropes on the way, which would probably not be in good condition after a winter's exposure. Never had I been in a greater state of nervous excitement on starting for any ascent than on this occasion. The Meije had exercised, and indeed still exercises, the same strange influence over me which the Matterhorn had on its early explorers ; and though I knew I could trust my two faithful guides, yet I scarcely dared hope that it would be given me to attain the much desired summit. We followed the usual route to the Brèche de la Meije, stopping 10 min. at the edge of the Glacier des Etançons to put on our gaiters and to admire the sunrise. This time the weather could not have been more perfect. We skirted the base of the great southern buttress, and shortly after, at 5.20, reached the point on the glacier to its west, where the climb was to begin. This is on the

right of a small tongue of rock projecting into the glacier. The vertical height of the Meije above us was about 850 mètres (2789 ft). Here we made our final preparations, leaving a "cache" of provisions after the scanty breakfast which was all our excitement would allow us to swallow. We hoped to be back again about 9 P.M., and to return to our bivouac by moonlight. Little did we know that 29 hrs. (of which about 19 were spent in active exertion) were to elapse before our return to the glacier !

At 5.40 A.M. we started on our adventures. Our first object was to attain the crest of the great southern buttress, from which a couloir partly filled with snow ran down towards us; but, unfortunately, between the end of the couloir and the glacier there is a wall of steep rocks. This, the first difficulty, was surmounted by a rather rough scramble, after which we mounted steadily, but without hurrying ourselves, by the route followed by our predecessors. At 7.15 (*i.e.* 1 hr. 35 min. from the glacier) we reached the small cairn built by M. Duhamel in 1876 to mark what was practically his highest point. M. de Castelnaud took 1 hr. 15 min., having already traversed this portion of the ascent on his attempt a few days before his victory. We had thus accomplished, without great difficulty, about one-third of the total height of the Grand Pic above the glacier. At 7.30 A.M., after leaving a bottle of wine there for our return, we started, casting anxious looks towards the precipitous rocky wall, above which peered the end of the Glacier Carré. The first steps lay over broken rocks, and then we struck to the right across steep rocks to the upper edge of the higher of two patches of snow. After that we mounted more or less in a straight line to a point above the "Epaule," and a short distance to the west of the Glacier Carré, passing by M. de Castelnaud's second rope, a short way below it. It will thus be seen that we did not mount the rocky wall immediately under the Glacier Carré, but kept to the rather less steep rocks to its left, or west. My readers probably know from their own experience how difficult it is to describe minutely a climb up rocks ; at any rate, I do not propose to enter into a detailed account of the successive difficulties against which we had to struggle. Suffice it to say, that though the rocks are extremely steep, it is generally possible to find crannies wherein the tips of one's fingers and one's toes may be inserted. In fact, on the *ascent*, I was surprised to find that I got on much better than I had imagined, though I am bound

⁶ Annuaire du Club Alpin Français, 1876, iii. pp. 336-7.

⁷ *IKd.*, 1877, 17. pp. 284-6.

⁸ Annuaire du Club Alpin Français, 1877, iv. 287-94.

to add that perhaps my expectations had been raised too high. It will appear later that this favourable opinion was materially altered on the *descent*. I hasten, however, to remove any impression I may have created that the climb is comparatively easy. It seemed easier to me than I had imagined ; but even so, it ranks with, and even surpasses in length and *continuous* difficulty, the most difficult mountains with which I am acquainted.

It is probable that we followed precisely the same route as M. de Castelnau. Indeed, as far as I can judge, there is little or no room for variations. One can just get up the rocks, and that is about all that can be said for them. I cannot refrain from putting it on record in this place, that Aimer never *once* retraced his steps during the whole of this difficult ascent ; and, in fact, led as if he were perfectly acquainted with the best route, though of course this was the first time he had ever been on the south face of this mountain.

