GRANDES JORASSES, NORTH FACE

I. *THE FIRST ASCENT*

By RUDOLF PETERS

Translated

To climb the superb northern precipices of the Grandes Jorasses was a long cherished desire of mine. In the cold winter of 1933–34 I had already begun preparing myself for the great aim. My friend Rudolf Haringer and I, on many evenings after the day's work, went out to the Isar valley to bivouac and learn to master the rocks of the *Klettergarten*, well known to us in summer but now under winter conditions. In early summer we were rewarded with the first ascent of the great S.E. face of the Schüsselkarspitze (Wetterstein), and not long after we started for our first attempt on the Jorasses, N. face.

I need not enlarge on the beauty of this mountain, which for sublimity of appearance and architecture was deemed unique among the mountains of the Alps by E. T. Compton, the widely-travelled Alpine painter. When in 1934 we stood for the first time at the base of the N. face we could understand why the mountaineers of several nations dreamed of its conquest. I shall not deal here with the many attempts of our predecessors as they have been recorded in numerous periodicals, and particularly carefully in *Alpinisme* (No. 36, p. 534). I feel, however, that the narrative of our successful climb of 1935 would be incomplete did I not say a few words on my first attempt, in which my friend Haringer was killed.

On July 28, 1934, we started from our bivouac in the Leschaux Glacier icefall intending to reach as soon as possible the great rock buttress, but having overcome the first and the second bergschrunds and after climbing for 2 hours on the precipitous ice slope of its left bank, we seemed still to be very distant from the rocks. We resolved accordingly to traverse horizontally for about 200 m. to the rocky rib, where we arrived just in time to find a bivouac place. This spot could have been attained much quicker had we gone *direct* up, as was demonstrated to us early next morning, when I was awakened by a wet rope touching my face. It was the rope of [Armand] Charlet and his companion who were about to overtake us ; indeed they easily got ahead, but somewhat below the second great ice slope they returned and, having passed by us again, disappeared as quickly as they had come. I then began to cut a series of steps, during which a new party—this time Italian—arrived. They appeared to be waiting for the completion of the step-ladder. On our settling down for a second breakfast

they turned back. Disheartened by the retirement of the Italians, an Austrian party who had also been on the way, began to retreat from a much lower point.[1] When all these ' competitors ' had evacuated the field, we continued to cut steps along the precipitous ice slope for some 200 metres.

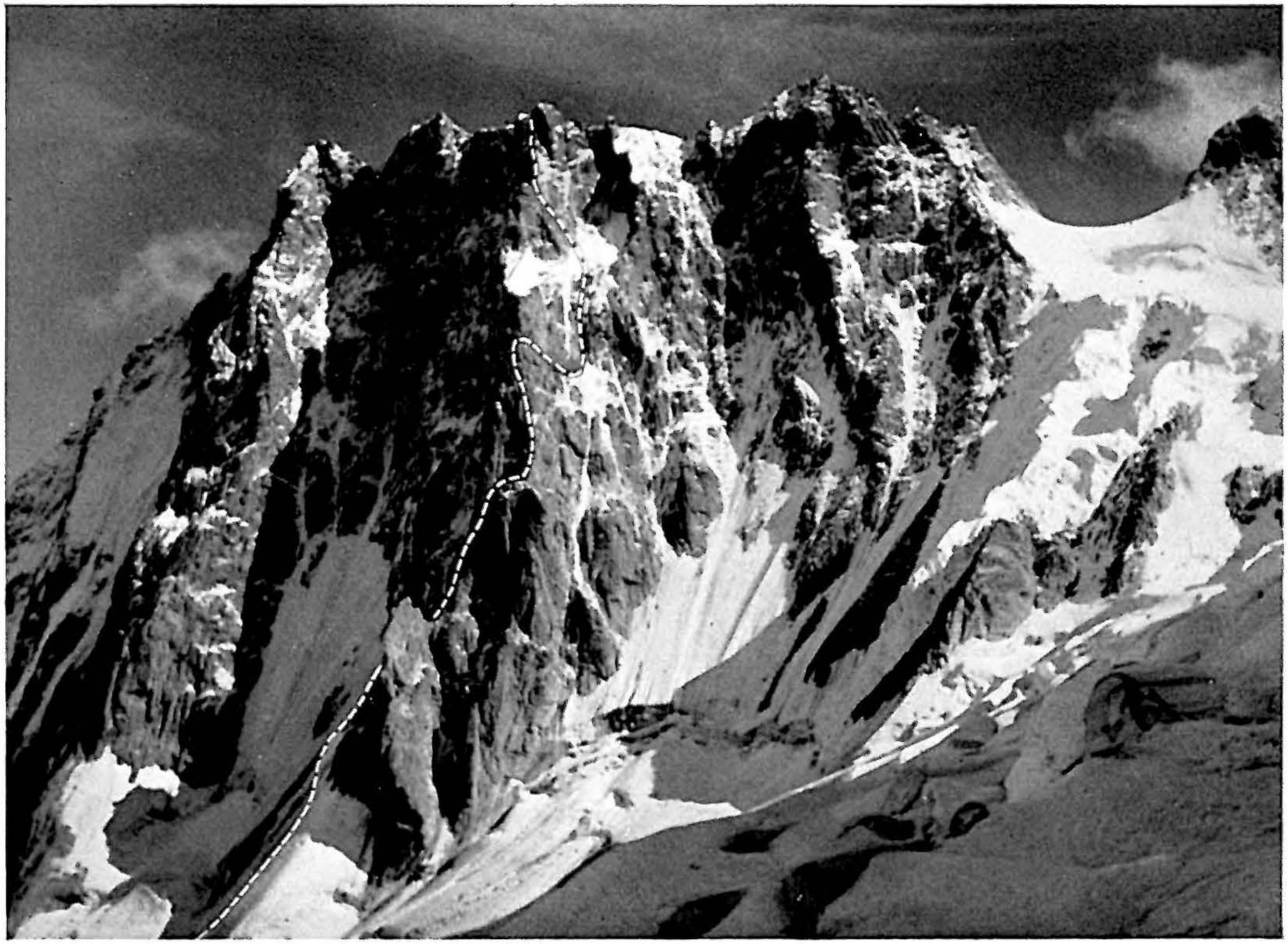
By evening we had succeeded in overcoming an exceedingly difficult stretch of rock and in attaining a narrow boss, where, sitting astride, we passed the night. Next morning we continued our climb up to the third ice slope. A general break in the weather then forced us however to retreat ; we roped down until nightfall over the enormous slabs. While searching for a suitable bivouac place my friend Haringer, usually so careful, unroped himself and withdrew for a few steps to feel for a standing-place under the snow. In his attempt to do so he came upon ice and, with a shout of ' Ice ! ' slipped, vanishing into the depths and darkness. I spent that night on the spot and yet another night at our lower bivouac place, before reaching the Leschaux Glacier and safety once more.[2] My friend was buried at Chamonix, but the memory of his cheerful character and indomitable energy remains alive among us.

