SOME GUIDELESS CLIMBS

By T. A. H. PEACOCKE

Read before the Alpine Club, February 6, 1940

After I had rashly accepted the Honorary Secretary's invitation to read a paper to you this evening, I spent some weeks in a state of indecision wondering what climbs I could describe to you, as none of those in which I have taken part have the merit of novelty and most were very ordinary expeditions. Eventually I decided to describe some done in the seasons of 1934 and 1936 in the Dauphiné and Chamonix districts because they serve to illustrate the many pitfalls which may trap the guideless climber and also, selfishly, because they are the seasons which give me the greatest pleasure in retrospect. This is partly due to the exceptionally fine weather we had, but also because both districts were new to us all at the time and therefore had the mystery of the unknown.

In 1934, I went to the Dauphiné in company with M. G. Meade-King, D. A. Hodgkinson and A. T. L. Reed. The previous summer Meade-King and myself had been climbing in the Oberland, our first guideless attempt at the big peaks. We had restricted ourselves to the ordinary routes for the most part and with good weather and plenty of good tracks we had a fair measure of success. We felt, however, that following tracks was not really guideless climbing, and encouraged by the stories of the absence of other climbers in the Dauphiné and the lack of guide-books and maps, we hoped that we might be able to do some real mountaineering. In this we were not disappointed, for we rarely came across any tracks. The result was that though we only climbed four peaks—one very easy—in a fortnight, still we managed to have some exciting moments and to collect a good store of memories for the following winter.

We made our headquarters at the Hôtel Tairraz, La Bérarde, which we found very comfortable though rather expensive. We arrived there by car on August 12 from Grenoble, and after an excellent lunch and much discussion of plans we moved up to the Châtelleret hut prompted by the logic of Reed, who argued that if we did not go today we should only have to go tomorrow. We toiled up the path making any excuse for a halt, and collected

plenty of wood only to find a large store on arrival. The hut is very small and ill-equipped and Hodgkinson must have received a tough impression of Alpine huts as it was his first visit to the Alps.

Next day we set out for the Tête de la Gondolière with the double purpose of getting into training and studying the local topography, but owing to our poor condition were forced to admit defeat when still 400 ft. short of that summit. We retired down the E. ridge and found a couloir leading to the Glacier du Plaret, and an endless succession of Dauphiné moraines which only those who have been there can really appreciate. At one point I attempted to slake a raging thirst from an aluminium bottle which we had filled with tea made by the unsound method of boiling the tea in the water for a long time in the semi-darkness of the Châtelleret. It was an evil, black-looking liquid and had most disastrous results. We then stumbled on for what seemed an eternity down an endless succession of boulder-strewn slopes, and at length reached the Etançons valley and La Bérarde at 7.40 P.M.

After this expedition we felt that we were either made or broken, and though fearing the latter, set off next day for the Temple-Ecrins hut (since destroyed by an avalanche). Before leaving England I had been told that as there was no wood at this hut I must at all costs cut down the last tree. On our way up we duly assaulted a miserable stunted fir and sawed a few branches off it with a knife. We were much surprised on arrival at the hut to find that not only was there plenty of wood but also a *gardien* who eyed us and the branches with acute disfavour, for we had apparently committed the unforgivable sin of greatly damaging the forest. However, he said that he would try to hide the wood and so save us from imprisonment.