Finally, after much toil and labour, we reached, at 9.45, the point to the west of the Glacier Carré to which I have before referred (c. 3700 mètres); 2 hrs. 15 min., as against M. de Castelnau's 2 hrs. 45 min. We were now at the spot whence a few steps over scree would have led us to the crest of the main west arête, whence La Grave can be seen. We were, however, too much absorbed in our endeavour to reach the summit to make this *détour*, which M. de Castelnau describes. We could not, however, refrain from admiring a very grand aiguille of bare rock on the arête below us. I believe it to be that part of the Epaule called the Petit Doigt d'Epaule, at the west base of which I was driven back on July 22, 1877, as will be described later on. It is engraved, from a photograph taken by M. Duhamel, at page 331 of vol. ii. (1875) of the *Annuaire of the French Alpine Club*. We made another attack on our provisions here, which was very welcome after our severe exertions, and leaving a second "cache" resumed the ascent at 10.10, after 25 minutes' halt, in a joyful frame of mind, since we knew from M. de Castelnau's experience that there were no more serious difficulties to be overcome till quite near the top. To reach the Glacier Carré we had to traverse some smooth rocks at a considerable incline, and covered with a slight coating of snow. This "trajet" of 10 minutes was not very hard, although from below we had always imagined it would prove very tough ; indeed, after our return to the

valley, and even at this very moment, I cannot understand how we got across, although I cannot recall any special difficulty. This is an extreme case of the exaggerated steepness of rocks when examined from a distance. We now found ourselves on a small platform at the south-west extremity of the Glacier Carré. It was here that my friends, MM. Guillemin and Salvador de Quatrefages, spent the night after their ascent. M. Guillemin also gathered on this spot three plants, the names of which may interest the botanical members of the Club. They are : *Linaria Alpina*, *Androsace glacialis*, and *A. Charpentieri*.⁹

We entered on the glacier at 10.20, and could scarcely believe we were actually treading what we had so long looked at with eager eyes. We mounted straight up it, first keeping close to the base of the Doigt, and then to that of the Pic du Glacier Carré. We gained a glimpse of La Grave from the gap [the Brèche du Doigt] between the Doigt and the Pic du Glacier Carré, and another from that [the Brèche du Glacier Carré] between the Pic du Glacier Carré and the Grand Pic. At 11.5 we had reached the base of the rocks of the final peak, *i.e.* 45 minutes from the south-west end. M. de Castelnau took the same time, and M. Guillemin's party 55 minutes. This glacier is not a glacier properly so called—at least we could not see any crevasses—but is rather a large field of snow or névé. At the time of our visit there was still an enormous quantity of soft snow. The inclination is much greater than we had imagined from below. M. de Castelnau puts it at 45°.

The lower portion of the final peak consists of rocks, which can be called easy only by comparison with those previously climbed ; and it seemed to us that M. de Castelnau had made too light of them. Still we advanced rapidly until we reached the base of the last pinnacle, which Gaspard calls the "Chapeau du Capucin." It rises sheerly (for a great deal more than the 10 mètres of which M. de Castelnau speaks) above the face we had been climbing, some-thing like the last bit of the Matterhorn above the Zermatt face. It was here that M. de Castelnau spent a long time searching for the way, and we did pretty much the same thing. It was obviously impossible to climb straight up. To the left stretched the main

⁹ M. Guillemin writes to me (Jarmay 8, 1879) that a more careful examination has led him to the conclusion that the two last-named plants are really *Myosotis nana* and *Saxifraga oppositifolia*.

west arête ; and we gathered from M. de Castelnaud's description (which I here read aloud) that he had gained the crest at some point or another. But the question was, which was this point ? We saw a small rocky pinnacle on the arête, to the right of which the rocks literally overhung their base ; to the left was a narrow gully of most uninviting appearance, filled with just enough snow to make it dangerously slippery, which led up to a slight depression in the arête. M. de Castelnaud's highest rope was nowhere to be seen. I really thought for some time that we would have to return discomfited ; but our gallant leader went off to explore, and by-and-by came across the abandoned rope, which the wind had carried over to the La Grave side, where it was found rolled up in a heap of snow. Greatly encouraged we managed to crawl up the aforesaid gully, which did *not* belie its appearance, and reached the crest of the arête. Gaspard's narrative had led me to believe that his party descended from the arête on to the slope facing La Grave, and had so gained the summit from the north. But there was now altogether too much snow on that side to allow of its ascent ; and we were forced, after circumventing the rocky pinnacle mentioned above, to keep along the crest of the arête.¹⁰ This was far from easy ; but the top was now in full view, and our blood was up. Soon the ridge melted into a slope composed of rocky fragments, and at 1.20 P.M. we found ourselves standing by the side of the two cairns erected by M. de Castelnaud. We had taken 2 hrs. 15 min. from Glacier Carré, as against M. de Castelnaud's 2 hrs., and M. Guillemin's 1 hr. 45 min.

