

CLIMBS AT ZERMATT, CHAMONIX AND COURMAYEUR

By R. R. E. CHORLEY

A paper read to the Alpine Club on Tuesday, October 7, 1952.

I WAS fortunate this summer in being able to spend some six weeks in the Alps. This was made possible by helping to dig an ice tunnel in Monte Rosa. A few weeks' work on the tunnel was sufficient to pay for nearly a month's climbing. For various reasons the tunnel, which was for glaciological research, had to be on a north-facing slope above 4,000 m. and the site chosen was a short distance below the Silbersattel on Monte Rosa at about 4,200 m. altitude.

George Band (who had discovered this job and with whom I was to climb most of the season) and I arrived at Zermatt on the 19th of June and the next day went up to the tunnel. From the Bétemps hut this took us four hours, but we steadily cut this time down, and one day we did it in nearly three hours; then as we became jaded with the monotony our times sank back to three hours and a half.

When we arrived the guides had already dug 15 m.; we helped them with digging another 14 and also made measurements. But it was the lunch break basking in the sun in this glorious spot that we most looked forward to. In the early afternoon we began our wade back to the hut while the guides flitted by on ski; how mad we were to be without them! All this made a twelve-hour day, about the limit when repeated day after day. There are many things connected with the tunnel which I could mention; two left a deep impression: the sheer unrelieved monotony of the ascent and the extraordinary change in the face of the glacier over the period we were there.

After a week we thought we deserved a day's climbing. We left at 3.00 A.M.—far too late, for the Lyskamm and as much of the frontier ridge as we had time for. On the way up to the Lysjoch there were two interesting events: one was a bird singing and the other an animal which looked like a stoat descending the Grenz glacier. Arrived at the Lysjoch I suggested a quick détour up the Parrotspitze, only half an hour, we thought, but it was an hour before we were back.

When we finally left the Lysjoch the snow had already softened on the Lyskamm. After an initial slope the ridge becomes quite narrow and one felt one was walking along it like a Charlie Chaplin. At other times we were on the steep northern slopes avoiding cornices. We reached the East summit at 10.30 and two hours later the West; even from here there were a considerable amount of ups and downs along the ridge left. I had not realised how long this ridge is—nearly two miles and a half.

The broad expanse of the Felikjoch was a quagmire when we crossed

it, but Castor was soon disposed of. However the follies of the late start were now apparent and there was no hope of including the Breithorn. When we reached the summit of Pollux at 5.25 P.M. the sun was already throwing long shadows. We scampered on down the ridge towards the Schwarztör ; we had no guide book and were disconcerted a few minutes later to find it disappearing in one great step to the col. By casting around over iced rocks we eventually reached a place where a couple of abseils took us to the col. All this lost us an hour and we did not finally get away from the Schwarztör until after 7.00 P.M.

