

# Jean-Franck CHARLET, Argentière

**Jean-Franck Charlet descends from a prestigious line of Alpine Guides. Following in the family tradition, he is an accomplished ice-climber and was a leading figure in the new wave of ice-climbing in the 1970s. He is an instructor at ENSA, the French national ski and mountaineering school and assists in the testing and development of new outdoor equipment. Yet in spite of his modern accolades he still remembers the important role his valley played mountaineering history.** By Jean-Franck Charlet.

**T**ake a moment to imagine what climbing was like 150 years ago, your equipment comprising solely of a pair of crampons, an axe and a rope. In the 70 years following the first ascent of Mont Blanc, the practice of roped glacier travel was unheard of and the only protection came in the form of long walking poles. It wasn't until around 1850 that British climbers first thought of using a safety rope, and the early technique involved simply holding the rope by hand! This was for the good of the party; if a climber slipped, he would grip the rope as best he could and if he couldn't hold on, he would let go, falling without endangering the rest of the group!

In around 1865 climbers began to rope up for actual climbing, and large climbing parties of 5 – 7 people were common. Protection on rock involved passing the rope behind natural features, if there were any. On snow and ice, the leader would cut steps for his companions to use as they followed behind. If the terrain became too steep, the leader would continue alone and search for a safe place to belay the rest of the group. There were no pegs, ice screws or carabiners, and the party had no physical link to the mountain. Success (and therefore survival) depended entirely on the actions of the leader. The first (sparse) use of fixed equipment didn't appear until the mid-thirties, when Pierre Allain's route on the north face of the Drus (1935), Peters and Meier's ascent of the Croz spur (1935) and Cassin's route on the Walker (1938) were equipped with a modest number of pitons and carabiners. Gaspard's route on the Meije, Jean Charlet's on the Drus, Burgener and Mummery's routes on the Grépon or Zmutt Ridge, the Ryann-Lochmatter routes (south face of the Täeschorn, Aiguille du Plan east ridge), the Knubel on the Grépon, then Armand Charlet's

routes up Nant-Blanc or the Aiguilles du Diable some years later...the list is endless. Great routes both then and now, all of these were realised using with the same equipment and techniques used in 1865. Armand Charlet spoke of "climbing without a safety net", and if this is what traditional climbing once meant, let's be thankful that this is now a practice employed only by solo climbers.

Even with our modern "safety net" (pegs,

bolts, nuts or ice-screws) in place, modern mountaineering still carries an aspect of adventure and uncertainty; we might lose our bearings, hear the whistle of falling rocks or the rumble of collapsing seracs, the weather might catch us out and trap us in a gale or storm. We are no longer governed by danger; instead we juggle with the multitude of risks which, both yesterday and today, make the call of the mountains so irresistible.



Opposite: Jean-Franck and his son Jonathan, both of them Alpine Guides.

Below: The Chamonix Guides celebration: Jean-Franck Charlet at 6 years of age (right) admires his father Jean-Paul, his grandfather Georges and his great-uncle Armand Charlet. Photos Jean-Franck Charlet Archives.



I was born in Argentière, and for the people of my valley the Verte is more than just a mountain. Flanked by the two huge shoulders which form the Sans Nom and Jardin Ridges, her imposing face is filled with human emotions, She smiles, cries, rages or is simply indifferent, her moods changing with the light, the clouds and the seasons.

## La Verte

I remember one summer evening when my father did not return home. My mother sick with worry and after a sleepless night of endless waiting, I remember looking at the Verte as dawn drew near. She was smiling, and my heart told me that my father would soon return. An hour later he was back.

I also remember a day when she frowned, turning her serious face towards me. In the ignorance and enthusiasm of youth we ignored her and set out regardless to climb her north flank. As we descended, a huge rock fall claimed the lives of two of my closest companions. Another night we were heading towards the Moine Ridge, yet despite the starry sky and the promise of excellent conditions, the Verte's face was black and terrifying. I couldn't ignore her a second time, and using the pretext of a stomach ache I told my client that we would have to turn back. Half an hour later, a huge rock slide swept over the Bergschrund.

Michel Croz and his companions were accustomed to gauging this capricious mountain's moods, watching and waiting

for the moment the Lady would let herself be conquered. She smiled benevolently at the local guide in June 1865, but unfortunately he had other commitments when Whymper organised his expedition. When the Englishman and his two Swiss guides reached her summit, perhaps she shared in Chamonix's anger at the theft of her first ascent. Michel Croz and his companions responded with the ascent of the Moine Ridge six days later, followed by the Grande Rocheuse Spur two months after that.

150 years on, the Verte has lost none of her spirit and still commands the respect she deserves. The descent is always something of a trial; the Moine Ridge is long and the shorter *Whymper Couloir* is exposed and dangerous. The latter holds less snow than it once did and can involve some very steep sections, and it was to avoid such a section that recently I inadvertently went off-route on the Rocheuse Spur. At the end of the day I was thrilled, having followed the route opened by the guides of Chamonix back in 1865 which otherwise I would have almost certainly never climbed.

Mountaineering is in my blood; Michel Croz's sister Marie was my grandmother's grandmother and Armand Charlet, who made 100 ascents of the Verte, was my grandfather Georges' brother, who also climbed the Verte more than 30 times. My father made the second ascent of Nant Blanc with Gaston Rébuffat, the writer proclaiming: "A second ascent after Armand is worse than a first!" I have an ice-fall on the north side of the Col de la Verte to my name, and my son claimed the first ascent of an ice-fall on the Charpoua side of Pointe Croux. The Verte has smiled and given her blessing so many times, but out of respect for Whymper, Croz and Charlet we must approach this mountain humbly, waiting for her heart to lighten and for her permission to spend a few precious moments on her summit. ■



The Mont Blanc range in the 1920s: mountaineering is still in its early days and the only additional gadget is a pair of crampons. Photo Jean-Franck Charlet Archives.