

THE CENTRAL PILLAR OF FRÊNEY

BY C. J. S. BONINGTON

‘It’s too warm Don, we could always go up the Major.’ I was afraid, standing there on the Col Moore. My mind, out of control, sought for an easy alternative. Water was trickling down the rocks in the shadows below us. The moon was full and the sky full of stars, but the mountains around us were not frozen into complete silence. Perhaps the weather was changing. The Col de Peuterey across the dark gulf of the Brenva glacier seemed very remote. The Pillars of Frêne were not even in sight. It would have been so easy to climb the long, easy snow-slopes of the Brenva face, and be on the top of Mont Blanc before dawn. Fear of the weather, fear of unknown changes, grew inside me.

‘We’ve come this far, we’ll go on.’ Don spoke quietly and decisively. As we stepped down into the shadows, my fear left me. I revelled in the steepness of the hard snow, the feel of my crampons, biting home, and of my own movement and balance. We were now committed to our venture. After leaving the Col Moore, we never thought of retreat.

We were bound for the Central Pillar of Frêne. This granite tower, flanked by two buttresses, stands at the head of the Frêne glacier. Its base is at 3,900 metres, higher than the tops of nearly every major rock climb in the Alps. To reach it is an expedition in itself. As a result the Frêne cirque has been neglected. The two great ridges containing the cirque like the arms of a crouching sphinx were both climbed many years ago. The cirque itself was touched by Eustace Thomas and R. L. M. Underhill when they made a variant descent of the Innominata face in 1928. Graham Brown climbed up this route in the following year. The Pillars themselves were left untrodden until 1940 when Gervasutti, with Bollini, climbed the right-hand Pillar. This gave a magnificent climb of T.D. Sup. It was climbed for a second time in 1953 by a French party which included the guide Julien.

He was tremendously attracted by the mass of rock on his left—the smooth tapering obelisk at the top, resting on a massive plinth of fissured granite. Other leading continental climbers were also interested and several attempts were made during the ‘fifties. However, the remoteness of the climb made settled weather essential. As a result, all the attempts were abandoned at an early stage because of threatened changes.

On June 9, 1961, two parties arrived at the Col de la Fourche—Guillaume, Vieille, Kohlmann and Mazeaud from France, and Bonatti, Oggioni and their client, Gallieni, from Italy. That night they set out on the long approach to the foot of their climb, reaching the lower rocks on the morning of the 10th. They made good progress that day, getting two-thirds of the way up. On the following day they quickly reached the smooth tower near the top. The weather had been deteriorating all day, and as they slowly worked their way up the final tower a violent thunderstorm exploded around them. They retreated to two ledges, on semi-detached blocks at the foot of the tower.

They now had a difficult decision to make. Retreat back to the Col de la Fourche was impossible. The way down the Frêne glacier, to the safety of the Gamba hut, would be extremely dangerous, while only two hundred feet of rock barred them from the comparative safety of the upper slopes of Mont Blanc, with the Vallot hut only just over the top.

They therefore decided to sit out the storm. After all, it was only a thunderstorm and it should have blown itself out after twenty-four hours or so. They sat there for two days and three nights. The conditions were appalling. The ledges were only wide enough to sit on and it was impossible to keep dry. On the third day they realised the inevitability of retreat, and started down the Pillar. Rappelling down the rocks presented few problems. Once down, however, it was a different story. The soft snow, rushing down in little avalanches, was thigh-deep. It was impossible to see more than a few feet, and finding a way across the *rimaye* was a desperate business. That night they got back to the Col de Peuterey. Weakened, soaked to the skin, they spent the night in a crevasse.

On the morning of the 15th, on the top of the 'rochers Gruber', Vieille collapsed, and died from exhaustion. It took them most of that day to descend the rock spur. During a lull in the storm, a rescue party on the Innominata spur heard their shouts, but was powerless to do anything.

Once on the glacier, two ropes were formed—Bonatti, Gallieni and Kohlmann in one and Mazeaud, Oggioni and Guillaume in the other. As they fumbled their way through the drifting snow and round the crevasses on the glacier, Guillaume fell behind, exhausted. They reached the foot of the couloir leading to the Col de l'Innominata at nine o'clock that night. Mazeaud went back to find Guillaume but could see no trace of him. Oggioni was exhausted and could go no further.

The other three pressed on. The only hope of survival for any of them was to reach the Gamba hut and get help. Kohlmann collapsed only a few hundred yards from the hut; Bonatti and Gallieni staggered on, reaching the hut at three o'clock in the morning. The rescue party

in the hut immediately went out to pick up the others. Kohlmann died before they could carry him back to the hut and Oggioni died during the night in Mazeaud's arms.