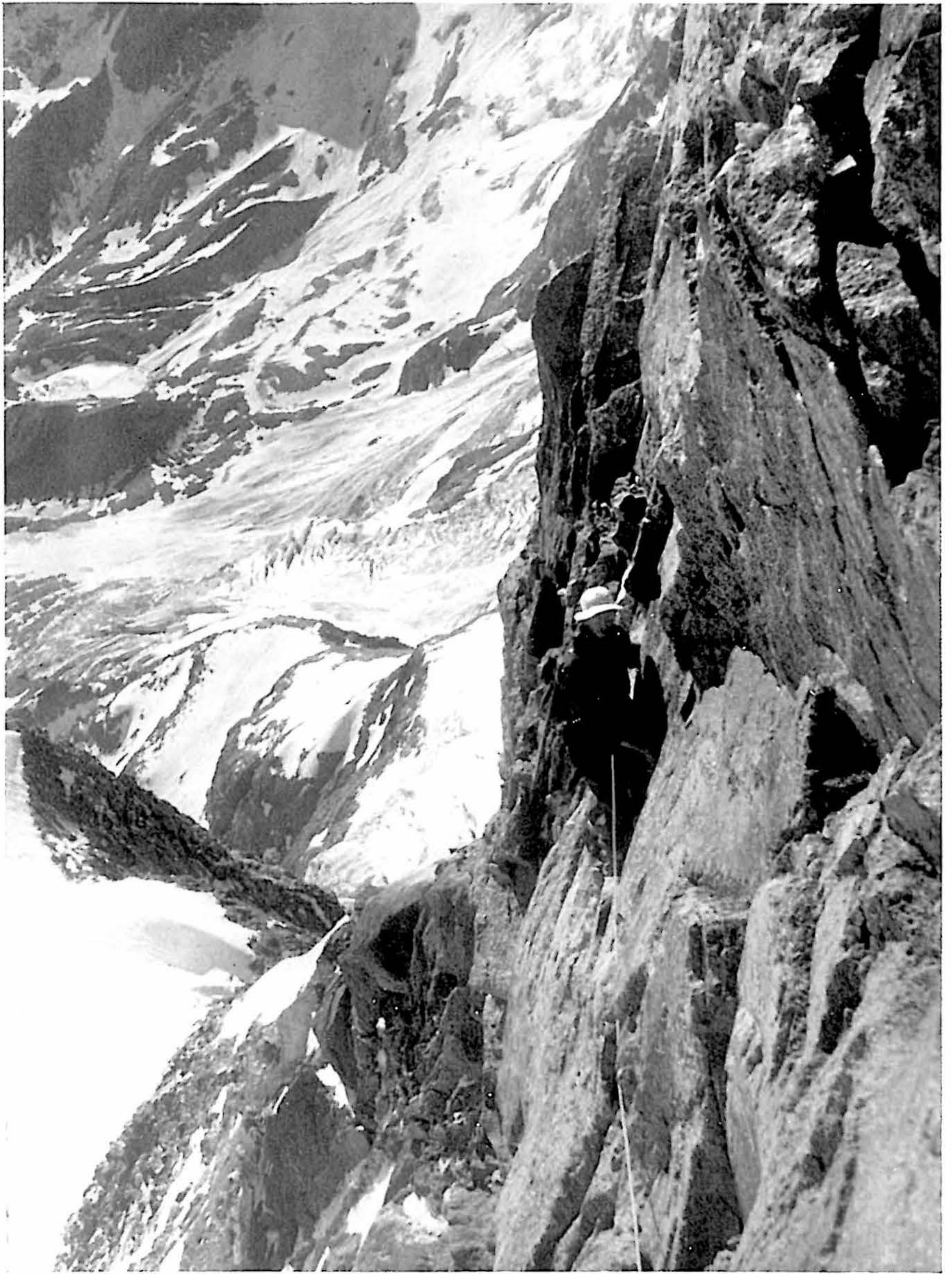
The descent of the Schwärze glacier was speedy for we had previously worked out the route through the icefall from the Gornergrat. Foolishly, however, we took to the flank below it—a short cut, of course—and became tangled up in scree and moraine, so it was not until 10.00 P.M. that we were back at the hut.

We rounded off the final day's work at the tunnel with a traverse of the Nordend and Dufourspitze. The next day was to be one of rest, but we ended by carrying 40 kg. loads of wood from the glacier to the hut for Alexander Graven, the guardian. The round trip was about 15 minutes, and when after about 20 journeys we still had not finished we called it a day. This enriched the kitty by five francs and the stomach by two free meals ; more repaying perhaps it was that our work induced Graven to expand a little. His stories and his gruff laugh will always be associated in my mind with the kitchen of the Bétémps hut.

Graven also gave us much useful information about the Santa Caterinagrät of the Nordend. This ridge which runs along the side of the East face of Monte Rosa down to the Jägerjoch is a Ryan-Lochmatter route of 1906. Franz Lochmatter also made the second ascent, but the third was not made until 1937, and by 1946 there had been apparently only ten.

We left next morning at 2.10 A.M. ; after a preliminary skating around on the glacier we were on the moraine. The Caterinagrät came into view as we rounded the base of the great rock buttress so prominent from the Gornergrat. The ridge rises in four distinct steps. The lower two come close together and form the principal difficulties of the climb ; the first step ends in a great smooth yellow overhang and here the route lies entirely on the Swiss side.

We had a half-hour halt at the Jägerjoch and left again at 6.30 ; 20 minutes of snow and 20 minutes of scrambling led to a point where the ridge reared up and we were forced over to the right. Two pitches, a steep wall and a small niche with an awkward corner, led to a large ledge which petered out to the right in a line of weaknesses across the face. This was obviously the traverse Graven had spoken about ; it was delightful, about 100 feet, exposed but not difficult, the rock a warm brown granite. It ended in a short chimney which in turn was linked by a delicate traverse to a parallel one. The exit to the latter was over an overhang on to a large ledge. We were now on a level



Photo, R. R. E. Chorley.]

SANTA CATERINA ARÊTE : THE TRAVERSE ON THE FIRST STEP.

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with the top of the first step. A few more feet led to another good pitch, a wall beginning with a layback, then a short section on small scattered holds and rounded off by a nose of curious frail-looking flakes. This pitch finished on a level with the top of the second step.

