

ANNE LISTER'S ASCENT OF VIGNEMALE

BY MISS VIVIEN INGHAM

(One illustration: no. 46)

THE story of Anne Lister's ascent of Vignemale on August 7, 1838, is an interesting landmark in the history of mountaineering. Few English tourists ventured to the Pyrenees as compared with the number who visited the French and Swiss Alps during the early part of the nineteenth century. It was the ancient health resorts built around the therapeutic springs that attracted visitors rather than the opportunity to climb mountains.

The route to the summit of Vignemale was discovered by two guides from Gèdre, Cazaux and his brother-in-law Guillembet, in 1837. It was, however, only recently that the facts relative to Miss Lister's ascent, the first made by an amateur climber, were found in her manuscript journals among the Archives of Halifax Corporation. Miss Lister (1791-1840) was the owner of Shibden Hall, Halifax, a small estate inherited from her uncle in 1826, together with an adequate, but by no means large, private income. For some years she lived in Paris, and it was in 1830 that, in company with Lady Stuart de Rothesay, wife of the British Ambassador in Paris, her two daughters and sundry attendants, Miss Lister first visited the Pyrenees.

A forceful woman of great energy and masculine tendencies, she had always been a hardy walker and a visit to Switzerland in 1827 had whetted her appetite for mountain expeditions, although her intention to climb Mont Blanc had remained unfulfilled. On this first visit she climbed Mont Perdu, and took other adventurous trips over the Spanish border, exploits which must have caused dismay to Lady Stuart de Rothesay in view of the prevailing political situation and her husband's prominent position.

On July 9, 1838, Miss Lister and her friend Anne Walker arrived at St. Sauveur for a six-week stay, arranged primarily for the benefit of Anne Walker's health. Miss Lister was lucky enough to engage Jean-Pierre Charles, her guide of 1830; his friend, Jean-Pierre Sanjou was to attend Anne Walker. Each guide was to have five francs a day for himself and three for his horse; saddles were hired separately on a monthly basis.

It was a casual remark, ten days after their arrival, that encouraged Miss Lister to climb Vignemale. Charles had been guide to Chausenque, whose book, *Les Pyrénées ou Voyages Pédestres dans toutes les régions de*

ces montagnes depuis l'Océan jusqu' à la Méditerranée, published in 1834, she was reading. Her Journal records—'Read him Chausenque's observations: Vignemale inaccessible du côté de France. Charles says a man from Gèdre has discovered the way to the top. Told Charles to make enquiries.' The same afternoon Miss Lister procured a thick cape and cloak from Charles to use on the expedition.

On July 23, Charles having reported that the guide's wife said there would be no difficulty, both Annes and their guides rode up to Gèdre to spend the night. The intention was to climb the Piméné on the east side of the Gave de Pau on the 24th, and descend to Gavarnie, where Anne Walker would remain. Anne Lister would continue up the west side of the valley towards Vignemale, spend the night in a hut, and be ready for the ascent early on the 25th; thereafter they would continue into Spain for a few days exploration.

In the event, the Piméné expedition proved far more strenuous than expected; moreover the weather turned cloudy and the Vignemale attempt was temporarily abandoned. Nevertheless, on the Piméné they had encountered Cazaux, the Vignemale guide, and agreed a price for the climb. It would be twenty francs, 'I,' wrote Miss Lister, 'having to find his nourriture (not much) and give him something on reaching the top to drink my health.'

On Sunday, August 5, Miss Lister decided to try again, but once more the weather turned misty, and a message was sent to Cazaux 'to say that if tomorrow not favourable—I should be at the cabane the first favourable day afterwards.' The following day she recorded the first hint of competition; 'Brouillard low on the mountains again. F.69½ at 9. The chasseurs-guides say the Prince of Moscowa has engaged Cazaux, the Gèdre Vignemale guide, to go to the top of that mountain on Thursday, the Prince to sleep at Gavarnie on Wednesday night, be the weather fine or not.' The Prince was the son of Napoleon's Marshal Ney, and the knowledge that he, too, was anxious to climb Vignemale may well have spurred on Miss Lister to set out as speedily as possible.

Fortunately the guides expected the weather to improve, and at 3.35 that afternoon Miss Lister was finally off on horse-back from St. Sauveur, dressed in a profusion of petticoats, capes, shawls and cloaks, her skirts ready to be tied up above her knees by a complication of loops and tapes. Pockets were stuffed with necessary items for personal use, and 100 francs secreted in the toe of a thick grey woollen stocking. The crampons used on Mont Perdu were also taken and Charles thoughtfully provided a bâton ferré. 'Yet,' she concluded, 'I was lightly equipped and my heart was light.'