This was the end of a determined, well-planned and equipped attempt on the Frêne Pillar, by some of Europe's best climbers. It emphasised the great objective dangers in attempting this route. The rock was sound, there were no stone-falls, but in the event of bad weather retreat would be extremely difficult. Bonatti knew the area intimately. A party without the same knowledge would have little chance of getting back in similar conditions.

The Pillar was no longer known to only a few leading Alpinists. It was inevitable that more parties would be attracted by its challenge. At the end of July, Pierre Julien, a *professeur* at the École Nationale in Chamonix, and Piussi, an Italian climber attending an International Meet held there, decided to make an attempt. Julien was restricted for time, so he hired a helicopter to take them to the top of Mont Blanc. They then descended the Peuterey ridge, and crossed to the foot of the Pillar. There was a lot of snow from the previous bad weather, clinging to the rocks. At three o'clock that afternoon they found a good bivouac site about two-thirds of the way up the Pillar, and spent the night there.

On the following day they reached the foot of the smooth section, and bivouacked again. Meanwhile the weather had become threatening. Heavy snow clouds were settling on the top of Mont Blanc. The next morning, on the smooth bulging tower, above the Bonatti bivouac, Piussi dropped most of their pitons and karabiners. Without sufficient material, the pair had no choice but retreat. They descended to the Gamba hut harassed by gusting snow-showers, reaching it at half past four in the morning.

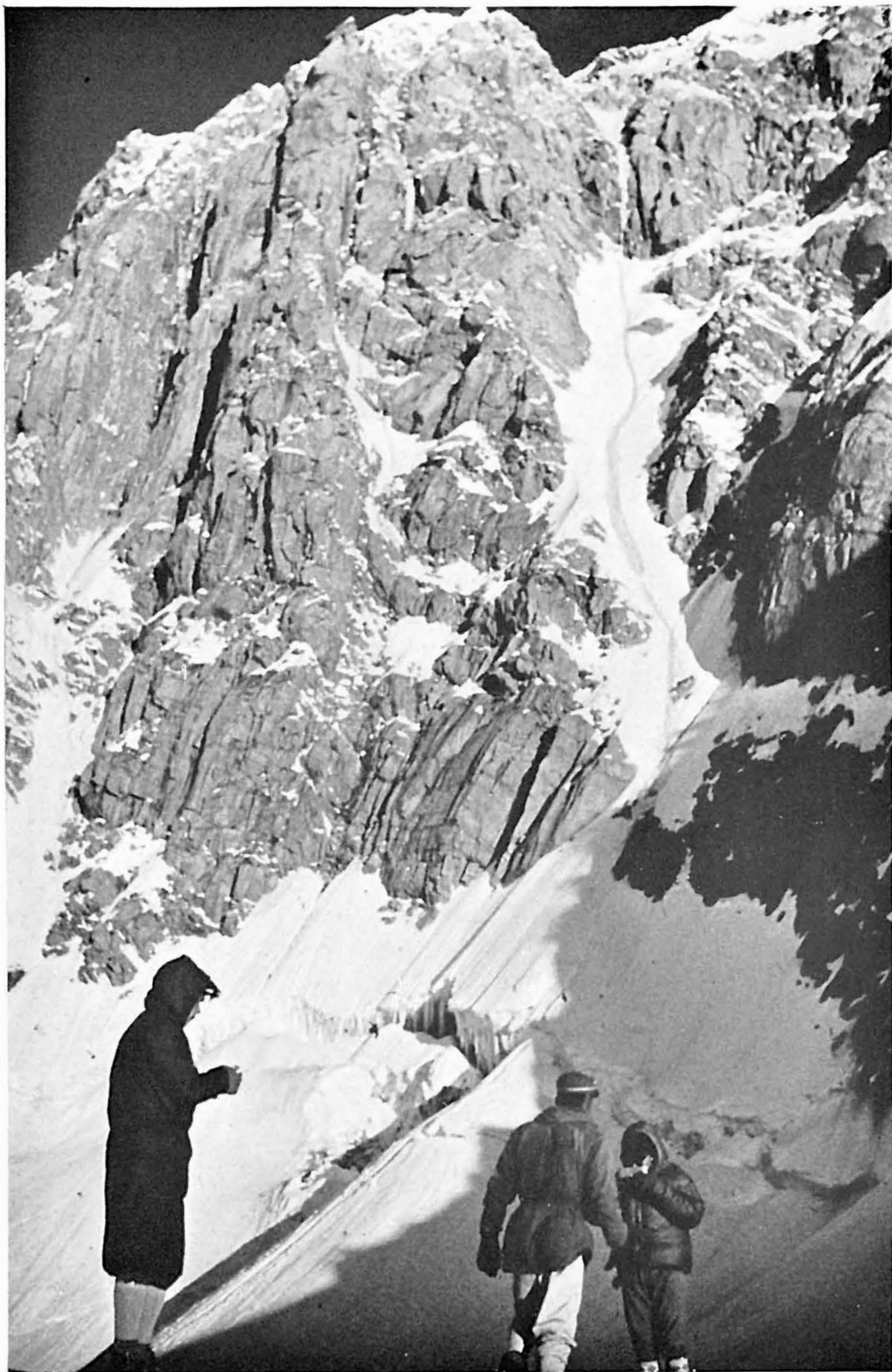
The scene was now set for a third attempt. Don Whillans and I had been in Grindelwald, waiting for some good weather to attempt the Eiger. Towards the end of August we abandoned our attempt and crossed to Chamonix. We had with us a Polish climber Jan Djuglosz who had also been waiting at the foot of the Eiger. He spoke some English, was strongly built and had a good Alpine record, having done such routes as the West face of the Dru.

