

# The Story Of Mont Aiguille

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CURIOSITY and necessity, pilgrimages and military campaigns, were among the early motives in man's approach to mountains. One peak, however, was attained by royal command, and this is its story. Mont Aiguille (6800 feet), sometimes called the Mount Olympus of Dauphiné, rears its fantastic summit 31 miles south of Grenoble, immediately west of the village of Clelles. A gigantic wedge of precipitous rock bastions, supporting a nearly level grassy plain, soars into the sky as an isolated outlier of the Vercors, an island of resistance during the last war. The mountain was known in the fourteenth century as one of the "Seven Miracles of Dauphiné,"<sup>1</sup> most of them now forgotten, and its conquest is regarded as the earliest manifestation of alpinism in France. It is the "Mons Inascensibilis" of Aymar Falco (1534), and on a few old maps is called "Mont Equille," *i.e.* equal in height to the adjacent Grand-Veymont (7797 feet), the highest summit of the area.

Gervase of Tilbury was a wandering scholar, employed first by Henry II, the young king of England, and later by Otto IV, who had Plantagenet connections and for whom he wrote his chronicle, *Otia Imperiali* (1211), in which Mont Aiguille is first mentioned.<sup>2</sup> It was probably from this source that Charles VIII of France heard of the mountain. In any case the king first saw the peak while on a pilgrimage to Notre-Dame d'Embrun in 1489.<sup>3</sup> He was struck by the silhouette of this "Mont Inaccessible," and by legends surrounding it, report being that angels were seen flying along its escarpments keeping it inviolate. After becoming Dauphin on his entry into Vienne in 1490, Charles VIII adopted Mont Aiguille as his "device," surmounting it by the Latin motto *Supereminet Inuius*.<sup>4</sup> He commanded his chamberlain and military engineer, Antoine de

1. Salvaing de Boisseau, *Septem Miracula Delphinatus* (Grenoble, 1656), 53 ff.

2. "In Regno Arlatensi & Episcopatu Diensi juxta Gratianopolitane . . . est rupes altissima . . . cui nomen *Aequalli*, eo quod sit aequalis alteri sed inaccessibilis in sua altitudine." Alpine peaks are rarely mentioned by name prior to 1300. Monte Viso (Vesulus) was known to both Virgil and Chaucer; the Eiger occurs in a document of 1252.

3. Michelin, *Savoie-Dauphiné* (1964), 174.

4. P. Menestrier, *Les Sept Miracles de Dauphiné* (Grenoble, 1701); the plate of Mont Aiguille with superimposed Latin motto is reproduced in Coolidge, *Simler*, facing p. 175\*.

Ville (Lord of Dompjulien and of Beaupré),<sup>5</sup> to ascend the mountain, and this was accomplished on June 26, 1492, under the latter's leadership with ten hardy companions,<sup>6</sup> aided by ladders and ropes ("subtilz engins").<sup>7</sup> It was, as he quaintly reported to the king, "le plus horrible et expovantable passage que je viz james." They remained six days on the summit,<sup>8</sup> discovering no divinities but only a charming meadow covered with flowers and "une belle gareyne de chamoys." Antoine de Ville caused the summit to be baptised in the Threefold Name and had mass said in a hut that he built on top, a space which he tells us was a quarter of a league in length and a crossbow shot in width. Three large crosses were set up, one at each angle of the summit, as proof of the ascent. One of the party wrote an imaginative account of wonders they had seen, including not only the chamois, but strange birds and plants, as well as human footprints. Many witnesses stood in the fields below and confirmed the conquest which, even with artificial aid, was a remarkable achievement in its time. It must have been with satisfaction that Charles VIII again sighted the mountain, passing its base in 1494 on his way to Italy. It is the cradle of rock-climbing in France, the first *grimpe* and Antoine de Ville the first *grimpeur*. After 1492 the ascent was not repeated until 1834, when Jean-Pierre-César Liotard gained the summit alone, finding no marvels but only a sloping meadow and what he took to be the remnants of dry walls, possibly the remains of the hut erected in 1492. In 1878 the Isère Section of the C.A.F. had chains placed at the most difficult points. Other routes have been discovered since that time.

While spending a few days at Grenoble in July, 1951, we made an

5. Both places are in Lorraine.

6. Their names have come down to us: Sébastien de Carect, professor of theology and preacher to the king; Reynaud de Jubié, ladder-man to the king; Master Cathelin Servet; Master Catin, clerk of the collegiate church of St.-Croix, Montélimar; Pierre Arnaud, carpenter [who was probably equipped with hammer and pitons]; Guillaume Sauvage, servant of Dompjulien; Jean Lobié, of Die; and François de Bosco, Dompjulien's chaplain.

7. S. Champier (1525) recorded: "Don Julien par son engin et subtilite trouva et fit faire engins et crochets [hooks], lesquelz on boutoit dedans les roches, et tant fist quil monta dessus la montaigne." The ascent was said to be "half a league by ladders, and a league by a route terrifying to see and even more so to descend." Only a few years after the event Antoine de Ville was spoken of as an "alchimiste," a sorcerer!