We could now move together along the crest of the arête. But the third step, really a series of little steps, gave delightful climbing with a touch of exposure over the East face. We were impressed by the grandeur of this face : steep, very long and continually rumbling with stonefalls. The third and fourth steps are linked by a gentle snow arête and the few feet of rock of the last step did not take long to climb. We came out on to the top to find the summit surprisingly close, we had expected at least two miles of snowfield to cross to the summit. We stopped to bask and eat ; at our feet lay the dirt-covered Belvedere glacier, beyond that the chalets of Macugnaga.

The slog to the summit of the Nordend was tedious and an anti-climax. Once on it, however, we went into top gear. In about twenty minutes we were at the Silbersattel, from then on we ran almost the whole way to the hut, reaching it in 1 hour 26 minutes from the summit. Our return in time for lunch surprised Graven for he had laughed when we had said the day before that we hoped to go down to Zermatt the same day. Later, judging from stories, he seems to have come to the conclusion that we were hoaxing him or at any rate that our ascent was a pure figment of the imagination. In Zermatt the ridge seems to have a great reputation ; few of the guides have done it, not even for the fun of climbing. What a contrast to the guides of Chamonix ! Although at a higher altitude it is easier and shorter than the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon—the ridge is only four hours' climbing and has only four passages of IV.

There was time for one more climb before going on to the Cambridge meet at Zinal, the South face of the Obergabelhorn. Instead of using a hut we pitched a tent next day in the Arbental ; the situation was superb with the South face of the Gabelhorn on one side and the North face of the Matterhorn on the other. The evening was as pleasant as any I have spent, moreover our tent saved us two hours next day. The rock of the face is good sound granite, but unlike most granite, of a slabby nature. In our efforts to get into the sun we went too far to the right ; the real route goes straight up towards the Grand Gendarme and then across easy ledges and an easy couloir to the summit. Our route became increasingly steep until we were forced to move singly and pad our way across smooth slabs and up a steep wall to join the route. We decided on the direct finish, but although liberally pitoned it is not as hard as the guide book leads one to suppose. We reached the ridge a minute or two below the summit ; in $8\frac{1}{2}$ hours of climbing with 5 hours on the face. The day was hot and we found the descent of the Arbengrat tedious but it did not last long and we were back at the tent just in time for tea.

At Zinal Band and I split, although we both began by taking parties over the Grand Cornier. This gave us a good opportunity of

examining the North ridge of the Dent Blanche which we hoped to climb after the meet; it was an impressive sight in the morning sun.

Next day I took a party over the Lo Besso and Blanc de Moming traverse, good for the views but for little else. This was to be followed by the Rothorn traverse, Rothorngrat-Nordgrat, but a bad decision on the weather robbed us of it. Two days later, however, I was back at the Mountet hut and next day we traversed the Obergabelhorn and Wellenkuppe. This is a most enjoyable all-round expedition: step cutting to the Col Durand, then subsidiary humps of mixed climbing between it and the Arbengrat. This had a sprinkling of fresh snow and proved much better value in ascent than descent. By a mistake we climbed its Grand Gendarme; this has a VS move on it which I remember thinking at the time was odd on a standard route.

The next item was the Teufelsgrat. The guardian of the Täsch hut helped us considerably with information on it, as we had no guide book. The couloir leading to the ridge provided a foretaste of the rock to come; the ridge is too flat and too rotten to have much rock interest. But the view of the South face was sufficient compensation, it looked more like a vertical pile of scree than anything else. The summit was reached in $9\frac{3}{4}$ hours of climbing from the hut; here we had a really long bask. We descended to Randa down the upper Kien glacier, but instead of trying to cross to the Festi glacier we took to the small subsidiary ridge which separates the two bays of the Kien glacier to avoid the icefall, abseiling off the ridge back on to the glacier below it. Like Emlyn Jones' party of 1948 we found that the worst part of the descent was to come: the scree, steep grass, and juniper of the Kiental. Even bad things come to an end, and eventually $5\frac{1}{2}$ hours from the summit we arrived in Randa.

There was now only time for one more climb. The most fitting way of rounding off the meet and returning to Zinal was obviously over the Weisshorn by the Schalligrat and the Nordgrat. We went up to the hut next afternoon, made our 'recce' and were all set. Then the first major storm for a month broke. We set off next morning with the clouds low in the sky and the continual flicker of lightning on the horizon. As we approached the first rocks there were two huge flashes on the Weisshorn and heavy drops of rain; we scampered back to the hut just in time to avoid a wetting. So it was back to Zinal the expensive way, by train and bus. But back at Zinal we heard that George Band and John Streetly, forestalling the storm by a day, had done the North ridge of the Dent Blanche; it was good that they had not waited but it was disappointing not to have been there.