With Charles and Pierre also mounted and accompanied by Charles's brother-in-law to bring back the horses, Miss Lister rode by Gavarnie to the cabane des Saoussats Dabats, and arriving at 8.5 p.m. found

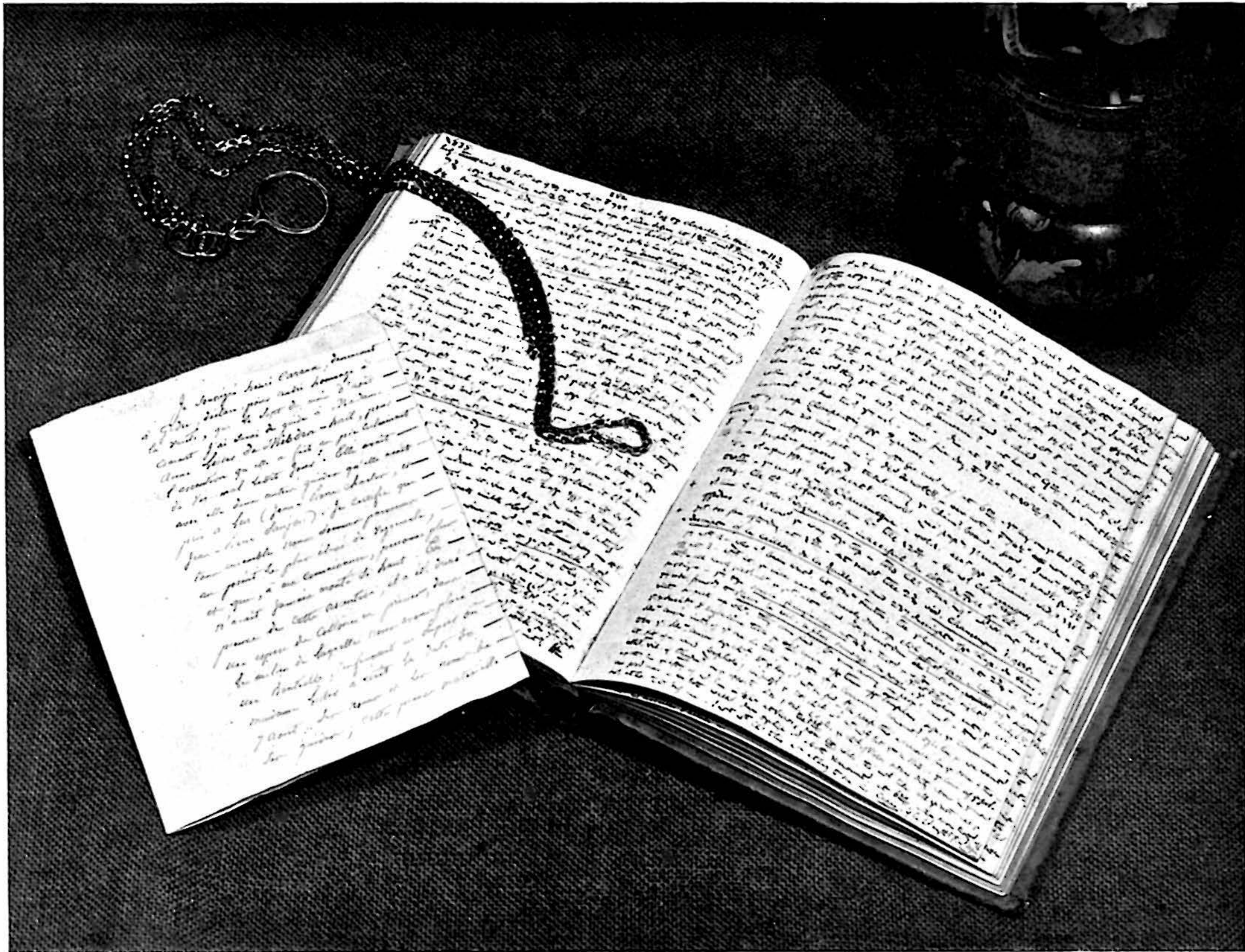


Photo: Gray Studios]

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THE FIRST ASCENT OF VIGNEMALE. ON THE LEFT IS THE FIRST PAGE OF THE CERTIFICATE OF THE ASCENT; THE BOOK IS VOL. 21 OF ANNE LISTER'S DIARY, SHOWING ON THE RIGHT THE ENTRY ABOUT HER REQUEST TO CHARLES TO FIND OUT ABOUT THE GUIDE CAZAUX (SEE PAGE 199).