It was not by accident that I returned, together with Martin Maier as my next companion. We had been acquainted for years and had both the same aim : the Jorasses by the N. face. During Christmas, 1934, we joined up together to make the first winter ascent in 2½ days of the S. edge of the Grosse Mühlsturzhorn (in the Berchtesgaden range), which even in summer is of extraordinary difficulty.

It was on June 24, 1935, that I received a telegram from Chamonix containing two words : ' Sofort—Martin.' The sender was Martin Maier, who had been watching the face for several days, finding it in good condition owing to the activity of the *Foehn* that had prevailed for the last eight days or so. On June 26 I arrived at Chamonix and, on the same day, we stood together at the base of the great wall. Owing to the abnormally warm weather conditions, it was not until two days later that we were able to begin the ascent. On June 28, at 16.00, we attained the lowest ice slope : it was partly composed of bare ice, while in the following couloir a regular rivulet poured down on us, wetting us through to the skin. Sometimes we were in danger from falling stones, but were able to find shelter. Some 2½ hours later we attained the first tower, where we made ready to bivouac in the same spot as the year before.

During the night the noise of the waterfall ceased ; it was growing colder and our hopes gradually rose as we rolled ourselves up in our sleeping-bags. Once during the night we were disturbed by falling stones, some of which fell with a loud din upon our cooking-pot. Saturday, June 29, dawned with doubtful weather. We tried to cook breakfast, but the utensils were badly damaged and the stove useless, so without any hot food we started at 06.00. The couloir remained quiet and dry : by a fast and pleasant climb over warm, dry rocks we

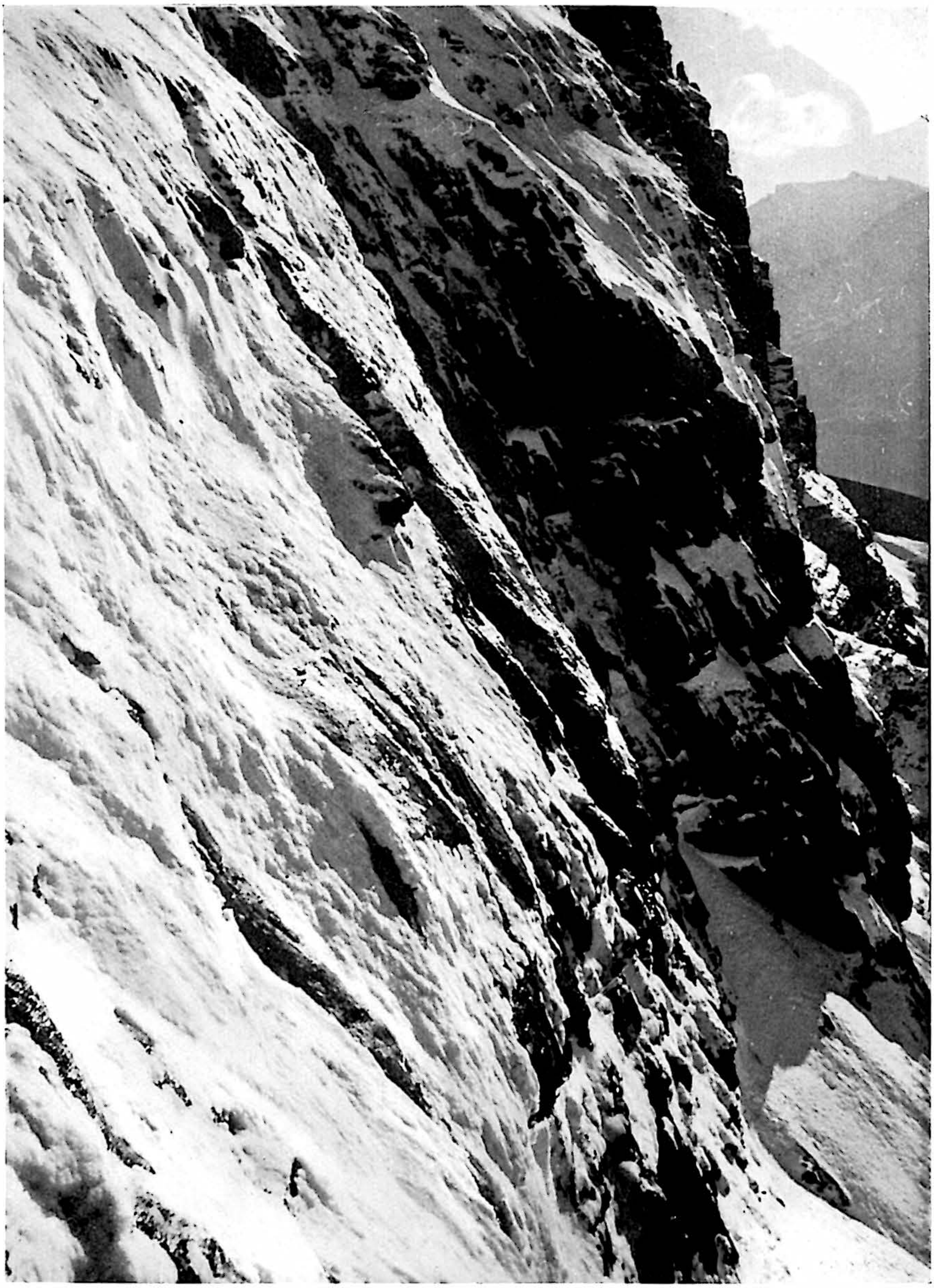
[1] *A.J.* 46. 420-1, footnote 11. [2] *Ibid.*



