

THE ACCIDENT ON THE SOUTHERN AIGUILLE D'ARVES.

ON July 31, at 3 A.M., Raymond Bicknell, his son Peter, A. F. Procter, and Sir J. W. L. Napier left Valloire to traverse the Aiguille Méridionale d'Arves to La Grave: it was proposed to ascend by the N.E. face direct from the head of the Glacier de Gros Jean to the Brèche in the S.E. arête, and to descend by the ordinary route.

'By 10 A.M. we had reached the head of this glacier, where we were able for the first time to decide on our exact route. Our objective, the Brèche,¹ was at the head of a snow and ice couloir, some 1000 ft. high, flanked by broken faces of rock. It was decided to ascend by these rocks, keeping as far as possible close to the couloir.

'For 3 hours we made slow but steady progress, though the rocks from the start proved to be loose and rotten. By 1 P.M. we had reached a point where the rocks became more difficult, being, actually at the sides of the couloir, quite impracticable. At this point the couloir contracted, and, for about 50 ft., was distinctly steeper. The best route appeared to be straight up the couloir until over this step, and then to take once more to the rocks on the side.

'With this in view we cut steps across to an island of rock which divided the couloir, and as Bicknell would have to lead nearly 80 ft. from this island before reaching a secure enough position from which to bring the second man on, our second 80 ft. rope was attached between him and Napier.

'Bicknell then traversed the gentle ice slope to the true right bank of the couloir and proceeded up the steeper ice, cutting steps with his right hand and holding the rocks on his left with his other hand. During this manœuvre the position of the three of us was as follows: Napier, second on the rope, was at the top of the island and had a small belay for the rope, but was otherwise in a poor position; Procter, third, 10 ft. below Napier, was on the right of the island, and though in a physically uncomfortable position was well placed to hold a pull from the left; Peter, at the foot of the island, a few feet below Procter, was in a good position where he was able to belay the rope round his ice-axe, which was inserted in a crack right up to its head.² We consulted as to which side of our rock a fall might occur and Napier arranged his belay accordingly, *i.e.* to

¹ Marked *Brèche supérieure* in the illustration, *La Montagne*, 1910, facing p. 344.—*Editor*.

safeguard a fall to the right—the likely direction; without the assistance of this belay he could not hope to hold the rope in case of a fall. During this time we began to suffer slightly from cold and mild cramp in the fingers. As cutting steps with one hand proved a tedious job, Bicknell's progress was very slow. On one occasion he asked us whether, in view of the lateness of the hour, we should prefer to turn back. We replied that we left it entirely in his hands; he decided that it would probably take less time to complete the traverse to La Grave than to return down the loose rocks up which we had come. He appeared quite confident, and on two occasions said that a few more steps would get him over the difficulty.

'After about half an hour's cutting, and when he was some 60 ft. above Napier, without a word of warning and with no apparent effort to stop himself, Bicknell fell from his steps and shot down the ice slope to our left. When he had fallen the full 120 ft. of the free rope the strain came on Napier who, with his belay rendered useless, the fall occurring to the *left*, was pulled from his position; Napier had fallen some 25 ft. when Procter, dragged against the rocks to his left, held the rope, with the full weight of Bicknell and Napier on it; the rope, however, was drawn over Peter's shoulders so that the latter could take some of the strain.³ Napier was lying on steep rock 20 ft. below Peter, with Bicknell hanging out of sight some 70 ft. below Napier. The latter at once managed, by getting hand-holds on the projecting rock, to take some of the weight, while Procter secured the rope round a suitable belay. As the full weight of Bicknell was still on Napier, it was necessary to see if Bicknell, from whom we had heard no signs of life, could be brought to rest on a ledge. To do this, Procter eased the rope round the belay, while Napier lowered himself to a more secure ledge. Bicknell's full weight was still on the rope, and so Peter detached himself and climbed down to where his father was, using the rope between Procter, Napier and his father to lower himself by. It was at once evident that Raymond Bicknell had been killed outright, as his skull was completely smashed in. It was obvious, in fact, that he was dead *before* his fearfully rapid slide had tautened the slack of the rope.