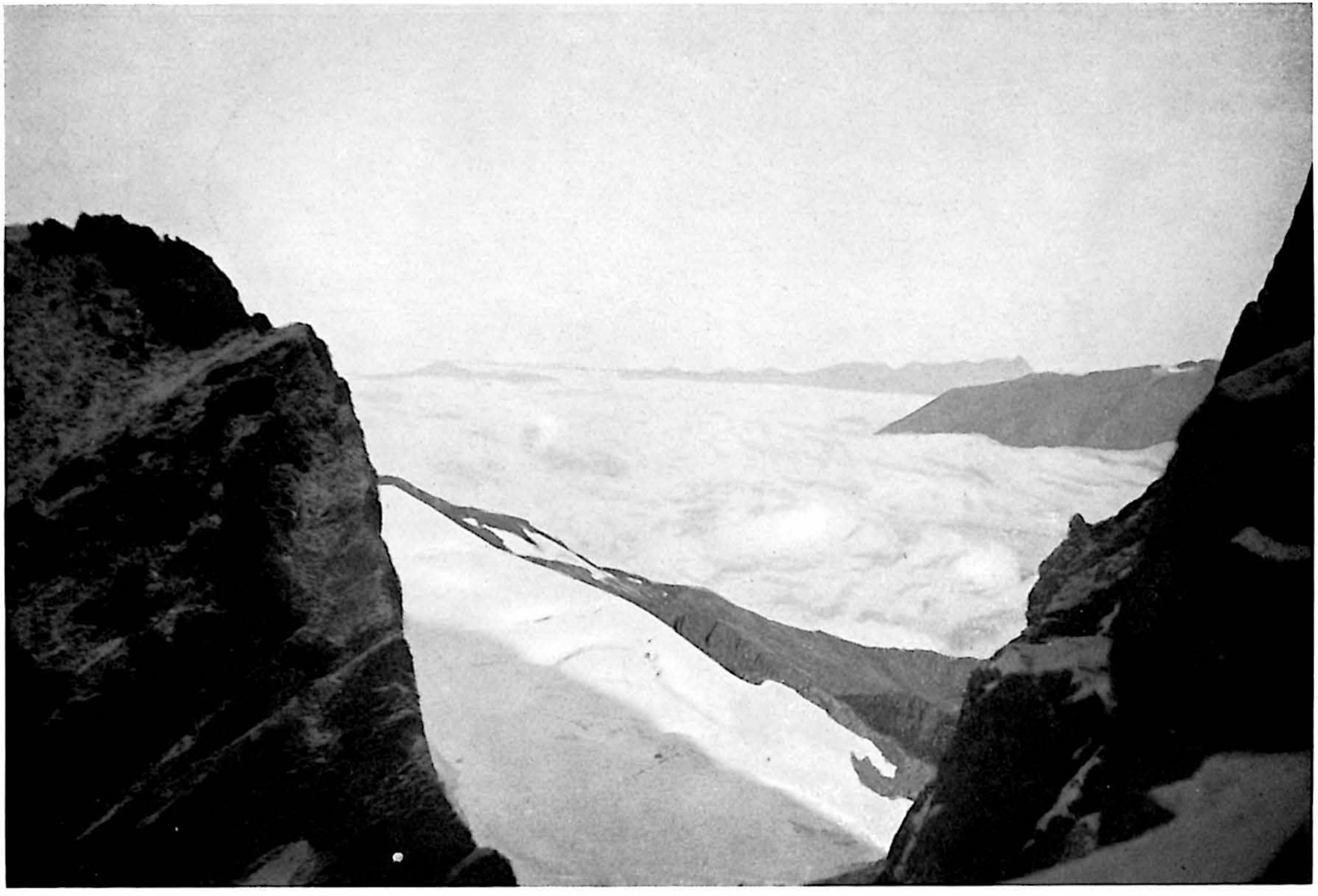
The following day we climbed Pic Coolidge in glorious weather, managing to keep our noses in front of a guided party, much to our satisfaction, and spent a long time studying the stupendous S. face of Les Ecrins. We could not at first believe that there was any way up that mountain, for seen from this side it looks utterly impossible. However, encouraged by the guide-book, which spoke of a couloir and a fixed rope, we hoped we saw the route. On our return to the hut we were met by the *gardien*, who informed us that the forestry commissioner had been up but that he had managed to conceal the wood from him. He then presented his bill, in which hush-money seemed to swallow up all else. We parted not exactly the best of friends.

At this point I feel I must quote a passage from the ALPINE

JOURNAL of 1935. 'Three irresponsible youths, under the impression of performing public as well as esoteric services, calmly uprooted a fir tree in the "forest" so laboriously planted about the confluence of the Vénéon and Pilatte torrents. This tree they proceeded to transport to the hut, where they duly presented it to the *gardien* for cooking purposes. Our entire sympathy goes out to that worthy man, both for his hostile reception of the malefactors, and for his "excessive charges for cooking a little soup." During the Consulship of Coolidge, imprisonment at the least would have rewarded these young hooligans.' I fear there may be a connection.