Photo, L. Steinauer.]

GRANDES JORASSES, N. FACE SHOWING 1935 ROUTE.

[*To face p. 74.*



Photo, R. Peters.]

VIEW TO THE W. FROM A POINT OF THE ROUTE BETWEEN SECOND AND THIRD ICE SLOPES.

[*To face p.* 75.

reached the second tower and, crossing over the edge, attained the second ice slope. We were in good condition ; up to that place it had taken us but half the time required in 1934. Here we put on our crampons and distributed ice-pitons and *Karabiner*. Without cutting a single step, I ascended straight up the steep ice slope, taking but short strides and using the two front spikes of my special crampons. Every time the rope ran out I cut a step for one foot, drove in a long piton and then my friend followed me, hauling himself up to ensure rapid progress with the aid of the rope. It was during this part of our route that we were caught by a particularly heavy rock fall, in the course of which Maier was injured by a stone and swept away from his stance ; after a short fall I was able to stop him. I had remained unhurt save for the loss of my hat, but my friend had received a large and open wound. In spite of it, however, he insisted on continuing the climb at once. An hour later we had left the ice slope behind us and at 10.00 were at the foot of the great rock-rampart separating the middle from the highest ice slope. Its smooth, slabby rocks made necessary the use of pitons, and it was not before 14.00 that we arrived below the boulder in the third and highest ice slope—the place where we had turned back in 1934.[3] Here we rested for an hour and then, ascending the ice slope in 45 minutes, climbed up the rocks of a hidden couloir which, after 150 m., led us to a small rock pinnacle in the edge. From this place we climbed together simultaneously over magnificent granite, although difficulties soon recommenced. The last three ropes' lengths over yellow rock are among the most difficult in the entire face. But at 20.00 even this last hindrance was overcome and we stood on the storm-swept summit-ridge, *Pointe Michel-Croz* (4110 m., *Vallot*).[4] As there was thick fog on the S. side and also because we did not know the route of descent to Courmayeur, we decided to bivouac on the spot. [Courmayeur was attained at 12.00 on the following day.]

II. *THE SECOND ASCENT*

Translated from the Notes of RENATO CHABOD

G. Gervasutti and I having arrived at the Leschaux hut at 10.00 on June 30, 1935, learned from Herr Steinauer who was in the hut, that Herren Peters and Maier had begun their attempt on the morning of June 28. We were ignorant whether they had been successful or

[3] With regard to the height we had reached in 1934 there seem to have been doubts about the truth of our statement. I quote, however, on the authority of *Alpinisme* : ' On sait que cette affirmation ne rencontra, l'an dernier, que scepticisme et qu'une vive polémique s'engagea à ce sujet. Des pitons rouillés trouvés par les deuxième et troisième caravanes qui firent l'ascension de la face dans le ressaut entre les névés, démontrent l'exactitude des dires de M. R. Peters.' (*Loc cit.*, No. 39, p. 131.)