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Cazaux and his brother-in-law awaiting them. Together with five shepherds the party spent a brief night in some discomfort, lying head to foot.

The Journal entry for August 7 records; 'Off at 2 $\frac{3}{4}$. Sent back the horses at 4.55. . . . Breakfast at 4.55 and off at 5.20 on foot. At the first degree at 6.40. Climbed the chimney. Rest at 7.7. for 12 minutes. . . . At the second degree, that is at the neige at the Cirque, at 8.5. Put on crampons and off again at 8.18. On the snow without quitting it till 9.8., then rested on a little grassy knoll till 9.20.

'Took off crampons at 10.10. Rested on top of second crête at 11 $\frac{1}{4}$. I lay down a little; put on my cloak and did not feel the air cold. Thick-clear all the morning, except about sun-rise and for about an hour. . . . Off again at 11 $\frac{3}{4}$, Sick just before.

'At the top at 1, then descended for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour to see the Rochers à Pic and glacier and Col. . . . Put our names in the bottle and began the descent at 2.10. At 2.25 down at the snow. At the bottom of the first snow at 2.38. At snow again, where we had left our crampons, and put them on again at 3.10. . . . Over the whole and took off crampons at 4.

'Very fine sunny evening but delightful air. Off again at 4.10, after eating a little. I tried a little bit of bread with my weak brandy and water. . . . Back at the cabane of Saoussats Dabats at 8.5. Tired, but would have pushed on to Gavarnie, but Charles said it would be dangerous to attempt such a road in the dark.'

The party rested at the cabin until 11.30 when presumably moonlight was sufficient to allow them to return to Gavarnie in safety. They were back there by 1.15 a.m. and Anne Walker arrived at 9 next morning, August 8, to meet her friend. Cazaux left them to go to Gèdre, where, it will be recalled, he was due to meet the Prince of Moscowa on that day.

It was not until August 13 that the two ladies were back at St. Sauveur, having spent the intervening days trekking over the Spanish border as far as Jaca and returning by Cauterets. During an afternoon ride towards Gèdre on the 14th: 'Charles told us how Cazaux had deceived the Prince de la Moscowa. Had told him I had not gone to the top, was sick on the glacier, and could not get further than the little Pic, but the guides had gone to the top, that Charles himself was sick.

'Annoyed; would not pay Cazaux till this was cleared. Either I had gone to the top or not, and if I had it should be acknowledged.' Charles was immediately sent to the Prince and returned to report that Cazaux had written to the Prince saying that Miss Lister had only reached the lower Pic. 'Cazaux lui avait donné le laurier, ce qui est fait, est fait,' the Prince had said. There had been no bottle at the summit, Cazaux claiming that the pile of stones round the bottle, made by Charles and Pierre, was done by himself and his brother-in-law. Presumably he meant on the original ascent.

The quarrel became serious; diplomacy failed to work either with Cazaux or the Prince. 'Poor Charles! . . . The Prince set his word quite at nought . . . and Cazaux the *one* to be believed against the *three*.' [Anne, Charles and Pierre.]

On August 16 Miss Lister, taking Charles with her went down the valley to Lourdes to consult a lawyer, M. Latapis, 'about 50, rather *rotund* au milieu, and of agreeable lawyer-like manners.' He readily sympathised with her firm stand, and wrote out a certificate which Cazaux must be persuaded to sign; if he refused, then an action would be taken against him, but the lawyer considered that withholding payment for the climb would be sufficient inducement to compel its acknowledgment.

Next day came the grand dénouement. Miss Lister and Charles rode up to Gèdre in the afternoon, arriving at 4. 'Cazaux at home. Sent for him, as also for the aubergiste . . . and for his brother-in-law with him. I ordered bread and wine and cheese for them all . . . went down to the kitchen and stayed with them all the whole time. . . . Cazaux came in perhaps ten minutes or $\frac{1}{4}$ hour and then joined heartily in talking the story over, in everything agreeing with and confirming the statement of Charles and myself.'