It was a moment of my life which I can never forget. Yet my feelings were very mixed. The pleasure of having attained a long-wished-for goal was very great, but at the same time my thoughts recurred involuntarily to my companion [my dear aunt, the late Miss Brevoort, who died December 19, 1876] on many expeditions in Dauphiné, one of whose most cherished wishes it had been to stand on this lofty pinnacle, a wish which was doomed to remain ever unsatisfied. These conflicting emotions, added to great physical fatigue, incapacitated me, I regret to say, from profiting as much as I had hoped by my short stay on the top. The following details, however, may be of interest. The summit consists of a short ridge,

¹⁰ MM. Guillemin and S. de Quatrefages also adopted this route..

running nearly due east and west, and is composed of rocks,¹¹ which on the north side are very disintegrated, and slope away gently at first, but on the south fall sheerly away. The ridge, in fact, is unexpectedly broad and strewn with loose rocks, with which M. de Castelnaud had built two cairns, which the great accumulation of snow on the north side had prevented us from distinguishing when at La Grave. We added a third more to the east, and left a fragment of a red flag, brought from the Sommet des Rouies, and my pocket-handkerchief, which we later clearly made out from La Grave. The handkerchief was restored to me by M. Guillemin at the "Fête du Lautaret" on August 14. I shall, no doubt, be asked what I saw from the top ; but I am ashamed to say that I paid but little attention to the view. The Meije, in my eyes, had been a mountain to be climbed for its own sake, and not for the sake of the view—a fault or merit which I cannot attribute to many other mountains. Besides, there were really some light mists about, which interfered with the view. M. Guillemin informs me that he enjoyed a most splendid panorama. I can recollect seeing La Grave at an enormous depth below, but we could not distinguish the people before M. Juge's hôtel, as M. de Castelnaud succeeded in doing. But there was one object which could not fail to arrest my attention—the Pic Central, on which I had stood eight years before, which from this point assumes a most extraordinary appearance, and leans over towards the Glacier des Etançons in a more crazy manner than usual, which is saying a good deal. It is a marvellous sight, and seemed to overtop us, though when on it the Grand Pic in its turn had seemed the higher. The French map attributed 17 mètres, or 55 ft., more to the Grand Pic. We also scanned with curious eyes the ridge which lay between us and the Pic Central ; it looked even more hopeless and forbidding than before, the teeth being most formidable. Almer, indeed, descended a short way towards the first gap [the Brèche Zsigmondy] towards the east, and declared that it would not be impossible to descend into it ; but the tooth [now the Pic Zsigmondy] which rises above it is very steep, if not indeed perpendicular, and would, I fear, baffle even that member of the Club who is most gifted with fly-like capacities of climbing.

¹¹ M. Guillemin informs me he found two «pecies of rocks on the summit granitoid gneiss, and protogine containing white orthoclase.

But time flew rapidly by, and after a hasty dinner, and leaving my card in a bottle (as far as I can recollect), we began the descent at 2.10 P.M., after 50 minutes' stay on the summit. We followed exactly the same route as on the ascent, but we found the descent to the highest ridge much more difficult than the ascent, and besides, the excitement of the climb had nearly passed away. It was not till 3.15 P.M. that we reached M. de Castelnau's highest rope, which we carried off as a proof of the reality of our ascent. We worked down the rocks slowly and steadily, and at 4.40 regained the Glacier Carré. Treading in our old steps, and going very cautiously, owing to the deep soft snow, we took to the rocks again at the spot which was to form the camping place of MM. Guillemin and Salvador de Quatrefages a month later, and reached our first "cache" of provisions at the point above the Epaule at 5.15. In order to prepare ourselves for the terrible descent of the wall, we made a last onslaught on the contents of the knapsacks, hoping to regain by nightfall our chief dépôt on the Glacier des Etançons. We set off again at 5.30 P.M. The rocks had seemed difficult, though not excessively so, on the ascent ; on the descent, as rocks always are, they were ten times worse ; and as in addition to unusual fatigue, owing to my half-trained condition, I was further handicapped by my short sight, I was only able to advance very slowly. The descent of this wall will always remain in my mind as the most arduous and terrible pièce of climbing it has ever fallen to my lot to perform. When I say this, I am speaking deliberately, and in the conviction that I am not exaggerating the impression it made on me. Those who may follow may very possibly think that I have rated the difficulty too high. This *may* certainly be the case ; it is notorious that descriptions of rock climbs rarely satisfy every one. All I do now is to record *my own* experience on these rocks. Little by little we gave up all hopes of reaching the Glacier des Etançons that evening ; but we still fondly imagined that we might reach M. Duhamel's cairn, where we had left a bottle of wine. But even this was denied us. As soon as dusk came on, my eyes as usual gave out ; and at 9.30 P.M. (after a day of more than 18 hours) we resolved to spend the night where we were.¹²