In Chamonix we wanted to find a fourth member for our party. We were lucky to find in Chamonix Ian Clough, a Yorkshire climber, who had already had an outstanding Alpine season (described by him elsewhere in this JOURNAL). Ian is a friendly, very modest, easy-going person, who makes an ideal companion on a major expedition. At the same time he has considerable determination, and is a fine mountaineer in his own right.

After several delays we were ready to go. On the afternoon of the



THE FRÊNEY FACE OF MONT BLANC FROM PUNTA GUGLIERMINA.



CENTRAL PILLAR OF FRÉNEY FROM COL DE PEUTEREY.

26th we caught the last *téléphérique* to the Aiguille du Midi. When we arrived at the station, we found three other well-equipped climbers, weighed down by heavy sacks. They were Desmaison, Pollet-Villard and Julien. There could only be one climb they were interested in. We wondered where the fourth member of the party could be. Surely they were not going as a party of three? We were still more mystified when we reached the top of the Midi. They took the telecabins to Torino. Were they going down to Courmayeur, to approach by the Gamba? Was this the best route?

Anyway we could not afford to go to Courmayeur, so we started the long walk to the Col de la Fourche. As I lay down that night squeezed between Don and Ian, I longed for the sound of the alarm. Lying uncomfortable and inactive, one's imagination had too free a rein.

At half past eleven the alarm rang. We were soon ready, crampons on, dropping down towards the Brenva glacier and across to the Col Moore. As we stood there, that one agonising moment of indecision tortured me. How I longed to escape from the danger and discomfort. Yet once committed, climbing down towards the other branch of the Brenva glacier, I was only conscious of the excitement of anticipation. I wondered if the others had felt the same as I.

We roped up on the glacier and soon reached the foot of the couloir leading to the Col de Peuterey. At first the couloir bulged steeply and we moved one at a time. After three or four rope-lengths the angle eased and we were able to adopt an easy, rhythmic pace, kicking into the firm snow. Near the top it steepened again, and I found myself inadequately belayed by Don, poised delicately on a steep, loose rock wall. My head-torch kept going out, the holds all sloped the wrong way and the big blocks of rock seemed barely cemented together by the ice. I could feel the impatience of the others as I teetered and fumbled on the wall. Was I going to climb badly all the time?

It was half past four in the morning and we were on the Col de Peuterey. It had seemed too warm earlier on. Now it was reassuringly cold. We were frozen to the marrow. It was too cold even to think of starting the rock climb, so we decided to celebrate by having a brew of tea. As the snow slowly melted in the pot, we stood, stamping our feet, teeth chattering, waiting for the warmth of the sun to reach us. Every now and then we glanced down the couloir, hoping to see the other party. As the first rays of the sun hit the col we saw two figures far below, at the foot of the couloir. We felt sorry for them. It would be hard, possibly dangerous work, climbing the couloir with the sun on it.

As we drank our tea, we examined our route. The rock, lit by the early sun, was an invitingly rich brown. The first fifteen hundred feet or so were seamed by cracks and snow-covered ledges. Warmed by the

sun it was easy work crossing the snow-slopes to the *rimaye* below the rocks. By eight o'clock we were ensconced on a narrow ledge, taking off our crampons.