[4] Another case of debauched nomenclature : this ' insignificant gendarme ' (Kurz) is situated just E. of *Punta Elena*, or lower pinnacle of *Punta Margherita*. It will be noted that Herr Peters in his original account (*A.J.* 47. 356), supposed that he had attained the top of the latter.—*Editor*.

not, but imagined that such was the case, because conditions on the face were remarkably good. During the afternoon of the same June 30, the Swiss, Mlle. L. Boulaz, together with the French guide R. Lambert, arrived at the hut and I understood from the latter that, were we about to attempt the face, his intention was to accompany us together with the young lady.[5]

Our times of departure on *July* 1, were as follows: Leschaux hut depart 01.00, bergschrund 03.00–03.45 (we had ascended the slope facing Les Périades, but had to return and try more to the left, E., as the bergschrund in the darkness appeared to be too difficult). Second Tower 07.30–08.00, second ice slope 08.45; this latter was traversed by 10.30. At 13.00 we were within 150 ft. of the upper ice slope. Our times had been fairly rapid up to this point and we felt certain that we could complete the ascent without a bivouac, when suddenly we were involved in three tremendous, consecutive thunder-storms and the situation became critical. When the storms had evaporated the entire face was choked with hail and glaze: the difficulties were enormously increased; we were compelled to bivouac and thus more than doubled the time necessary for the ascent had conditions continued favourable. We reached the base of the great chimney above the upper (third) ice slope at 18.45, the notch in the buttress of *Pointe Michel-Croz*, some 330 ft. below the top, at 21.00 and here we went into bivouac at 21.30, having been forced to descend from the notch some 200 ft. into the great chimney to obtain shelter. On *July* 2, we left the bivouac at 05.00 and gained the summit of *Pointe Michel-Croz* at 14.10. Leaving at 15.45, we all four arrived at the Jorasses hut at 19.00. We had attained the *rochers Whymper* at about 100 ft. from *Pointe Whymper*, taking the usual line of descent from the latter, but avoiding *le Reposoir* by descending the 'couloir Whymper' direct.

III. *THE THIRD ASCENT*

By LUDWIG STEINAUER

Translated and abridged

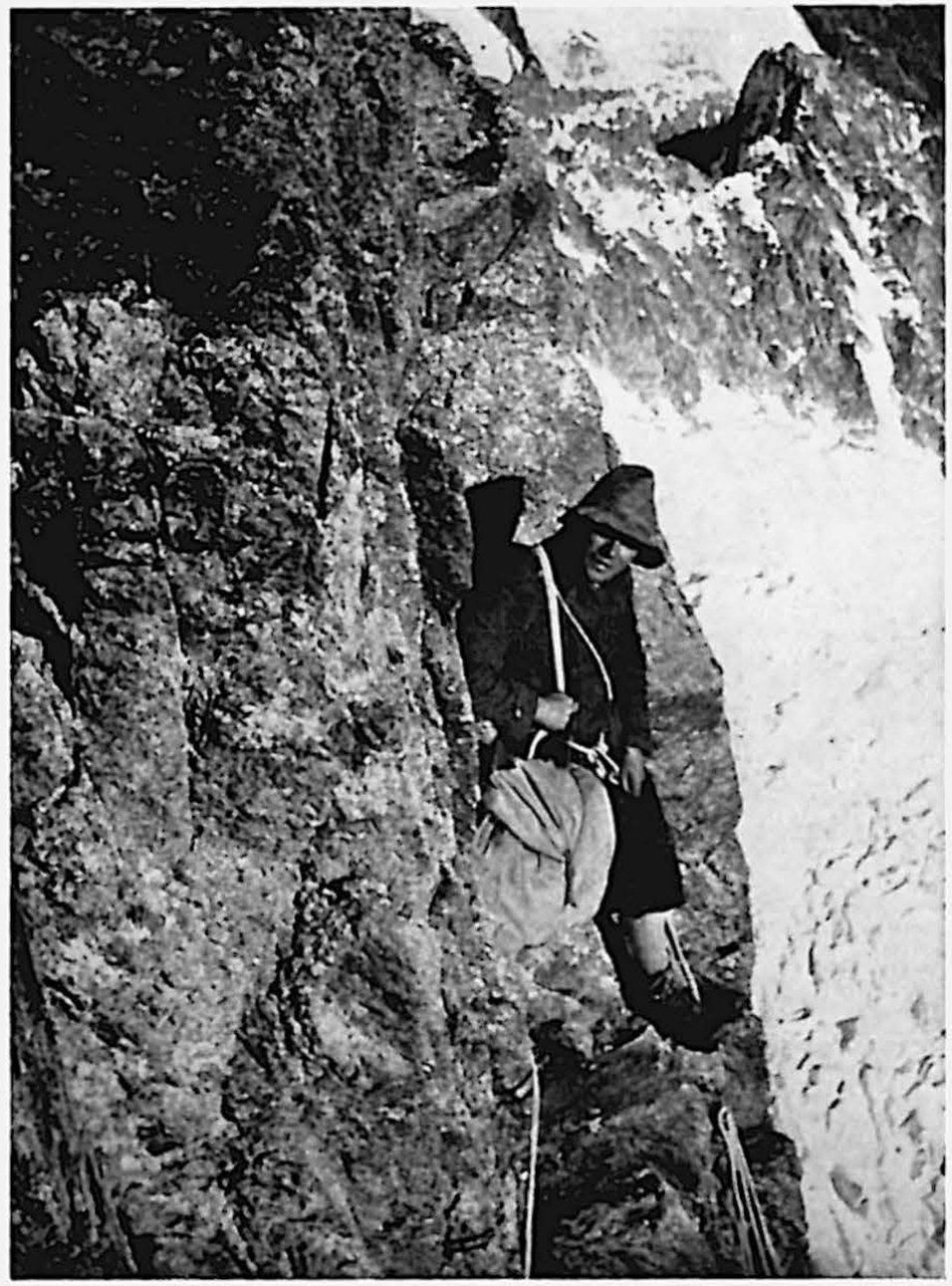
On June 13, 1935, we started heavily laden with tent and bicycles on the long trek, Munich to Chamonix. . . . On arrival there a three weeks' period of *Foehn* set in, shattering the snow masses accumulated on the mountains during a most snowy winter. My plan had to be altered, the ascent of the great wall of the Grandes Jorasses must, following every rule of great expeditions, be postponed. Moreover,