Feeling that we had not had sufficient exercise, and wishing to waste no time, we did not return to La Bérarde but went straight on to the Pilatte hut, which we found in the most deplorable condition: spoons and plates all unwashed and no means of cleaning them. Next day we attempted the ascent of Les Bans and, deciding that there could be no way straight up the Pilatte Glacier, made a long and ridiculous détour to the south and reaching the Col de la Pilatte followed the snow ridge to the Col des Bans. Owing to the state of the snow, however, and our own ineptitude, we had to retreat at the col in view of the lateness of the hour. After this second defeat we tramped wearily back to La Bérarde.

Our efforts to date on relatively easy mountains had not been exactly successful. Two failures out of three—it would have been very difficult to have been worsted by Pic Coolidge—put our morale at a low ebb. An attempt was clearly necessary to restore our confidence and so we set out for the traverse of Le Râteau from the Brèche de la Meije. Meade-King was unfortunately indisposed, and Hodgkinson—not without good reason—was beginning to doubt the wisdom of guideless climbing. He was, however, persuaded to make one more attempt, and the three of us set out for the Promontoire hut, reaching it after five hours' slow going. The next day we made the fatal mistake of starting too late—5.15 A.M. We took an hour to reach the col and did not get on to the rocks until 6.30, making as an excuse for a halt the magnificence of the sunrise on Mont Blanc. The lower part of this fine ridge is very loose and we had to move with great care. At 8 A.M. we reached easier ground and halted for breakfast. It was certainly a worthy spot for a meal. La Meije as seen from here looks at its best—a perfectly proportioned rock pyramid. We felt awed by the sight and, though it was on the programme, felt but faint hopes of reaching its summit. The next part of the route lay over easier ground by a traverse on the south side,



Photo, D. A. Hodgkinson.]

THE BRÈCHE DE LA MEIJE WITH E. RIDGE OF LE RÂTEAU.

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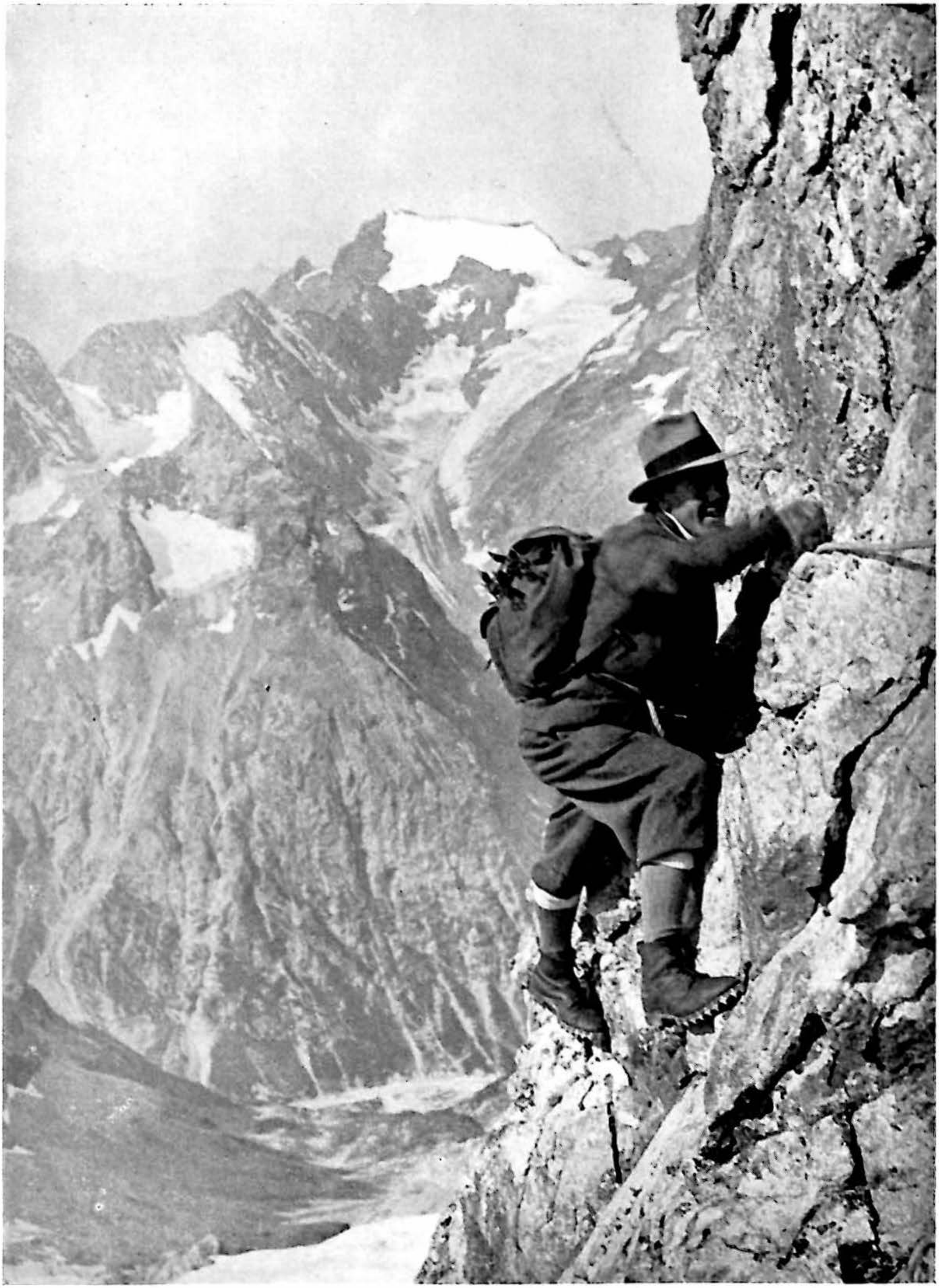
and when we regained the ridge the going was still quite easy. However, before long we met some difficult gendarmes, some of which were steep and disagreeably loose. Shortly after this we reached the snowy shoulder below the true N. face, recently climbed, and now saw the final ridge before us. This was of pleasantly sound rock, a welcome contrast, and fairly easy except for one severe crack, up which Reed who had led us most of the way mounted with lightning agility, but which I found very trying. Actually the gendarme can be turned by a snowy couloir on the north. The summit was reached soon after, at 12.45 P.M.; we had taken $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours, which was considerably in excess of the statutory time. The view was one of the best I have had and the weather perfect. The Valais peaks could be distinguished with extraordinary clearness and we distinctly saw the Matterhorn and Dent Blanche. To the east the Meije and Ecrins dominated the view.