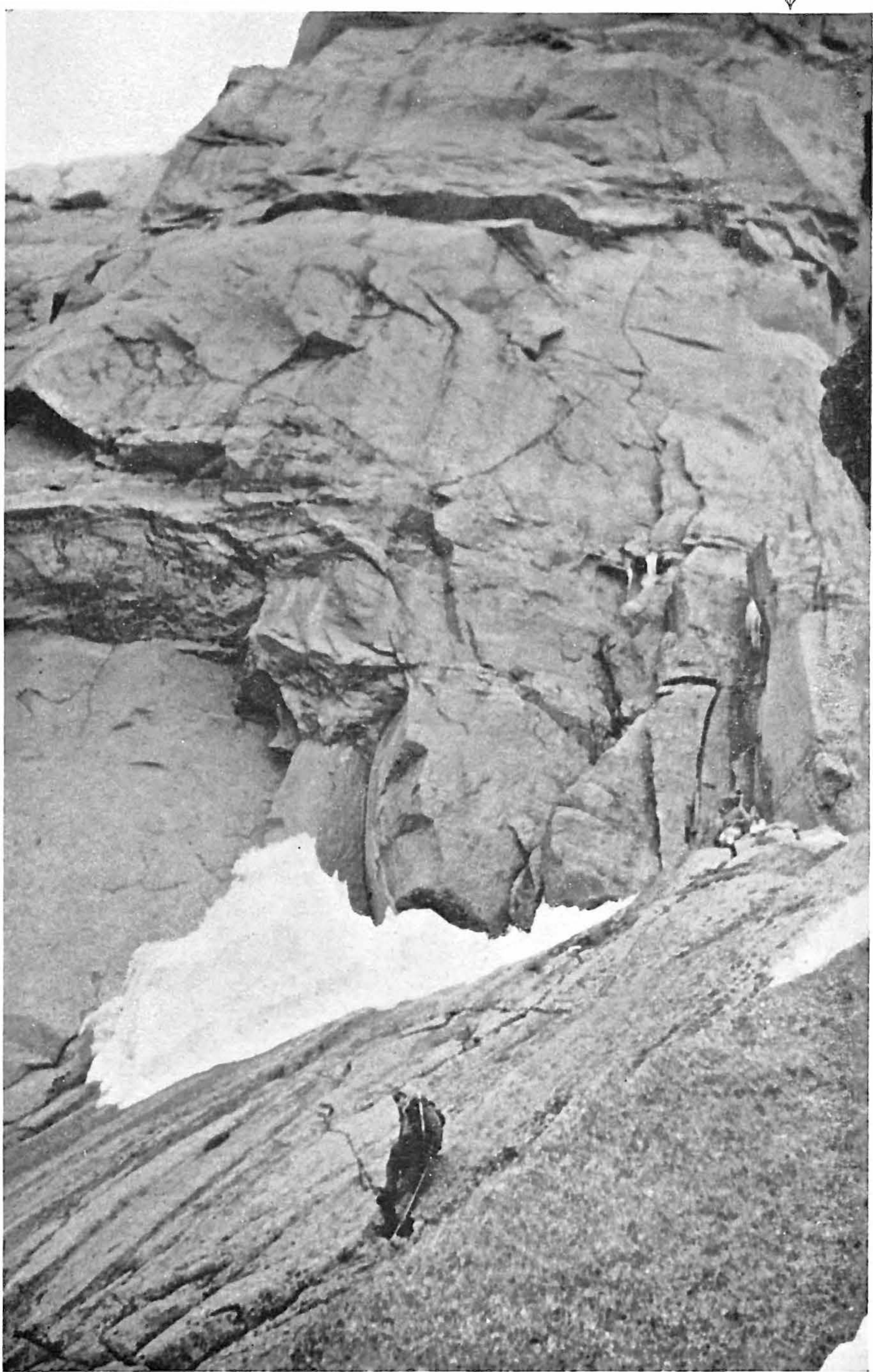
Don and I decided to climb together, followed by Ian and Jan. The texture of the rock was magnificent—rough to the touch, warm in the sun. Don quickly shot up a groove and I soon followed. It would be impossible to give a pitch by pitch description. There was so much of it—cracks, chimneys, slabs, walls—occasionally a piton left by one of the previous parties, to show we were on the route. We only put in three or four of our own pitons, and never used any *étriers*. The climbing varied between IV, V and V Sup., or Severe, with the odd pitch of V.S., by British standards.

Don and I found we were climbing more quickly than the others. Ian Clough was in fine form, but Djuglosz seemed to be feeling the effects of altitude. We therefore changed ropes; Don took Ian, and I stayed behind to climb with Djuglosz. At about midday we noticed that two other climbers had reached the Col de Peuterey. These were not in fact the French party, but were two Americans. The French had gone over to Torino to meet Piussi. He had been delayed and did not arrive that night. Leaving Julien to wait for him, Desmaison and Pollet-Villard set out that night for the Col de Peuterey. They were behind the Americans and only reached the col at two o'clock that afternoon. We were unable at the time to understand why they did not immediately go on to the Pillar, but of course they had to wait for the rest of the party, who only arrived that evening.