On July 24th I arrived in Chamonix via Genevan flesh-pots. Everyone seemed to be there and full of news. Magnoni had climbed the West face of the Dru and the éperon Walker of the Jorasses had become almost vulgar if that could be possible. I met Band that evening and we agreed on an old classic, the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon before sampling the more recondite Chamonix climbs. C. R. Simpson

and E. A. Wrangham came too and we all went up to the Envers des Aiguilles hut next day. The hut is still unfinished but it is progressing : last year we lived in the cellar, this year still virtually in the dark but on the ground floor. The Grépon next day was wholly delightful ; there is after all nothing to touch the rock of Chamonix. The climb is sufficiently difficult to make you feel that you ought to move singly and this, the least energetic form of progression, gives you a chance of seeing the surrounding country ; at alternate stances we had basks in the sun while the other climbed unencumbered by coils of recalcitrant rope.

Band led the Knubel crack very smoothly to an audience of peering heads from the summit ; I found it genuinely difficult but perhaps not as difficult as I had worked myself up for. It makes a lovely finish to the climb and, rare in Chamonix, is satisfyingly delicate.

The Grépon was to be followed by the Sans Nom arête of the Aiguille Verte and, as a preface to this, the Drus traverse which neither of us had done. A tentative idea was that if we found ourselves on the summit of the Grand Dru early enough we should press on along the Sans Nom ridge and risk a night out on the Moine ridge. So much for plans : next morning there was a gale blowing and it was snowing hard. We returned dripping to Chamonix.

I now had little more than a week left and there were two ' musts ' before leaving : the South ridge of the Aiguille Noire de Péteret and the Péteret ridge of Mont Blanc. Now the former was supposed to be considerably harder than anything either of us had done before, for it is graded ' TD *supérieure*. ' We had both done TD's before but we thought we ought to try something equivalent but shorter to see if we could cope adequately with hard pitches—to be more accurate, to see if I could cope, for Band is a much better rock climber than I am. The North ridge of the Peigne was suggested, for, to quote the Vallot Guidebook, it was ' the most elegant and most difficult on the mountain. TD sup. It is particularly athletic. ' We argued that since the Peigne is a small mountain this was the climb. But we overlooked one or two facts : the Peigne is small, but on the other hand it starts low down, the *dénivellation* of the ridge is 650 m., longer for example than the Ryan route on the Plan. Further there were, even for this standard, an undue number of difficult pitches : there were nine passages of ' V, ' one of ' AI, ' and countless of ' IV. ' Finally, as we only learnt afterwards, Lionel Terray is reputed to have said that it was one of the hardest rock climbs he had done. The route turned out to be one of great character and a fitting tribute to its creator, Francis Aubert. It consists really of two parts, the difficulties being all in the last 200 m., a great chimney-*dièdre*. In the first ascent in 1947 and many of the subsequent ascents the *dièdre* was approached from the ordinary route and across the Chamonix face, this gave an easy and quick approach to the climb ; in 1949 the French rock climbers, Gabriel and Livanos, linked the *dièdre* with the rest of the ridge, greatly improving it but making it longer and more difficult. Their route has been climbed perhaps half a dozen times and the *dièdre* perhaps a total of ten times.