After an hour of peace and contentment we started down, intending to descend by the S.E. face. One glance, however, showed that the snow was thoroughly rotten, even to our inexperienced eyes, and we had to go a considerable distance down the S. ridge before starting on a dangerous traverse under a big cornice. I believe we should have done better to have descended much farther down the S. ridge before turning off to the Etançons Glacier. We had some interesting route-finding down the rocks and then found a long snow ridge which led on fairly easily. We thought that all difficulties were over until we met an ice slope, which although only some 200 ft. long, cost us $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours, chiefly due to my inefficiency at downhill cutting. It was very weary work, and we did not reach the hut till 6.45 P.M., five hours of descent. After a hasty meal we left at 7.30, just getting clear of the rocks as dusk fell. Then we had a prolonged nightmare in the wilderness of stones below the snout of the Etançons Glacier, where I fell heavily three times, each time reviling the Dauphiné moraines in ever more regrettable language. We were considerably assisted by the moon, and the sight of La Meije and surrounding mountains under these conditions was very moving. We arrived at 10.40 P.M., and after repeated knocks aroused Madame out of her bath. She gave us a wonderful meal and we did such justice to the liquid refreshment that she was forced to exclaim : ' Prenez garde, Messieurs, de ne pas être saoûls.'

The next day, as perfect as the last, was spent in delicious idleness. I feel sure that one of the greatest delights of mountaineering is to be found in contrast. If every day is spent in furious exercise with never a moment's pause the pleasures cannot



Photo, T. A. H. Peacocke.]

A DIFFICULT CORNER ON THE S. FACE OF LES ECRINS.

be tasted to the full. Voluntary off days should be regarded as essential to a successful season, though alas ! far too often they are enforced by weather. In the fortnight which we spent in the Dauphiné we were exceptionally lucky, as the weather never seriously interfered with our plans and allowed us two off days in almost perfect conditions.

After our rest we felt in good form and set off next day for the Temple-Ecrins hut again, en route for Les Ecrins. I will not describe this expedition in detail as we have so recently heard about it, indeed I must apologise for mentioning it at all. I will only say that we found it full of interest, both from the point of technical difficulty and in unravelling the route. I expect we climbed the wrong couloir as we had the most exciting piece of ice climbing that I have ever met, and further on we had to make at least two small descents and rounded two very exciting corners. We never found the fixed ropes mentioned in the guide-book. Once on the little glacier the way proved fairly straightforward and uneventful. The weather was not so good and we returned via the Col des Ecrins in a threatened thunderstorm, arriving back at an almost orthodox hour, 7.10 P.M.