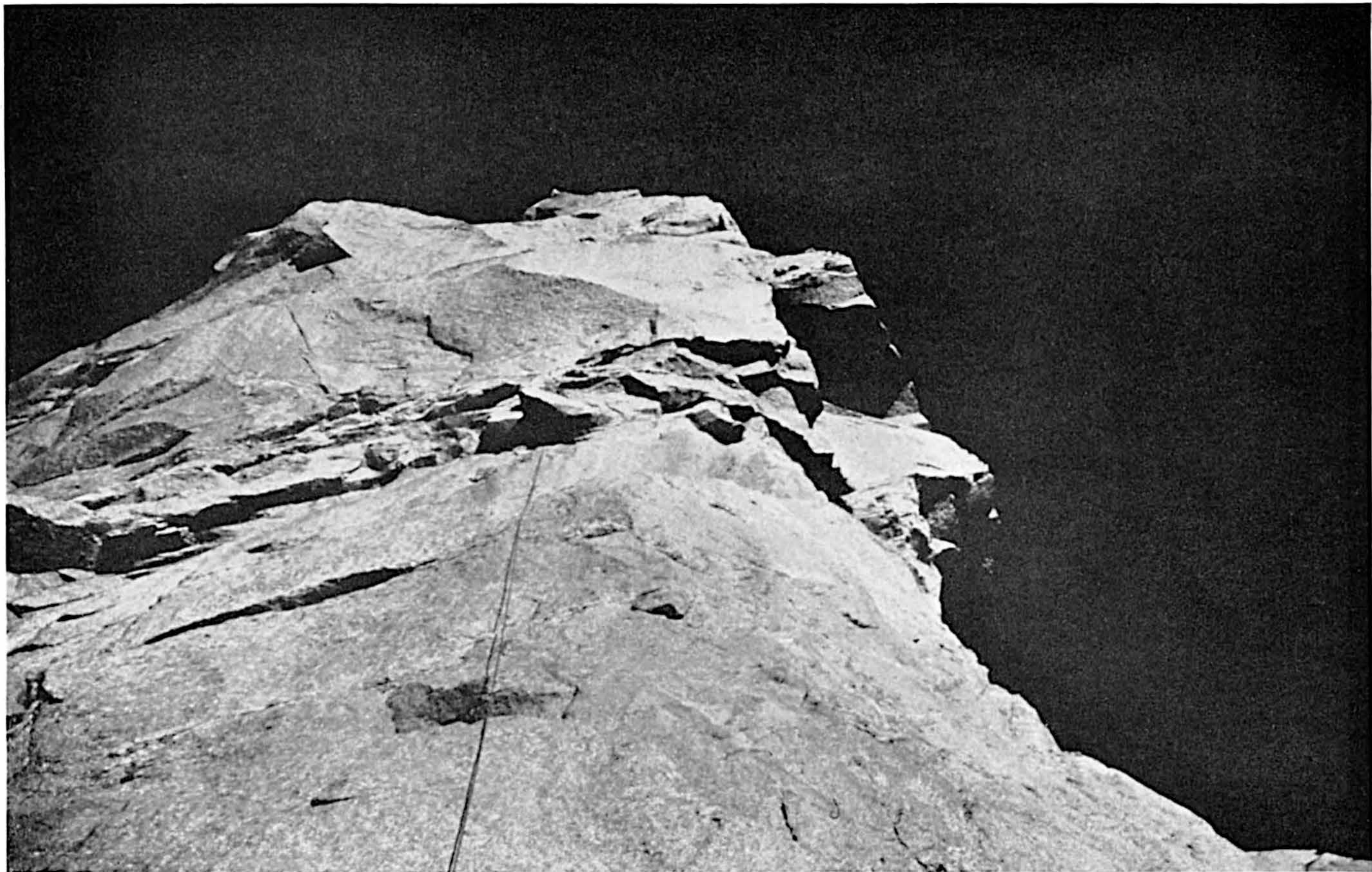
We were making fast progress. The climbing was some of the most enjoyable I have ever done. Because our rucksacks were quite light we did not need to do any sack-hauling, except up narrow chimneys.

At three o'clock that afternoon we came in sight of the famous Bonatti bivouac, where the buttress narrowed. A fifty-foot pitch of straightforward artificial climbing led to the top of the pedestal, which formed the bivouac. There was still plenty of daylight, so Don decided to go up and have a look. I joined him again and took a belay on the bivouac ledge.