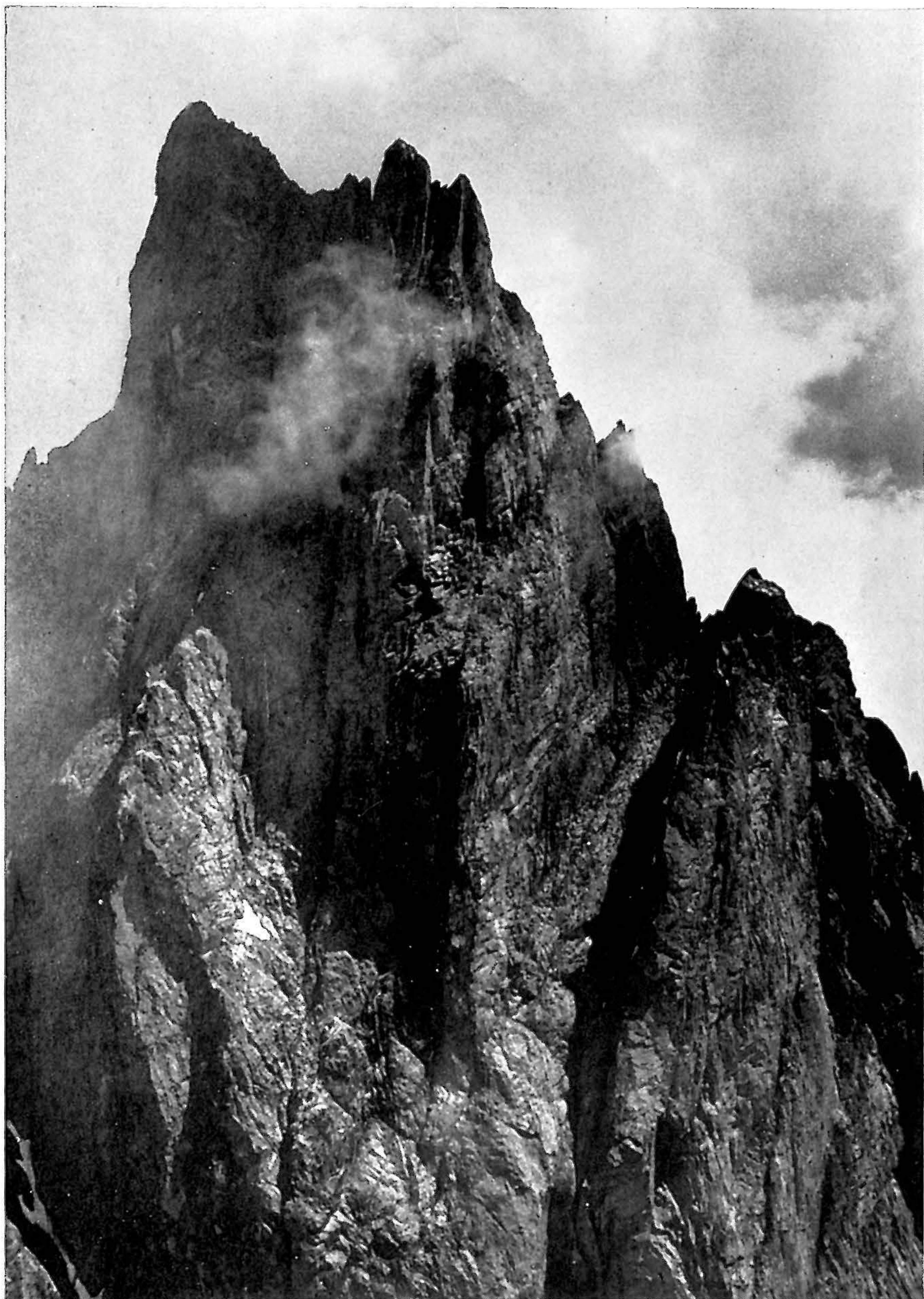
Photo, C. D. Milner.]

AIGUILLE NOIRE DE PÉTERET AND THE FAUTEUIL DES ALLEMANDS.

It appeared that Arthur Dolphin and Ian McNaught-Davis were going to do it so we joined forces and the four of us left a chalet near the Montenvers on July 31 at 3.40 A.M. From the Plan de l'Aiguille we made straight for the couloir at the foot of the ridge. I will pass quickly over the lower part of the ridge, we wasted some time trying to find the best route on to it, at first it was broad and ill-defined with a fair amount of loose rock and, unexpectedly in places, greasy lichen. It is comparable both in difficulty and length of time with the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon. Below the *dièdre* the ridge flattens and narrows, we lunched and were disconcerted to find we were a long way behind time. When we eventually reached the foot of the *dièdre* we had taken seven climbing hours from Plan de l'Aiguille; the guide book said three to four. For most mortals I think this is rather rapid.