¹² We were about two-thirds of the way down from the Glacier Carré to M. Duhamel's cairn, say 3560 mètres = 11,680 ft. M. de Castelnau states that the spot where he passed the night was 15 or 20 mètres above

This spot was a very small platform—a shelf in the rocks, perhaps 12 feet by 4. There was a projecting knob on which I sat, or tried to sit, but the two men could only sit with their legs over the precipice, and we found it of mutual advantage that they should lean against me, by which means we were all warmer than we should otherwise have been. One very small bit of cold meat was discovered in the knapsack, but beyond this we had literally nothing either to eat or drink, not being able even to get any snow to slake our burning thirst. We hoped that when the moon rose we could go on, but envious clouds covered her with few intermissions; and Almer thought it wiser not to move, as we might not succeed in finding another spot as suitable (alas ! only by comparison) as this. We tried to tie ourselves to the rock by the rope, but we could not find any projecting point that would do, so we could not venture to go to sleep, and tried to enliven each other by telling stories and singing songs. But the exertions of the day had told on us, and one after another we dropped off into uneasy slumbers, only to be awakened by our alarmed companions. Fortunately we did not have to stand the terrific storm to which M. de Castelnau and his companions were exposed. The night was fine—though once or twice a few flakes of snow fell—but bitterly cold. It was the first time I had ever been caught by night, at such a great height, without having any covering or food ; and this will help to grave the incidents of this ascent in my memory. At one time the cold was so intense that I thought I must succumb to it, and it was only by vigorous rubbing that my limbs were restored to animation. Towards sunrise a small keen wind came on, which filled up the measure of our troubles. The sun rose in clouds, and it was only at 4.40 A.M. that we dared to start. We were dread-fully cramped, and much exhausted physically, and that it took us nearly three hours (4.40 to 7.30) to descend the 200 or 250 feet which separated us from M. Duhamel's cairn. Here we found that precious bottle of wine, of which we had thought so often and so tenderly during the night, and I draw a curtain over our thorough appreciation of it. After a halt of 40 minutes we started again on our weary way at 8.10, and crawled down the couloir and steep

M. Duhamel's " pierre humide," and Gaspard that it was 80 or 100 mètres above M. Dnhamel's cairn. I am inclined to think that the two nights were passed at very nearly the same spot and height.

rocks below it. It seemed like a nightmare, until, at 10.45 A.M., a last jump landed us on the snow of the Glacier des Etançons, just 29 hours after having left it. We had indeed won the day, but we had paid dearly for our whistle. Needless to say that we made up for our previous forced fast by a hearty onslaught on the provisions, which we found untouched. When we set out again, at 11.10, I found that the exposure had so affected my breathing powers that I was not able to do more than walk slowly clown the valley to our bivouac, which we reached at 12.25. We spent the rest of the day in delicious slumbers, and returned to La Bérarde late in the evening. We had not divulged our intentions before starting, but Rodier had guessed them, and was beginning to be anxious at our non-appearance. M. Rochat, of the French Alpine Club, had just arrived there with his guides, the two Gaspards, to whom we presented their rope which we had brought down as a trophy, merely reserving a fragment to be long treasured by me as a souvenir of our long and perilous expedition. Succeeding parties may laugh this whole account to scorn, but the Meije will then have lost its strange fascination, though for me it will ever be surrounded by a halo of romance.