We could see a few pitons in the line of cracks, leading up to the bulge. Don, cloth cap planted firmly on his head, a cigarette gripped between his teeth, moved up, slowly and easily. He never seems to hurry when he climbs. Every move, every action is carefully planned—a piton hammered in here, an *étrier* clipped in, a pause, then a move. The rope never jams. He reached the bulge. There were only a few cracks. It was obviously improbable to go straight up. He worked his way across to the left; there seemed nothing there. The cracks either petered out in the bulge or seemed to be dead. It was getting cold; clouds were gathering; was the weather going to change?



APPROACHING THE FOOT OF THE STEEP SECTION. ARROWS INDICATE SITE OF THE FIRST BIVOUAC.



LOOKING STRAIGHT UP FROM THE FIRST BIVOUAC.

Don traversed to the right; he was moving very slowly. All too often the hammer thudded, dull and flat, telling of blind cracks and badly placed pegs.

I began to wish he would come down, so that we could get into our duvets, brew up some tea and clear the snow off our bivouac ledge. Still the rope ran out, inches at a time.

To the right of the Pillar out of sight was a dièdre, roofed by a huge overhang. There was a chimney in the roof. Perhaps there was a crack in the dièdre. Don was spreadeagled on the corner, the cracks were widely spaced. By a series of difficult tension moves, he was able to look into the dièdre. There was a crack there, but the wall between him and the dièdre was overhanging and holdless.

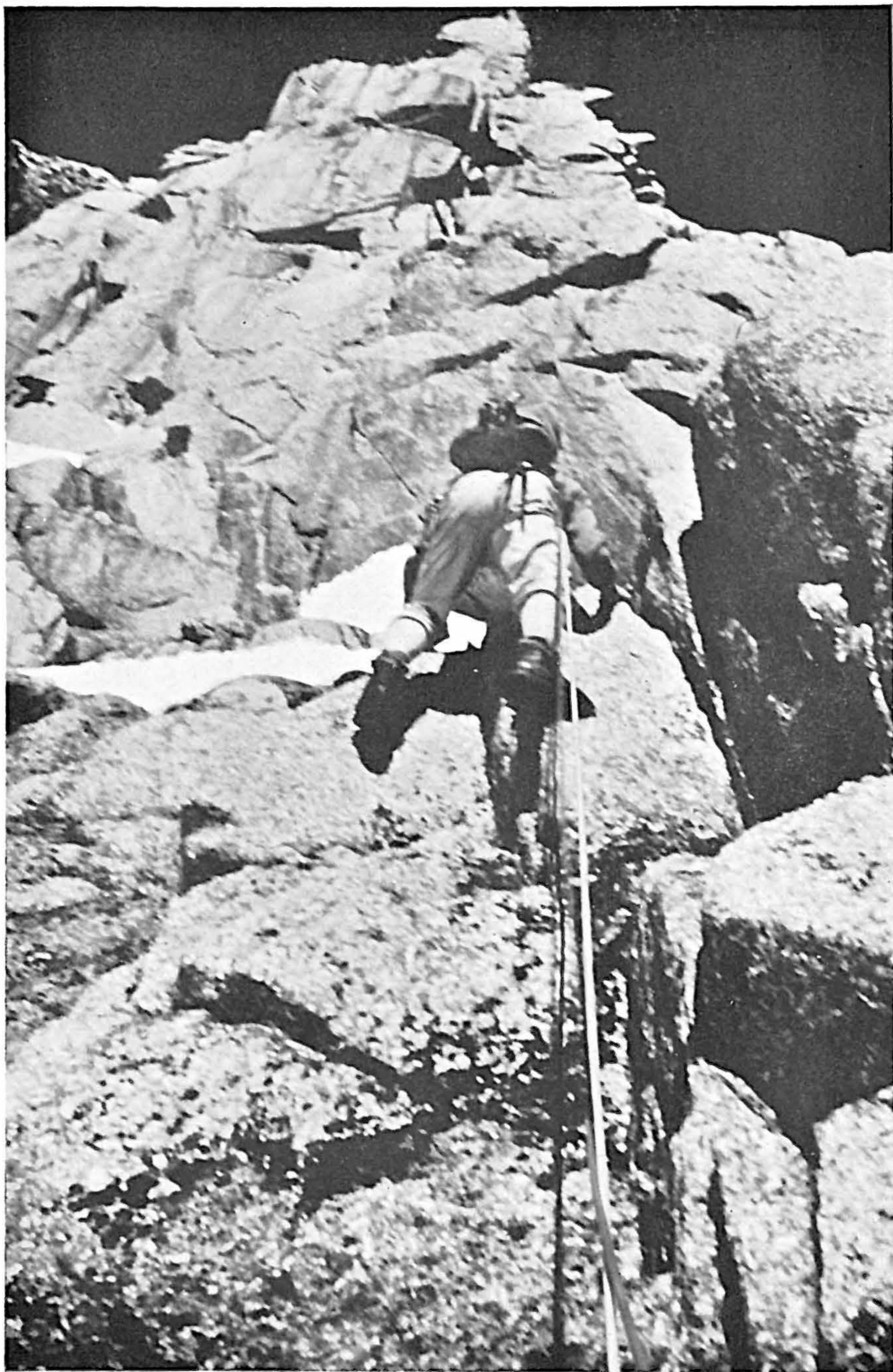
'Come on down, Don, or it'll be dark.' Reluctantly he returned, rappelling from a peg just before the corner. It was dark when he got back to the ledge.