8. One can imagine their astonishment, while on the summit, at the arrival on July 1, of a second party: noble Giges de la Tour, châtelain of Clelles, Barrachin Silve with Claude, his son, and François de Colans, his brother, curé of Saint-Martin, carrying some tame rabbits which immediately began to feed. A third group also came up, possibly on the same day [the document is undated], led by Pierre Liotard, captain of the Portes area, accompanied by the nobles George Juvenis, Pierre Blosset, Gaspard Robert, Gonnet-Bencon, chaplain Raymond du Collet, Jacques Jobert, Pierre Espeil and Claude Chevalier. Antoine de Ville's "subtilz engins" made this possible, but it is remarkable that three independent parties, totaling at least 22 people, reached the top, many of them persons of importance, nobility and clergy, untrained and unaccustomed to such exertion. All within one week. Had it not been for war, pestilence and religious quarrels, mountaineering might then and there have become the fashion!

Coolidge, who made the ascent in 1881, describes its character: "The way (centre of N.W. face) lies through several deeply-cut fissures, or, rather hollows of the most extraordinary nature. At one moment we seemed to be in the very bowels of the mountain in a great cavern, whither scarcely any light penetrated. The rock is very smooth and bad to climb, so that I was glad to avail myself of the iron chains." Kirkpatrick (1913) says: "It is the most extraordinary mountain I have ever seen," and adds that the route included a 300-ft. traverse "which would have a reputation at Cortina as spectacular." The vertical height of the actual climb is 1000 ft.

excursion to see Mont Aiguille.<sup>9</sup> The view of the peak as one emerges from the tunnel at Clelles station gives a tremendous impression of form and height. We walked through fields of lovely flowers to the railroad viaduct and took the mule path to Trezanne, but, as the day was not perfect, did not carry out our plan of crossing the Col du Pas Pavet, renowned for its flora, to St. Michel-les-Portes, returning instead to Clelles. On our way back we encountered waves of sheep and goats coming down the hillside. The accompanying shepherds, who had been camping out and had their tents and other equipment neatly packed on four little donkeys, told us that this was a small herd of about 800 head and that we should come again when they had 5000! They were moving to new pasture, as was constantly necessary, but the scene with dogs working, men driving, and the herd flowing by orchards and fields, with Mont Aiguille for a background, was almost biblical in its simple grandeur.

Going back to Grenoble we passed St. Michel-les-Portes, where guides are stationed and from whence Mont Aiguille is ascended, and had a final view of the peak, which from this point appears as a slender sheer-edged block of vast size. During recent years the region has been developed for winter sports.

On the following day I called on M. Avezou at the Archives, located in the Prefecture de l'Isère, Place Verdun. This obliging gentleman allowed me to examine the documents<sup>10</sup> written on the summit by Antoine de Ville and by witnesses from Clelles in 1492. They are well preserved, and M. Avezou thought that I was the first English-speaking climber to have seen them, since even Coolidge, who reproduced them in the edition de luxe of his work on Josias Simler, had only photographic copies.

On August 28, 1955, a light plane was landed on the summit of Mont Aiguille, a daring feat which gained much publicity in the Grenoble press,<sup>11</sup> the aviator having with forethought asked some of his climbing friends to smooth off a runway, without which he could not have taken off again.

In 1964 we paid our second visit to the mountain. Twenty-one miles south of Grenoble on Route 75 is Le Monestier-de-Clermont (2775 feet), a holiday resort strung along the road for over a mile. From the north

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9. It is interesting to compare our account (*A.J.* 53, 272) with those of earlier English-speaking climbers: Coolidge's ascent in 1881, Gardiner's visit to the area in 1888 (both in *A.J.* 14, 211) and the ascent of Hope and Kirkpatrick in 1913 (*A.J.* 26, 369). Earlier narratives in *Ann. du C.A.F.*: Gallet (1876, 584), Rochat (1877, 248) and Perrin (1878, 630). See also *Guide Joanne* (Jura et Alpes françaises, grande edit., 746). A chapter in Gribble's *Early Mountaineers* (London, 1899), 31, is devoted to Mont Aiguille.

10. There are five documents in all, reproduced in facsimile in the edition de luxe of Coolidge's *Josias Simler* (Grenoble, 1904). Antoine de Ville's letter was written on the summit on June 28, 1492.

11. The pilot was Henri Giraud, in a Piper-Cub. Hermann Geiger called him "the Lionel Terray of mountain aviation." *Le Dauphiné* (Grenoble), August 29, 1955.

end of the town a lateral turn ascends to Gresse (3950 feet), a convenient base for the Grand-Veymont as well as for Mont Aiguille, the latter being four miles south by road via the Col de l'Allimas, the ascent thence taking four and a half hours and affording a varied and interesting rock climb. The view is extensive and there is a feeling of complete isolation on this rocky wedge.

It was a cloudless day at Clelles, and we found an excellent new inn on the highway close to the station. The fields were heavy with yellow wheat, and carpets of scarlet poppies spread between cherry trees against which long ladders slanted. The herds of sheep had vanished to other pastures, but spotted cows and a small boy took their place. The only sound was the sleepy rustle of a cicada, strayed from Provence, while before us were expanses of rippling grain and the mighty wall of Mont Aiguille rising skyward. Truly, it is one of the great sights of the Alpine kingdom. We sat with our backs against vine-covered logs, thinking of the stirring events in that long-ago summer when men first reached its summit. The Moors had lately surrendered Granada and Columbus was readying his caravels for the New World.