Two days later (we had an off day after Les Ecrins) we set off once more for the Promontoire, en route for La Meije, arriving in better time than before. We had no illusions about the difficulties of the route and set off at once to prospect the way. Previous reconnaissance is most essential for guideless parties. On the occasions when this has been omitted we have nearly always found trouble. A route perfectly obvious by day may be impossible to find in the dark. Added to this the mere fact of going over the ground beforehand saves a lot of time, time that must be saved at all costs by guideless parties.

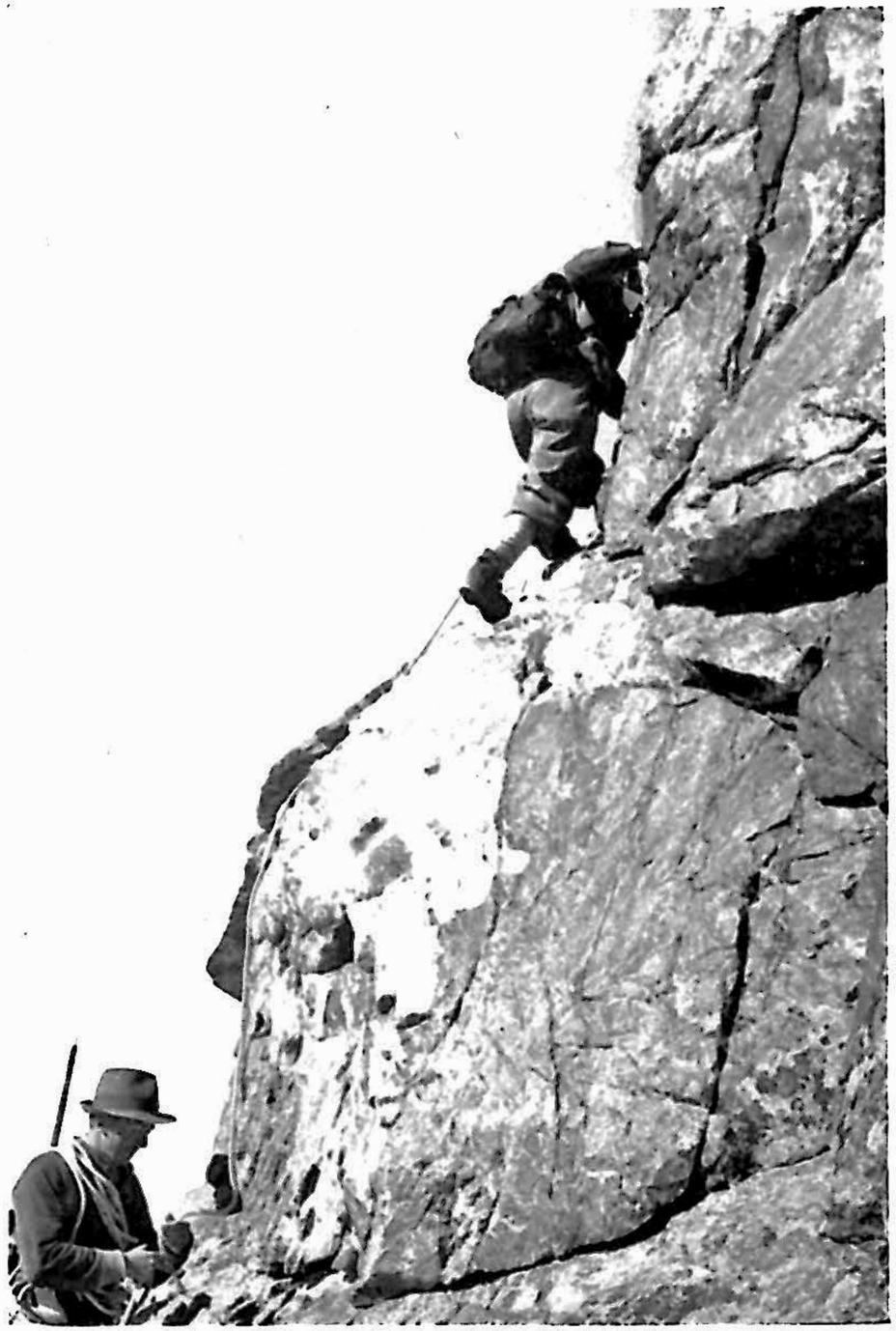
We reached the foot of the Grande Muraille, nearly two hours above the hut, before returning. So far we had not found the difficulties excessive. On our return we found the hut pretty full for, apart from us four, there were H. R. C. Carr's party, consisting of Geoffrey Barratt, Miss Barratt, Mrs. Carr and Miss Brenda Richie ; also a party of four Frenchmen with two guides. Two more parties were expected but luckily did not materialise. The weather provided us with a fine electrical performance, as during the storm that burst in the evening the hut became charged and great tongues of fire shot out of its corners, causing some apprehension amongst certain non-scientists in the party. A little rain fell but no snow at the level of the hut. We retired to bed hardly in a spirit of over-confidence.