[5] It should be stated here that the Italian party, save for some 300 ft. of comparatively easy terrain, led throughout. In fact, to quote *Alpinismo* (January 1936, p. 21), the second party 'constituted a care and a dead weight for the remainder of the ascent.' The Italians found but five of the Peters' pitons in position, while owing to the great heat, all the Germans' steps had melted and were no longer visible.—*Editor*.



Photo, L. Steinauer.]

20 FT. BELOW THE SUMMIT-RIDGE, WITH MER DE GLACE.



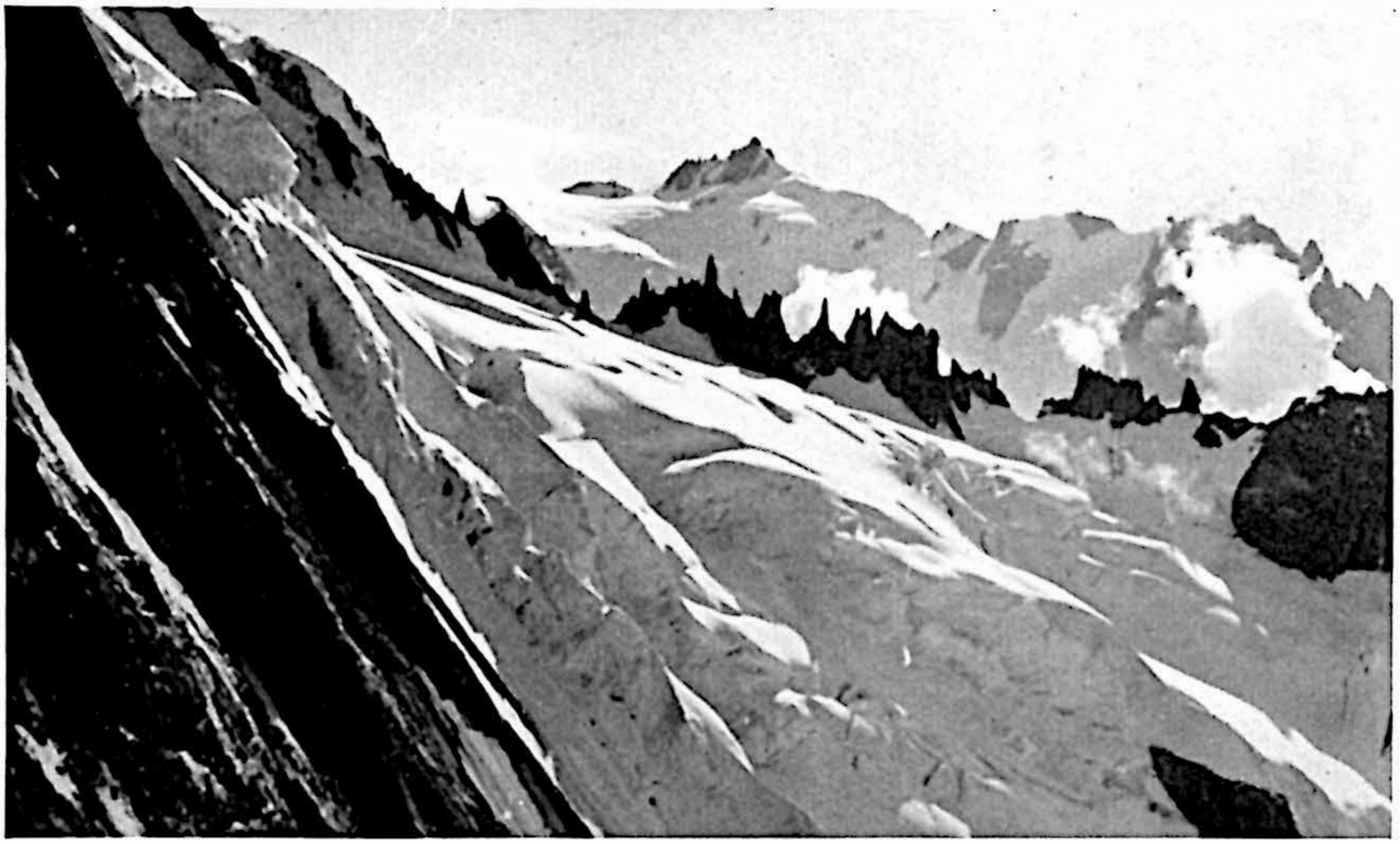
Photo, L. Steinauer.]

THIRD BIVOUAC UNDER THE SUMMIT-RIDGE.

[*To face p.* 76.



THE LOWEST ICE SLOPE BELOW THE N. BUTTRESS, SHOWING THE PARTY.



Photo, L. Steinauer.]

FROM THE N. FACE LOOKING W., WITH PÉRIADES' TEETH AND AIGUILLE DU MIDI.