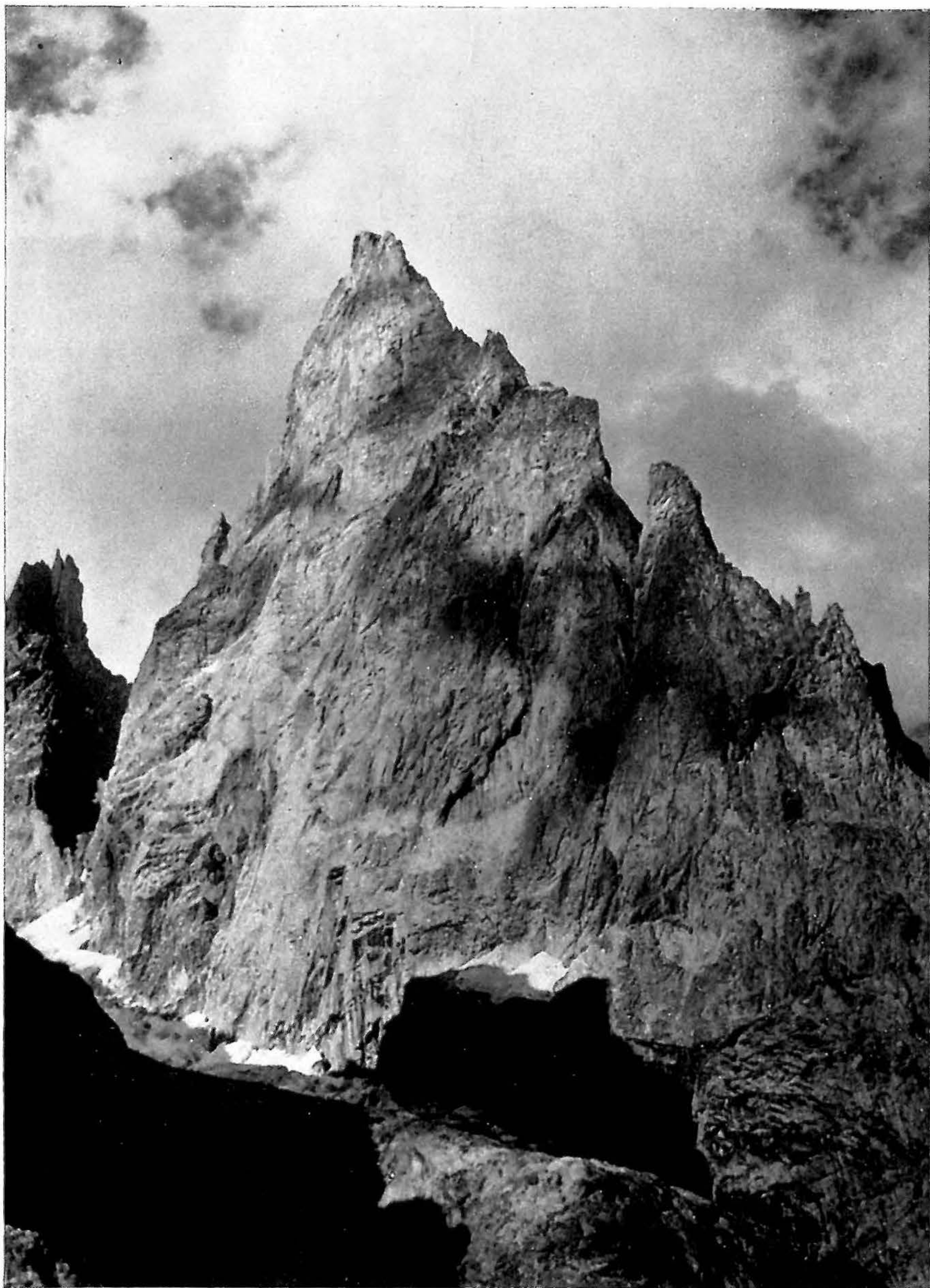
The great *dièdre* began reasonably with a slab cut by cracks and an easy chimney until further progress was barred by a large overhanging jammed block. This was the first difficulty, but backing up and a Harrison's Rocks move out of balance solved it; a few more feet of chimney led up to a bigger and better overhang. There was no future in trying to surmount the overhang and Band disappeared round a corner on the right; for what seemed a long time we heard only the occasional scrabble of a slipping boot, then he was up. The route round the corner was a delicate traverse ending at the foot of a crack; having completed it I looked up. The view was impressive: two smooth walls lying like a book opened at 40°, and steep too. In the apex was a crack wide enough for hand-jamming; below was a view of the Blaitière glacier; a 100 feet above was Band amused at my astonishment; it must have given Aubert a great thrill discovering it. The first 30 feet were climbed entirely on hand-jams, occasionally a foot slipped off the smooth wall for the rock was greasy; however, the holds began to appear and even a 'floor' and it eased progressively. George Band was belayed to a piton under another large overhanging roof. I realised at this time that I was quite happy not leading, our normal practice was to lead through, but Band had led the last two pitches and went on to lead the next three; he was in great form and I was quite content to play second fiddle.