When we looked out next morning at 3.30 we found to our

surprise that the weather was perfect, and so making rapid preparations got off by 4.30. The guides, wisely gauging the results of the storm, refused to move. We reached the foot of the Grande Muraille at 6.30, which was fairly good going considering that there was a good quantity of fresh snow. Here we had a long pause. Carr's party were tackling the Dalle Castelnau, which was obviously giving trouble. It was sheeted in verglas and repulsed several attempts. Finally Barratt, by a very fine piece of climbing, got up, and everyone else made use of the rope to save time, as the obstacle had already cost us nearly two hours. After this we broke up again into our respective parties, three twos and one three—the three ladies who, led by Miss Richie, continued in front throughout the climb. It was a very fine lead on her part.

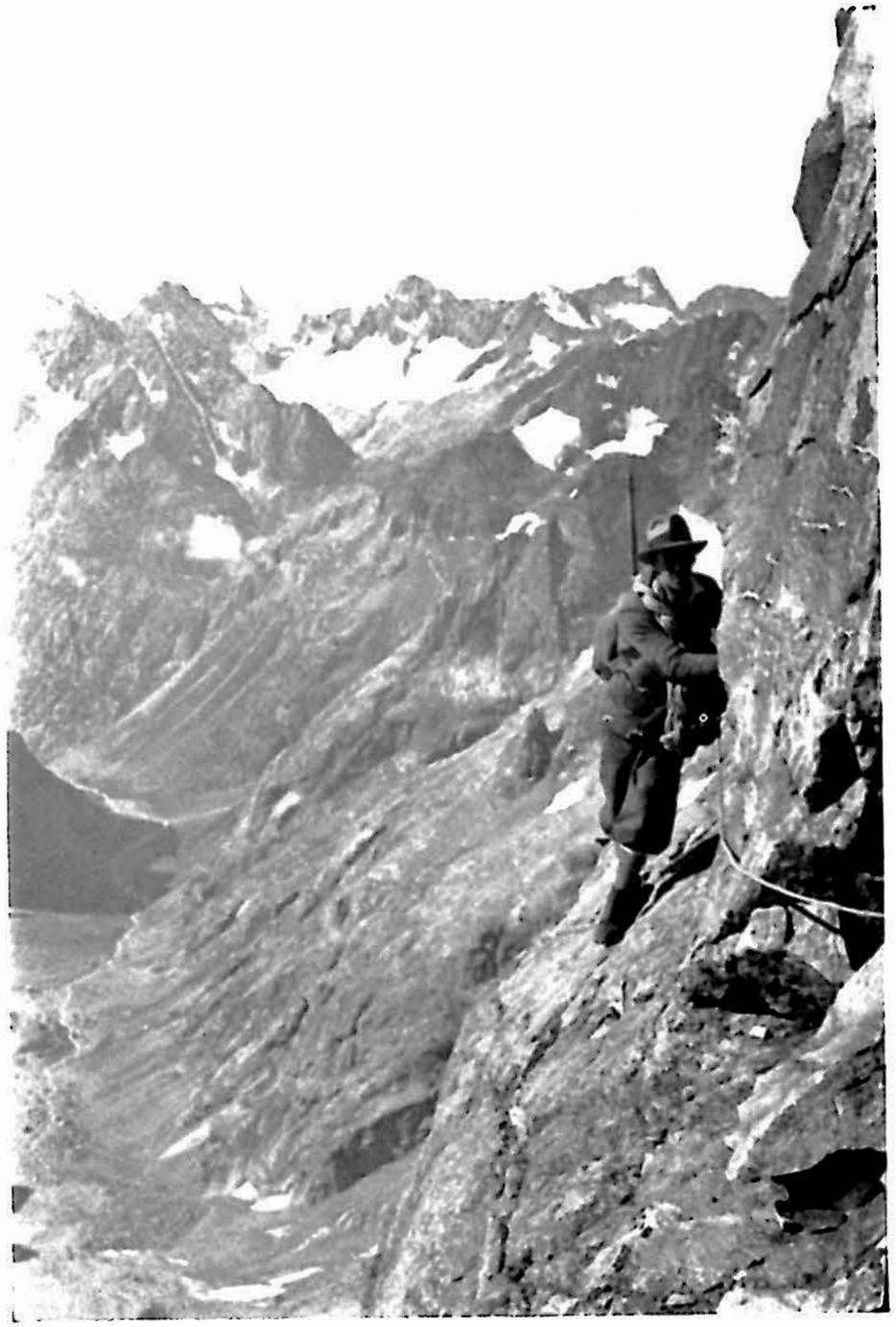
The sun was now beginning to thaw some of the ice from the Grande Muraille, but the going was for all that very difficult. La Meije is certainly one of the greatest mountains in the Alps, if not the greatest. No other peak has so many landmarks on it associated by name with the pioneers—the Campement des Demoiselles, the Dalle Castelnau, the Dalle des Autrichiens, to mention but a few of the well-known links in that slender chain of possibilities.