[*To face p.* 77.

my companion became ill shortly after our arrival ; I sent him home by rail at once and gave him a letter to Toni Messner begging the latter to join me immediately.

In the meantime I hurried up several times to the Leschaux hut near the mountain. For the fourth time I visited the base of the great wall and studied again and again every possibility of assault. Conditions were now excellent, the weather was good, but I remained without a companion. Should I invite Armand Charlet, one of the best French guides, to accompany me ? It would be a pleasant touch of mountain-comradeship that a Frenchman and a German should together solve this great problem. The mountain's N. face lies in French territory : we Germans have established the first claim to it by the losses we have incurred in the attempts. The problem of its ascent had racked my nerves to the breaking-point.

On June 22 I met Martin Maier ; he was followed on the 26th by Peters. These two on the 28th and 29th accomplished the first ascent. On Sunday, June 30, I sat once more, still alone, at the foot. The Italians, G. Gervasutti and R. Chabod also arrived, but when I told them that Maier and Peters had started up the face on Friday, neither would believe me. On my return to Chamonix I met also on the same evening the Swiss, Mlle. L. Boulaz, and the French guide R. Lambert. These two together with the Italians succeeded in making the second ascent on July 1–2.

In Chamonix at last I met Toni Messner—but it was three days too late ! . . . On July 2 we started, heavily laden, over the too well-known route to the Leschaux hut. We left that hut on the following morning over the Leschaux and Mont Mallet Glaciers *en route* for the Jorasses N. face bergschrund. Under a starry sky we crossed crevasses and séracs ; a gentle breeze accompanied us but the névé was soft beneath our tread. The bergschrund was easily crossed a little to the right of our proposed line of attack and soon we found ourselves on the 800 ft. preliminary ice slope leading to the rocks. Close to these begins the great gully leading in its turn towards the top of the immense buttress. Compared to last year the ice was bad. On its greenish surface lay a sheet of frozen slush disconnected, however, from the parent ice, but which balled greatly in our crampons' spikes and necessitated much labour. However, in the varying depth of this film we discerned that the bad conditions were not everywhere general, and accordingly bore away towards a lighter-coloured and steeper runnel that extended fairly high up into the slope. This runnel unfortunately inclined upwards more to the right, towards the sheer rampart of the first tower ; this, however, proved not altogether an unmixed evil, since the main gully was already showering stones and ice splinters on to the route we had intended to take. We clambered up accordingly to the right of the dangerous terrain till under the vertical slabs, where we bore away into the great gully. At 15.00 we attained the tiny notch in the first tower forming the comparatively safe bivouac place. It

had taken 12 hours of hard labour ; last year we had required but a quarter of the time.

Here we established ourselves at once ; snow had been falling for over an hour. The overhangs of the face grew grey and gloomy while snow-flakes flitted all about us. We should have taken warning from the soughing wind and soft névé of the early hours, but optimism had driven us onwards. Darkness came on apace while, during the night, a fearful snow-storm raged against the face. Once more our hopes and joys were buried in darkness, cloud and snow.

As daylight dawned all was still save for the ceaseless patter of snow on our ' Mosetti ' sheet, a sound conducive to slumber. At 10.00 the sun burst through the clouds. We gazed at the savage surroundings ; the faces seemed incredibly high, the mountains of unnatural size—all smothered in white masses of snow. It cleared first towards the Col des Hirondelles, a keen wind caused movement among the grey and mournful mists. Away on the dark slopes of the Aiguille du Tacul the clouds climbed upwards, afterwards remaining stationary along its fantastic pinnacles now blazing up towards the heavens. On Mont Mallet also long cloud-streamers were wafted horizontally—a marvellous and rare spectacle. Soon, however, the sun gained the mastery, the Aiguille Verte stood clear before our eyes.

With the utmost care we clambered down the glazed and snowy ice gully ; the sun gained power, clouds completely dispersed and soon the couloir surface grew alive with great or lesser snow-slides. Stones whistled here and there, ceaseless watch had to be kept. As quickly as safety permitted we endeavoured to escape off this lower ice slope. Hardly any steps were cut—a dangerous performance since the fresh snow balled ceaselessly in our crampons. In the late afternoon we regained the hut. . . .

It had been a hard and bitter descent ; a feeling of hopeless pessimism grew over me. . . .