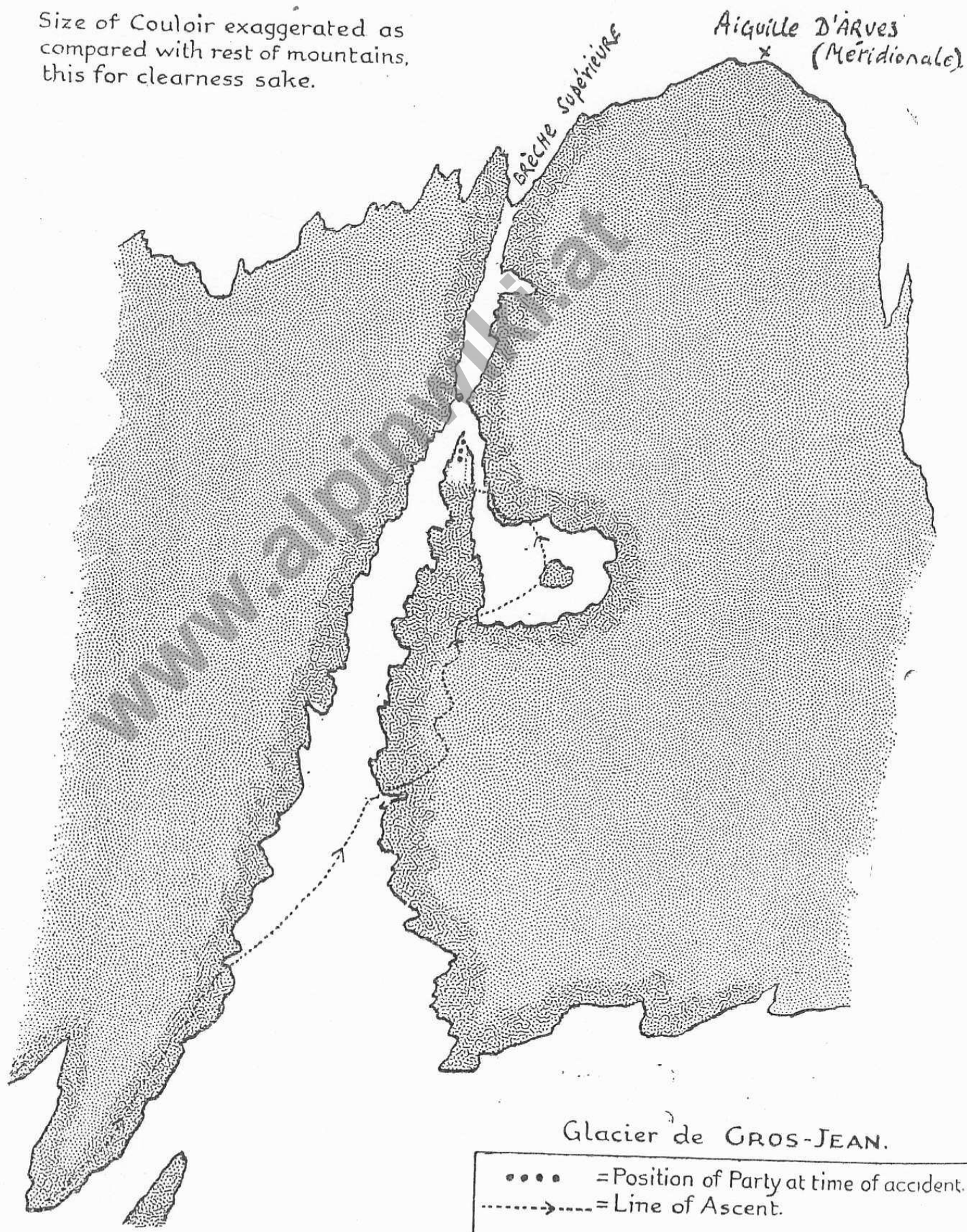
'It was essential for our own safety in descending that we should have the second rope which was attached to Bicknell. We decided, accordingly, that the only course open to us was for Peter to detach the body and to allow it to slide down on to the glacier below.

'With the help of the spare rope we made our way safely down on to the glacier, which we reached some 4 hours later,

³ It is interesting to note that the rope—which rendered such

and leaving the body where it had fallen we returned to Valloire, getting there about 11 P.M.

Size of Couloir exaggerated as compared with rest of mountains, this for clearness sake.



'It is impossible to state the cause of the accident. That Bicknell

that it was not an accidental slip. It would appear more probably to have been due to some form of heart failure, or violent cramp to which he had been subject as the result of an attack of phlebitis in the leg in the winter of 1924-25.

‘The climb itself cannot be described as easy, but in attempting it we were undertaking a task of no exceptional difficulty, especially bearing in mind the great reputation Bicknell held as one of the leading amateurs of the day.’

[The subsequent proceedings in Valloire were carried out with great despatch and Raymond Bicknell was buried there.

Monsieur Pierre Dalloz, the distinguished French mountaineer, gave every possible assistance. He accompanied the search party of La Grave guides who brought the body down from its resting-place on the Glacier de Gros Jean. He then stayed the night with the relatives and accompanied them subsequently to La Grave.

M. Dalloz’s kind and disinterested behaviour will not be forgotten by the friends and relations of Raymond Bicknell, and the JOURNAL avails itself of this opportunity of expressing to M. Dalloz the grateful thanks of the Alpine Club.

As the narrative points out, the immediate cause of the slip will for ever remain obscure, but one possible charge against Raymond Bicknell—that of rashness in attempting an expedition beyond his party’s powers—falls automatically to the ground. The performance of the young survivors was superb. The feat of Mr. Procter in holding the fallen, Sir Joseph Napier’s own accomplishments, and last, but not least, Mr. Peter Bicknell’s courage in going down, unroped, to his father, and finally his skilful descent, shaken as he was mentally and physically, during that nightmare 4 hours, in the all-responsible position of last man, will stand high in the annals of modern mountaineering. We can only add that the collective deeds of the party were worthy of any veterans or of their intrepid, erstwhile leader himself.]