We traversed to the right, along an ice-covered ledge until almost under the Glacier Carré and then found a fairly easy traverse back to the left over exposed ground, till we came to the slab known as the Dos d'Âne. This proved easier than we had expected as it was dry and clear of ice. It is in a very exposed situation. Then back again to the right but diagonally upwards by some steep chimneys and so to the Dalle des Autrichiens, which was rather icy and difficult. Then straight up again and finally, by a traverse to the right, on to the Glacier Carré, round one of the most exposed corners I have ever seen, with the Grande Muraille directly beneath. It was getting very late, 12.30 P.M., and there were still the final rocks. With so many people there were frequent delays, with the result that we did not reach the summit till 2.30 P.M. The position was distinctly serious. A return by the way we had come did not appeal to anyone, but the weather was fortunately perfect and we had a full moon—the eternal comfort of the guideless—so decided to push on for the Refuge de l'Aigle. We made common cause from here on, and fixing one of our 200-ft. lines we all made use of it. The fresh snow concealed a multitude of dangers and made the descent very hazardous. The rocks are very loose about here and two enormous slabs, weighing several tons each, peeled off. Once in



Photo, T. A. H. Peacocke.]

LA MEIJE. DOS D'ÂNE.



Photo, T. A. H. Peacocke.]

LA MEIJE. ROUNDING THE CORNER AT THE TOP OF THE GRANDE MURAILLE.