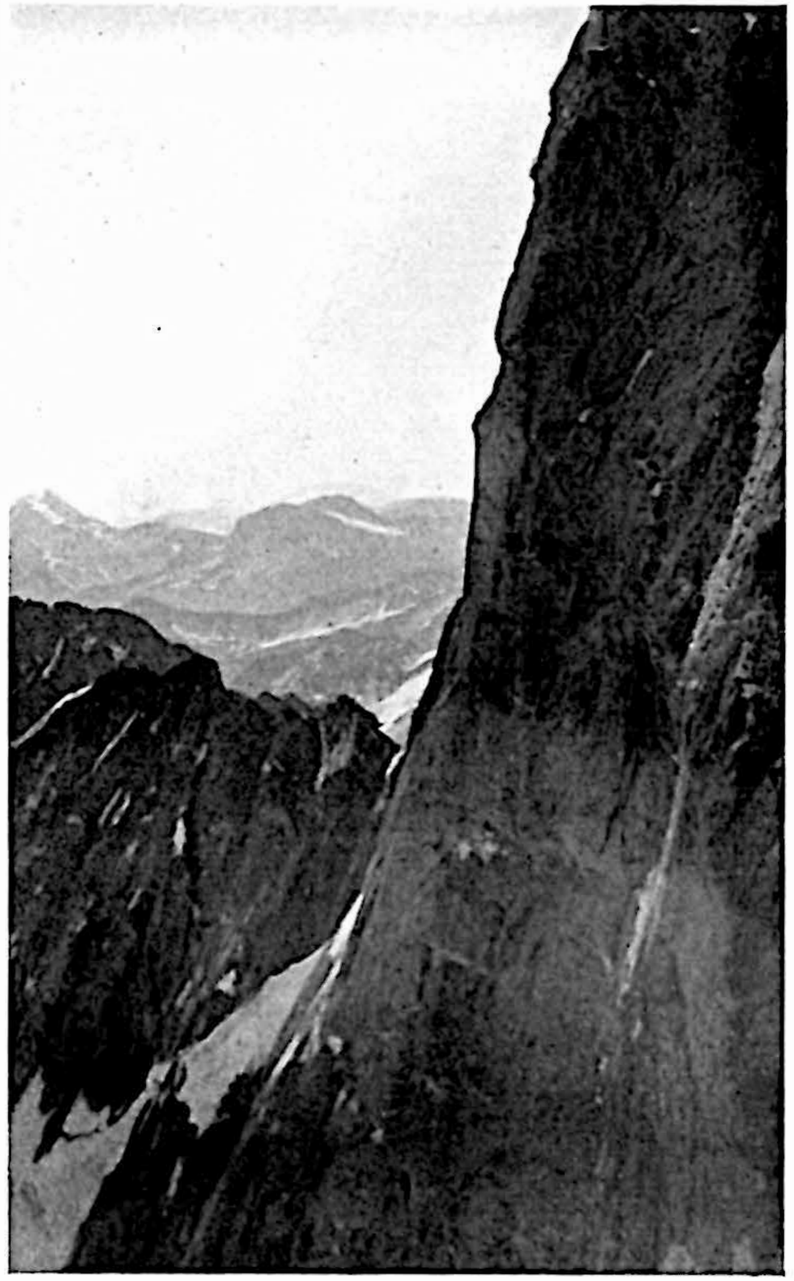
During the night of July 6–7 we started once more. Névé and ice conditions were hard and good. The bergschrund, however, gaped wide open, three different efforts had to be made before I could force myself over its upper lip—4 hours it took. Afterwards things went comparatively quickly ; by midday we had attained the buttress head, *ca.* 3600 m., where we halted for an hour. A blunt edge leads upwards to the top of *Pointe Michel-Croz*, composed of massive, square-cut steps ; these lean far out into space, furrowed by cracks, crevices and crannies, holding out some hopes of assured progress. Soon we were tackling these on airy, exposed perches. The Mallet Glacier sank lower beneath the fierce pinnacles of Les Périades, while beyond, rising ever higher in the blue, lay the Chamonix Aiguilles. To the left towered, gaunt and inaccessible, the N. rib leading to *Pointe Walker*.

At 20.00 we began to hunt for a bivouac place. We were not seeking comfort but merely a place to sit, and there, where the edge swung upwards towards the third ice slope, we found the spot desired. We



Photo, L. Steinauer.]

LOWEST STEP OF GREAT BUTTRESS.



Photo, L. Steinauer.]

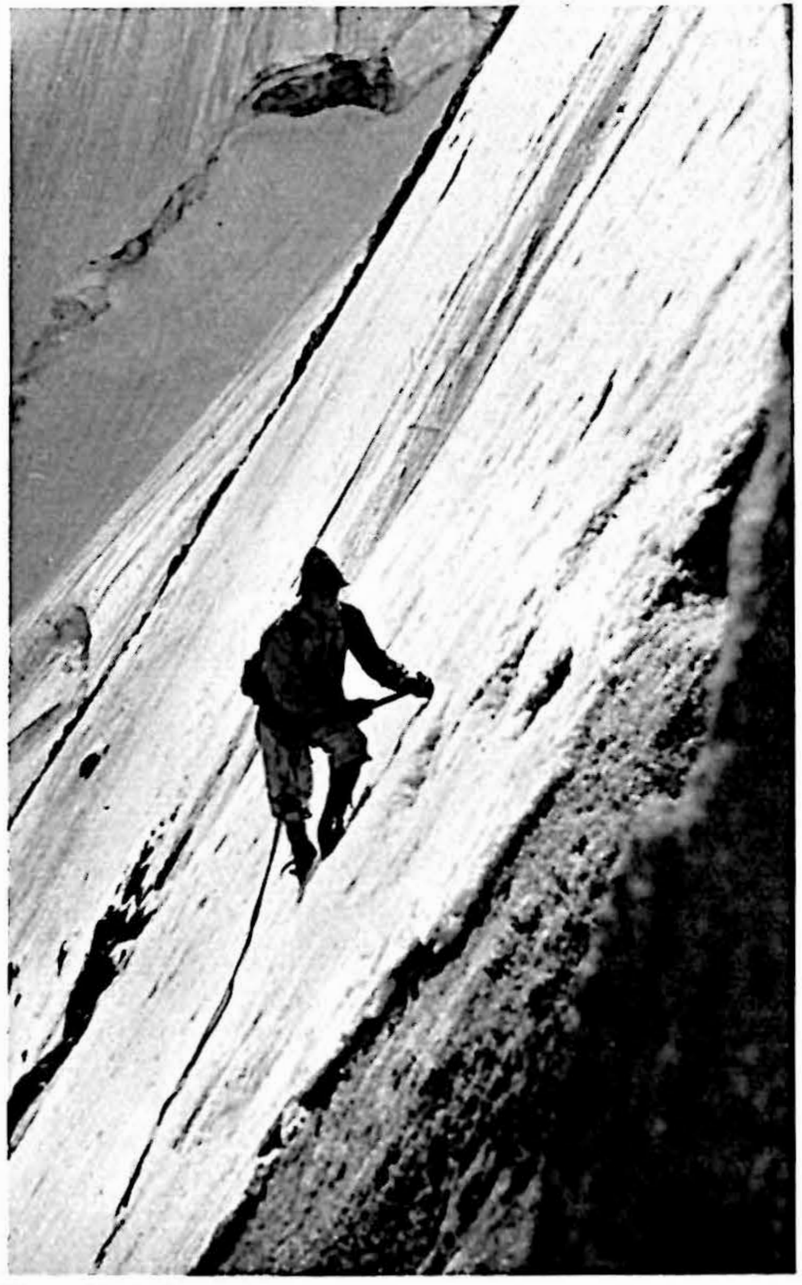
VIEW FROM UPPER PART OF N. FACE TOWARDS E., SHOWING THE PTE. WALKER BUTTRESS.