The certificate was read. 'Cazaux made not the least objection to sign it; declared fully and openly that all I and Charles had said was true, and that I had got up to the top and got up very well too. Cazaux then signed and Charles, and the aubergiste, saying he was *Maire* and could not sign these things, his brother-in-law signed as a witness.' [Charles and Pierre must have signed later in the day and, according to the certificate, in Luz.] The date, August 17, 1838, is written in Anne Lister's writing.¹

Cazaux was then paid, given an extra five francs, and two more to look after the bottle on the summit and ensure that no-one raised a higher stone column than Miss Lister's. She then ordered more wine, and the company relaxed. 'Charles had taken poor Cazaux to task, and here a *scene* commenced of pro and con.' Eventually the inn-keeper with great tact 'explained that if Cazaux had written as Charles declared, his letter would prove he had done it for the money for his family. Le monde was hard pressed here, and he hoped I should excuse the man.'

Miss Lister now showed the true Briton's partiality for the under-dog, shaking hands with Cazaux, and putting any remaining blame on the Prince, finally announcing:—'C'est une affaire d'honneur et je lui arracherai ce laurier à tout prix.' The inn-keeper agreed that the Prince had not behaved well in making Miss Lister hurry her ascent by ordering Cazaux for August 8, especially as he did not actually climb Vignemale until the 11th. And so the wine-flushed party dispersed,

¹ The text of the certificate is at the end of this article.

as Miss Lister wrote, 'leaving behind me, as it seemed, the cordial approbation of all present.'

The following afternoon Charles was again sent to the Prince in Luz, 'who seems to have received him very well, and to be at last convinced that I really *did* get to the top. But he made use of a word against Cazaux which he, Charles, could not repeat to me.'

After reading her newspaper, Galignani's *Messenger*, on August 25, Miss Lister recorded:—'Published Tuesday, August 21st. p. 3, Col 2 and 3, the following:—The Prince of Moscowa and his brother Mon. Edgar Ney, accompanied by five guides, made a successful ascent, on the 11th. instant, to the summit of Vignemale, the second highest mountain of the Pyrenees, a few feet lower than Mont Perdu, and which has been hitherto thought inaccessible.'

No further comment was made in the Journal, but the following day she wrote to Galignani asking for the following to be inserted in the next convenient issue:—'We noticed, some days ago, the ascent of the Prince de la Moscowa and his brother, Mon. Edgar Ney, with five guides to the summit of the Vignemale, hitherto thought inaccessible. We find that an English lady had, four days before, ascended with three guides to the same summit which, though inaccessible from the French side, is not more difficult of ascent from the Spanish side towards the East, than high mountains in general.'

This modest paragraph was inserted in the afternoon edition of Galignani's *Messenger* on September 3, but only a cursory mention was made of it in the Journal entry for September 7, when the excitement of the Vignemale adventure had receded, and she had made another journey into Spain. The victory had meant little to Anne Lister; the challenge and just acknowledgement of the outcome had been all-important. As she had written before the argument was settled:—'I thought not of certificate, nor cared more for mounting Vignemale than Mont Perdu, the ascent of which last mountain nobody believes. What matters it to me? I have made each ascent for my pleasure, not for *éclat*. What is *éclat* to me?'

Text of the Certificate

Je soussigné Henri Cazaux, demeurant à Gèdre, déclare, pour rendre hommage à la vérité, que le sept du mois d'Août courant j'ai servi de guide à Madame Anne Lister de Shibdenhall, pour l'ascention qu'elle a fait au pic culminant de Vignemal ledit jour. Elle avait avec elle deux autres guides qu'elle avait pris à Luz (Jean-Pierre Charles, et Jean-Pierre Sanjou). Je certifie que tous ensemble nous sommes parvenus au point le plus élevé de Vignemal, et que, à ma connaissance, personne plus n'avait jamais monté si haut. En preuve de cette ascention, il a été duné une espèce de collone en pierres, dans le milieu de laquelle nous

avons placé une Bouteille, enfermant un Papier où Madame Lister a écrit la date du 7 Août, Son nom, et les noms de ses guides; cette preuve materielle durera longtemps, si quelqu' autre Voyageur aussi intrépide que Madame Lister ne va détruire ce petit monument.

En foi de quoi à Gèdre, le 17 d'Août 1838 [date filled in in Anne Lister's hand.]

Signé en presence de
Alaubon

Cazaux Hry,

Jean-Pierre Charles et Jean-Pierre Sanjou, soussignés,
attestent la verite des faits rapportés dans
declaration ci-dessus

Fait a Luz le 17 d'Août [date in Anne Lister's hand.]

Charles

Jeanjou [vernacular for Sanjou]