The guide book told us to climb the overhang either on the right or on the left; neither looked feasible, the latter absurd. I suggested an *étrier* and Band, using his notorious reach, managed to clip on to a piton. This solved it and he disappeared above. Arthur Dolphin now appeared from below and we wondered how much of the *dièdre* we had done; not yet half we thought. The strenuous pull up on the *étrier* was followed in a few feet by a hard overhanging crack; more hand-jamming. Band was ensconced below yet another overhang, this time a *dièdre*; there was no stance, just some footholds on a slab. The next hour or so I spent working out all the different possible foot positions. Band had a preliminary look at the next pitch which had the artificial passage on it and decided that the *étrier* was necessary,



Photo, C. D. Milner.]

AIGUILLE NOIRE DE PÉTERET : THE UPPER PORTION OF THE S. RIDGE.



Photo, C. D. Milner.]

AIGUILLE NOIRE DE PÉTERET : S. RIDGE FROM NEAR THE GAMBA HUT.

so he returned to wait for the others. Dolphin's head appeared above the overhang below. As he began to emerge the rope between him and McNaught-Davis jammed ; he could not climb up nor could he climb down because of a loose block. He called for a top rope ; now the separate strands of our doubled rope were through different karabiners in the complicated set up for tension climbing, and it took time to untie one strand, pull it through and throw it down. It fell short by five feet and became jammed in a crack. Dolphin was supporting most of his weight on his hands and was beginning to tire. The only solution was to untie completely and throw the other end down. It fell a foot short ; we drastically shortened the loop in the end and ' third time lucky.' With our pulling we managed to free his rope and bring him up, then we brought McNaught-Davis up and the situation was again in hand.

From my shoulder Band embarked on the artificial passage and, assisted by pulling from below, was soon up ; the actual artificial passage was only about twelve feet but overhanging. It is a misconception to think of such climbing as an easy way out ; in fact it is much more strenuous than free climbing and usually takes much longer. I followed, but the rope had become jammed behind the *étrier* and I had to descend to free it. This was not the place to learn artificial climbing. The second attempt became abortive when I removed a sling that Band had used as a stirrup—not realising this I could not see how to make the move, so down again with rather tired arms. McNaught-Davis followed, realised about the sling and was soon up ; I followed, amazed at my foolishness. Dolphin followed at speed ; to be last on an artificial pitch is in many ways more difficult than leading as one has to remove the *étrier*, karabiners, pitons and so on. After his affair on the overhang he seemed suddenly to find form and with pulling above he came up very quickly.

The beginning of the next pitch was psychologically rather than technically difficult : a pull up on a hand jam above a little overhang until you could get a foot on to a sloping hold. You felt your hand would slip out, once launched you found it did not ; above, a few feet of *dièdre* (jamming again) led to a stance pleasantly enclosed behind a huge flake. It was a lesson to see Dolphin, a gritstone expert, jamming up this, punching his hands into the crack. He now took the lead up the last hard pitch ; it began with a crack wide enough in its lower part only for pitons until it widened sufficiently for the now inevitable hand jam. Suddenly the difficulties eased—there was even a small grotto ; the summit was only two small overhangs away ; strenuous though these were we were used to such things by now. At 8.00 P.M. we were on the summit, the *dièdre* had taken nearly eight hours.

When we left at 8.15 after a bite we had exactly half an hour's daylight left. We put this time to good use and when it was too dark to see we had covered the most difficult part of the descent where the route would be tricky to find in the dark. We reached the couloir and

after another halt the weary descent continued. Actually it is remarkable how easy it is to climb easy rock in the dark with a torch, but it is painfully slow. We could not find the route out of the couloir so we continued on down it; at 1 A.M. another halt was suggested and we just lay down on a patch of scree and I for one slept soundly. I was not so much physically tired as tired with the concentrating on the act of climbing—a state of affairs which is potentially dangerous. With the dawn the tedious process began again: a couple of abseils, a few more hundred feet of scrambling and we were down; not quite though, a ridiculous little pocket handkerchief of a snow slope forced us to put on crampons for some three minutes. At 7.00 A.M. we were back at the chalet for a long bout of eating and sleeping.

It is not easy to assess objectively the difficulty of rock when one has not led; on the one hand there is the psychological aid of the rope above, on the other hand one tends to climb badly in one's efforts to move quickly. But there seemed general agreement that much of the *dièdre* was good 'VS'; the mountain had certainly surprised us and the night out was unexpected. Yet somehow it did not alter the plans for the Aiguille Noire, partly we knew we would have to bivouac on this, partly also we just felt it would be easier. We were quite right; although longer it is not comparable for difficulty. I do not wish to belittle it, the South ridge of the Aiguille Noire is a ridge of great distinction and undoubtedly one of the most beautiful rock climbs in the Alps; difficulty is after all not everything.