[*To face p.* 78.



Photo, L. Steinauer.]

VIEW FROM FIRST PINNACLE INTO THE GREAT GULLY.



Photo, L. Steinauer.]

TRAVERSE OF GULLY TO FIRST PINNACLE ON BUTTRESS.

[*To face p.* 79.

drove in pitons and lashed ourselves apparently safe. The night following a magnificent day was gorgeous. . . . I slept hardly at all, but my sleeping companion had twice to be aroused since he kept slipping off the sloping slab we were clinging to.

Morning came with increasing cold; we had to remain stationary till sun and warmth could thaw our limbs. At once we perceived that a direct attack on the third and highest ice slope was impracticable. The overhangs were far too high and smooth above us. To the left the edge plunged downwards towards the great gully in black and ghastly cut-offs. To the right were steep and icicle-crowned slabs. Here and there we tried to force a way but always without success. Finally we roped ourselves diagonally downwards to the right on to the second ice slope and crossed this to a smooth-cut chimney. The chimney led upwards to a small platform. All was good, solid granite. Higher up a difficult and exposed rib rose steeply, then eased slightly, splaying out into the edge and, eventually, under the third ice slope. Messner, leading again, accomplished all this. When rocks were glazed, or when on ice itself, I went to the front. The third ice slope rose steeply, merging above into the gully leading to a well-defined tooth in the edge, a buttress of *Pointe Michel-Croz's* final top. On the other side of this tooth, a level, roofed recess seemed to invite a bivouac —but all unnecessary since it appeared certain that we must shortly reach the summit. On we went over splendid rock, rope length after rope length—always cunningly belayed but with every step of the utmost severity. The last 300 ft. rise in one sheer, vertical sweep to the snowy culminating point of this glorious peak. The direct ascent along the edge was impossible; accordingly, we pulled out to the left. Up we clambered over smooth slabs, minute crevices and abrupt ribs, all of extreme difficulty. Vertically beneath us gaped the depths of the great gully; hammerblows re-echoed loudly in the advancing night, three ropes'-lengths beneath the summit came darkness complete. In the entirely perpendicular wall we found a spot some inches square; on such the night bivouac had to be established. Soon everything was lashed and hanging on the ropes, the legs of one crouching man swinging free in space; the other remaining on his feet, roped to and leaning against the wall. . . .

No sleep came to me, only memories of my three Munich friends, Brehm, Rittler [6] and Haringer,[7] to whom the Jorasses have become a tombstone. . . . The earliest rays of the sun struck us—so high were we. Messner could now lead without a rucksack since during the night, the 'Norwegian' pack on which we crouched or stood had plunged remorselessly into the depths during a change of position. Three rope-lengths, the hardest in all the climb, brought us to the summit-ridge just to the left of the top of *Pointe Michel-Croz*, 4110 m. The hour was 09.30. Fifty-six hours had we spent on the face. . . . Onwards from our point, we scaled also the twin summits of *Pointes Whymper* and *Walker*. Messner had climbed his first 'four-thousander.'

[6] *A.J.* 44. 334–6.

[7] *Ibid.* 46. 420–1.

. . . On the summit of *Pointe Whymper* while boiling some tea, we were visited by a brilliant and wonderful little bird—a wall creeper. . . .

The marvellously good conditions prevailing in the N. face of the Grandes Jorasses this summer have alone permitted the three ascents to be accomplished. . . . Many years may elapse before similar conditions will enable another successful assault to be made. Once more I would state that we did *not* force the ascent ; it was a great and a wonderful gift to us and nothing else is left but to rest eternally grateful.

[We are much indebted to Herren Peters and Steinauer and also to Signor Chabod for their very interesting narratives ; the translation of 'The First Ascent' we owe to our member, Herr Paul Bauer.—*Editor*.]