The next hour was spent digging away the snow. As we dug we unearthed sad relics of the previous occupants—gas cylinders, cooking pots, pitons. As the night grew colder the clouds disappeared. We were prepared to put up with any amount of cold, provided only the weather remained settled. We sat, we shifted about, we got cramp and, every hour or so, we brewed a mess-tin full of tea.

As soon as it was light we organised our equipment, unravelled the ropes we had been sitting on and loaded ourselves with ironmongery. Don and I planned to climb above the ledge and then drop the others a rope, which they could prusik up. I left the ledge first, climbing up to where Don had made his rappel. Don then moved up past me. I was quite comfortable sitting in a sling, my foot braced on the rock. Don moved very slowly. Soon he was out of sight round the corner. I held the rope, enjoyed the sun and looked about me. The French party had started at the same time as ourselves. They quickly crossed to the front of the rocks and were climbing the couloir between the right-hand and Central Pillar.

Don succeeded in crossing the overhanging wall, using a series of tension traverses and a peg. He then climbed the dièdre, using channel pegs in the only crack. After twenty feet, it was barred by a small roof, which he succeeded in climbing. Above the roof, the crack widened. He was still twenty feet below the big roof, with its corner chimney. His pitons were too narrow and his wooden wedges too big. He decided to climb it free, but wanted to bring me to the foot of the dièdre first, to reduce the drag of the rope and to give better protection. I had been sitting in my rope seat for four hours. I was glad to move.

It was quite easy reaching the bulging corner and then everything sloped the wrong way. There were no holds. I had no rope behind, to hold me in balance. If I fell I should swing across, ending up in



DON WHILLANS ON THE LOWER PART OF THE PILLAR.

mid-air, spinning helpless on the end of the rope. I left an *étrier* in place and hanging on to it with one hand lunged across to an ace of spades peg which clung to a hairline crack with half an inch of its blade. The next piton was eight feet to my right. The rock pushed me out; there was nothing to hold on to, except a couple of undercut finger-holds. If I let go of the piton, I should swing, helpless. I had to have a rope from behind to give me tension. I returned to my belay round the bulge and pulled up a rope from the other two. With its tension from the back, I was now able to cross to the foot of the *dièdre*. It was a truly remarkable lead by Don.

Once I was tied to three pitons, Don was ready to start. We were now in the shade. Neither of us had put on our anoraks. It was bitterly cold. Don had been hanging in slings for an hour, while I had been performing my rope gymnastics.

The rope ran out quickly. He was laying back up the crack. There was a long pause. I thought he was up, and shouted something down to the others.

‘I’m coming off.’

It was a second before the import of Don’s cry impressed itself on my mind. I gripped the rope more tightly, and braced myself. Another long pause—he had his shoulders pinned in the chimney. There were no holds for his feet; he could not release either finger-jam. A crack which would take a wedge was in front of his nose, but he could not use it.

‘I’m off!’

The rope went slack in my hands—a strong jerk—Don was hanging level with my shoulders. He swung on to them, stood there resting, and cursed quietly, because he had lost his cloth cap and piton hammer on the way down. We were both quite calm and splendidly British, being careful not to dramatise in any way. Soon my fear of displaying emotion was drowned by the pain in my shoulders from Don’s weight, so I suggested we changed over. I went up quickly to the top piton, glad of any exercise to warm my frozen bones. The roof was twenty feet above me, the crack was easy to finger-jam, but where Don had failed to go, I was quite sure I should not succeed. I teetered around trying to use our wooden wedges. I hammered in our only small one and then, above it, succeeded in hammering in another, a couple of inches. It did not inspire much confidence.

At this stage, the French party arrived at the bivouac, having climbed a good half way up the couloir, before traversing into the buttress. I called down to Djuglosz, who spoke a little French, telling him to ask Julien for some small wedges or large pitons. There was a lot of talk and bargaining. Apparently the French thought we were off the route and wanted to have a look at the face of the Pillar. Anyway they gave us no pegs or other material.