To make this paper as complete as possible, I may mention that, incited by my success, my friends MM. P. Guillemin and A. Salvador de Quatrefages, with the two Gaspards, made the third ascent on August 12, by the same route. They took several photographs from the top and on the way, and brought down the other rope left by M. de Castelnau. Profiting by the experience of their predecessors, they wisely did not attempt to descend farther than the platform at the south-west extremity of the Glacier Carré, where they spent the second night at a height of 3754 mètres, reaching La Grave next day by the Brèche de la Meije.

An attempt to repeat the ascent, made on September 6, by Mr. Charles Moreing, an engineer at the mines of L'Argentière, between Briançon and Embrun, failed because of the unsettled state of the weather.

[Bien que cette publication date de 1912 – il s'agissait d'une réédition – Coolidge reprend tel quel son texte de 1879 sans modifier les jugements contenus dans les derniers passages, ci-dessous. Il se contente d'ajouter entre [] quelques indications, d'ailleurs incomplètes, ce qui est curieux pour un chroniqueur aussi pointilleux... ! D'où l'impression qu'il s'obstine

dans des conclusions erronées, largement démenties par les événements.]

I shall be perhaps expected to express an opinion on the practicability of the other routes by which the Meije has been tried, though hitherto without success.

The route from the east either over the teeth in the arête or along the "corridors" on the northern face would, I am convinced, involve an unjustifiable amount of risk [the arête was traversed from the central peak to the west peak by Herren E. and O. Zsigmondy and L. Purtscheller, July 26, 1885, all the teeth being crossed]. Bearing in mind what has been done in the Alps by men seeking some fresh sensation, I cannot say that this route is *impossible*. If the snow were in very favourable condition, a party of well-tried climbers might succeed in making their way along the "corridors" to the gap [now called Brèche Zsigmondy] at the east base of the highest peak, which is accessible from thence. It would be a very hazardous expedition, in which a slip would involve the destruction of the whole party, and it would be worse than foolhardy to attempt to return the same way.

Aimer, when on top, said that it might *perhaps* be possible to ascend directly from the Glacier de l'Arête up a ghastly couloir, which would land one in the gap just mentioned. I think, however, that he would be the first to admit that success is highly problematical, and that the suggestion was due to excitement at reaching the top at all. An attack on the Meije from the south, otherwise than by the route hitherto followed, would not, I believe, have the slightest chance of success.

There is, however, one route which may very probably prove to be practicable. The point to be arrived at is the depression between the Doigt and the Epaule. On July 22, 1877, I attained a height of 3550 mètres = 11,648 ft.¹³ (probably too high a reading of my aneroid) on the arête running up from the Brèche de la Meije, and was only stopped from attaining this depression by a very bold aiguille of bare rock—the Petit Doigt d'Epaule. A few days later, M. Guillemin, starting from the Glacier de la Brèche, climbed by the north-west rocks of the Meije to a height of 3620 mètres = 11,877 ft., a few mètres (50 to 20, according to different estimates) below the

¹³ About 135 mètres above the eastern or higher end (3115 m.) of the ridge of the bridge of the Brèche de la Meije.

above-named depression. Once there, it would probably not be difficult to rejoin M. de Castelnaud's route at the point where it approaches the main western arête, a short distance west of the Glacier Carré. I am decidedly of opinion that this [it has not yet, 1912, been achieved] is the most promising ; of the still remaining routes which have been imagined for reaching the top of the Meije.

And now a few words in conclusion of this long paper, which has, I fear, sorely tried the patience of my readers. It will be evident, I think, from what I have said above, and even merely from the fact that each of the three parties which have hitherto succeeded in effecting the ascent—and none of the members of which, I think I may venture to say, were novices in mountaineering—has been obliged to spend a night out on the mountain, that this is no ordinary expedition, though the actual number of feet to be climbed is not great. More than any other mountain with which I am acquainted it makes greater demands on the powers of endurance ; and, as far as my experience goes, it is the *longest continuously difficult climb* (save the Glacier Carré, there is nothing which can be called *easy*) in the Alps. It would not be very hard to name more difficult bits on other peaks, but as a whole it far exceeds all other peaks in difficulty. Even the rocks of the south-west face of the Pic d'Olan do not come up to it ; to take more familiar instances, neither the Rothhorn, nor the Dent Blanche, nor the Bietschhorn can be compared with it for a moment. But it is a noble mountain, and I should be very sorry if the description I have given of my ascent were to prevent any enterprising member of the Club from going to look at it or ascend it.