A chance remark at breakfast on the day we were leaving for Courmayeur revealed that Godfrey Francis was also going there to retrieve a camera left behind when he and Geoffrey Sutton were over there with Lionel Terray for the Fresnay face of Mont Blanc. E. A. Wrangham was also at a loose end so we invited them to join us; the party was again four, the ideal number for a big climb.

All roads lead to Rome and I suppose all climbers eventually reach Courmayeur. For myself and Band it held all the expectancy of a first visit and was a welcome contrast to the urban squalor of Chamonix. After a night in a field we went up to the Noire hut perched under a cliff in the Fauteuil des Allemands, the huge combe enclosed by the South and South-east ridges. With the evening sun streaming behind its six towers, our ridge was an impressive sight. This then was the ridge that had had the honour of being one of the unsolved problems of the Alps in its day. Many strong parties failed on it and the ridge had already a great reputation before Brendel and Schaller succeeded in 1930. 'This expedition will rank as one of the most terrible accomplished,' commented the *Alpine Journal*.

We left at 3.40 A.M. and were at the foot of the rocks in an hour, the summit lay 1,100 m. above. The ridge is reached above the first tower, the Pointe Gamba, a fine sight similar to an Aiguille du Roc with a middle-age spread. The climbing continues relatively easily until a tower appears: here, remarks the guide book, the difficulties begin. Some of the pitches that followed had character, others had not; one

required a shoulder, another was a charming little arête formed of two slabs with a marked economy of holds. In some seven hours we were on the third tower, the Pointe Welzenbach. A 25 m. rappel took us to the brèche below it, you are now supposed to have burnt your boats, but if the situation demanded it I think you could climb back.

A few feet of easy rock now led to the first crux, the *ressaut en demi-lune* which rises from a deep and narrow nick in the ridge. A great stride across the gap launched one well up on the wall; leading through from Band I was surprised to find myself on the top of the *ressaut*. This passage was graded until recently as one of VI; it should really be low in the Vs. Neither this part nor any other part of the climb is more than hard severe, at a pinch, perhaps, 'easy VS.'

Above, overlooking the Fauteuil, were the great yellow precipices of the Pointe Brendel, but the route lies on the more amenable Fresnay side up a 20 m. crack in a slab. At the top of this the guides of Courmayeur drilled two iron spikes into the rock; neither are necessary, one seems pointless. The route apparently now goes by hand traverses to the left; the more obvious line, which Band took, was straight up over the small overhang. The back of the Pointe Brendel was now broken and it was not long before we were on its top. Here, joy of joys, there was a patch of snow, the only one on the ridge; we quenched our thirst and filled our flasks from drip water. Climbing under a southern sun is both thirsty work and enervating, but because of the bivouac we had to ration ourselves drastically. We left at 3.00 P.M. and descended to the next *brèche*. From here we could see a party of three Italians; we had already seen them on the Pointe Brendel from Pointe Welzenbach, but they were now only just ahead on the second crux.

The fifth tower, about 300 feet high, is even more impressive than Pointe Brendel. Leading through from Band after the first pitch, I reached the last Italian; there was no room on Band's stance and I had to share a piton with the Italian. After half an hour of half-hanging to this I had had enough and tried another slightly more commodious place, and was there for another half-hour. Eventually he departed to the accompaniment of the Italian version of the Volga Boat song for the refrain ran 'tira, tira, tira. . . .' Band came through and up the so-called pitch of 'VI,' which ends with an awkward corner. On the top of the fifth tower we overtook the Italians; they had already had one bivouac apparently, and we never saw them again until next day. There were two more relatively hard pitches at the foot of the Pointe Bich, but at 7.00 P.M. we were on its summit. A rappel, more scrambling and at 8.00 P.M. we were at the top. We did not halt until, a few minutes down the ridge, we found a good place for the bivouac. In the remaining light we set about improving and enlarging it; this done we retired to our sleeping bags and began cooking. We had cold food and hot soup and Tonimalt. Hot food plus a sleeping bag make a bivouac enjoyable, but our rucksacks had never made their presence felt unduly.

When thoroughly warmed by a hot drink and the morning sun, we left again next morning at 7.00 A.M. It had been a pleasant night. Of the South-east ridge the less said the better; if one manages to find the best route one rarely needs to use the hands. It is long and, with a raging thirst and a vacant stomach, tedious in the extreme. Eventually just above the combe floor we lost the route. Too thirsty to retrace our steps, we simply abseiled towards the nearest stream. That afternoon the impending storm broke and continued far into the night. The Péteret ridge was obviously out and the best of seasons was over.