I was convinced that our dièdre and chimney could be climbed. As a last resort we decided to use inserted chockstones, so we dropped our sack-hauling rope to Clough and Djuglosz and asked them to send up some slings and our anoraks.

I then started out once again, threading a sling behind the badly placed wedge; then, inserting two chockstones, neither very secure, I trod in the étriers delicately. My shoulders in the chimney, my feet in an étrier, I was able to hammer a wooden wedge into the base of the crack. It was a struggle, even then, to get into the chimney.

Looking through my legs, I could see the sack rope looping down many feet out from the face. I have never had such a sense of exposure. There were no holds below my feet. I was jammed across the crack, the walls sloping slightly outwards, rock above me, and either side of me, nothing below, until the couloir dropped steeply a thousand feet lower down. I edged my way out, knee jammed against one wall, back against the other. Twelve feet out, I was on the edge of the chimney, still no holds. A bulge of ice blocked the crack where the chimney narrowed above me. I reached out to the left and found a good jug hold. I got both hands on it, relaxed my body and swung out on to the wall. I had barely the strength left to pull myself on to a narrow ledge. A few more feet of straightforward but nerve-racking climbing, and I reached a ledge with a belay.

Don called up anxiously. 'Is there anywhere to bivouac up there?' It was getting late. I glanced up. The ledge I was standing on was too small. There seemed another ledge above me, and then the rock reared up, smooth and savage. There would just have to be a good bivouac site up there. I shouted down, with little conviction in my heart, 'Come on up, it's great up here.'

Don came quite quickly, taking out as many pegs as possible. We had used nearly all our pegs on the dièdre and the rock above did not look encouraging. We wanted to have as many with us as possible. As Don reached my stance, Julien called out, offering to loan us equipment. We no longer needed it.

Don pressed on past me. The rope ran out quickly as he traversed round the corner. I sat patiently, wondering whether we were going to have a comfortable ledge for the night. At last there was a cry, 'Come on.' As I climbed round the corner I saw that the ledge continued right round the Pillar. Don announced that there was an easy line to the top, and that he had found a bivouac ledge a few feet below, on the other side. Now nothing mattered. We had overcome the main difficulties and would definitely be able to reach the top. We could not rest on our laurels for long, we still had to bring up Clough and Djuglosz. We dropped a rope down to them. Clough immediately started to prusik up it.



AERIAL VIEW OF THE UPPER PART OF THE PILLAR, TAKEN DURING THE FIRST ASCENT. ARROWS INDICATE WHILLANS AND BONINGTON JUST BEYOND THE TOP; THE FRANCO-ITALIAN PARTY IS VISIBLE ON THE FACE.

We left Ian to get up on his own, confident in his ability, and rappelled down to our ledge to start clearing it for the night. It was hard work hacking the snow away. By the time we had prepared the site, Djuglosz and Clough were up. The French asked them to take their rope up and fix it so that they could prusik up the next morning, and we were quite happy to do this.

Our bivouac ledge was not an ideal one. It sloped outwards, and there was barely room for four. It did not matter, however. We were all exhilarated by our success and spent the night brewing tea, singing a little and discussing the meal we would have on our return to Chamonix.

On the following morning we were on the main ledge by seven o'clock. As we reached it, Piussi also appeared, having prusiked up the rope we had fixed. Don and I had met him in Chamonix earlier on, and were glad to see him. He asked if he could borrow one of our ropes to use for lowering down the only set of prusik machines they had (a pair of metal hand-grips with a kind of ratchet, that made prusiking very much easier). We agreed to do this, but said we would not wait for them. They were now over the main difficulties and had no further need of our help.

The last few hundred feet gave pleasantly straightforward climbing, and at ten o'clock we were perched on the top of the Pillar. A helicopter and a light plane were buzzing about over our heads, taking photographs. We rappelled down to the brèche behind the Pillar, and plodded up the snow-slopes to the summit ridge. Don and I pushed on ahead, parched with thirst. At midday we reached the top of Mont Blanc to find a French journalist waiting for us. He did not have any champagne but, much more welcome, he had apples and cans of fruit juice. Clough and Djuglosz were slower, reaching the top two hours later, and the French were a good two hours behind them.

Big climbs are always most enjoyed in retrospect. There had been many moments of intense excitement and enjoyment on the Pillar itself, but these had always been overshadowed by a sense of urgency and doubt. Now that we had completed our climb, we were able to lie in the sun and enjoy the prospect of a huge feast in Chamonix, the football game in the 'Bar Nationale' and the chances of some female company in the 'Bar du Soleil'.