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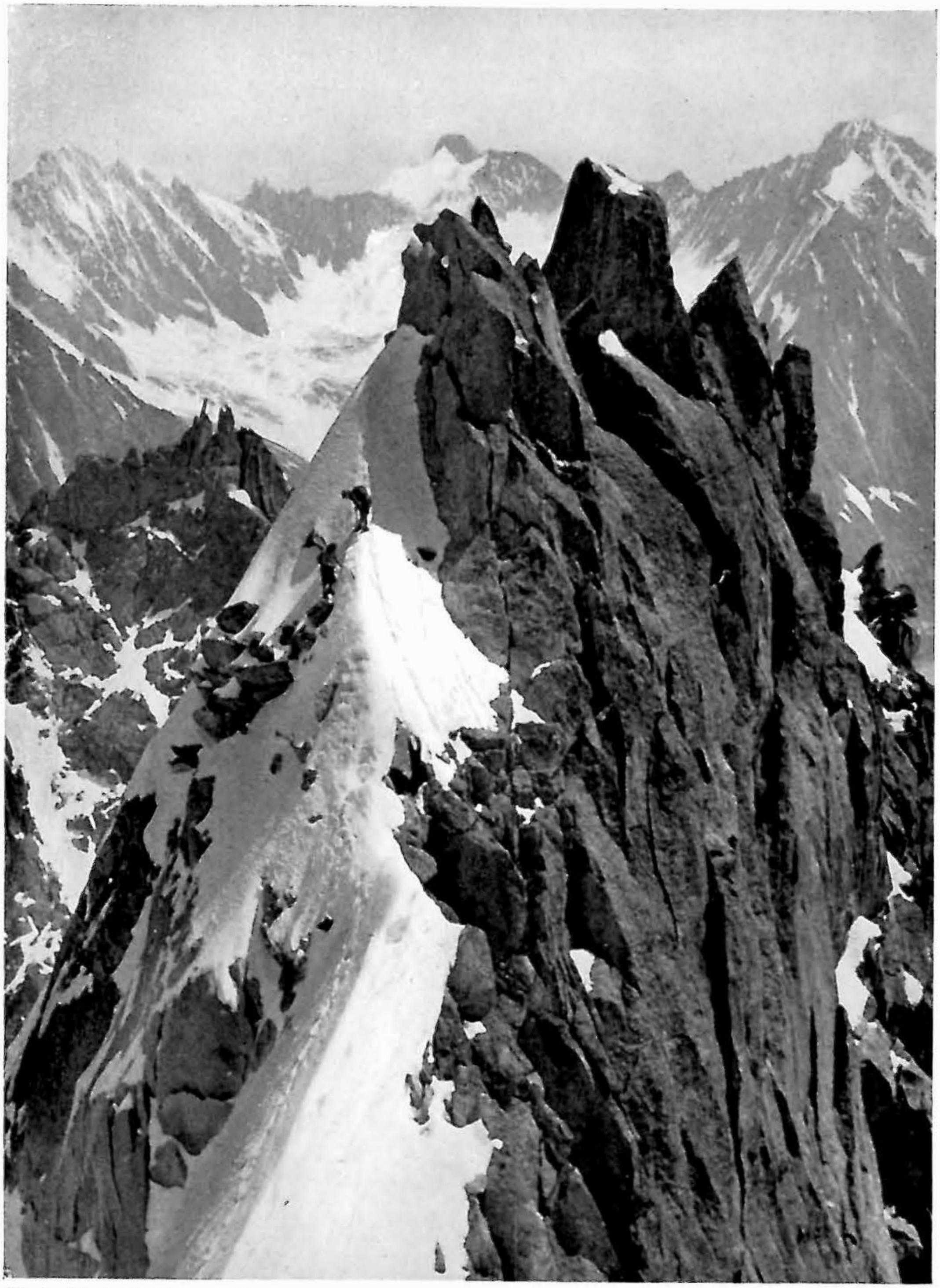
the Brèche Zsigmondy we had to set about the difficult job of regaining the ridge. The first part was clear of snow but directly we got on to the N. face conditions became very bad, as loose powdery snow concealed everything. However, Reed led us up with his usual skill, but it was very slow work and we did not reach the Pic Zsigmondy till 6 P.M. The ridge from here on proved much easier though very snowy. We had only one more difficulty before the Doigt de Dieu, where loose incoherent snow made a *rappel* advisable. We reached the final peak at 7.15 P.M. I happened to be the last to leave that wonderful summit at 7.45 and never shall I forget that moment. The sun had sunk behind the Grand Pic, which was standing out grim and gaunt against a brilliant sky. Clouds filled the valleys where they had remained all day and now caught the rosy light of the setting sun. The peaks all around were suffused with a pink glow and far away to the north stood Mont Blanc, the last to be shrouded in the mantle of the night. To the east the moon had risen, and finally, the shadow of La Meije could be seen mounting into the heavens. It was indeed a sight for the gods and I felt a privileged witness as I left the top and joined the others on their way to the Brèche Joseph Turc. Here we decided that we had had enough of the ridge and considered that we could probably reach the glacier by tying both our 200-ft. lines together. I was tied on to 300 ft. of climbing rope and, foolishly taking the *rappel* rope in my hands, rather than use a brake, started down the slope. This proved hard ice and was distinctly eerie as it was in the shadow and appeared to go on for ever. The prospect of finding that the 200-ft. of line was insufficient was unpleasant, but just as it was nearing its end I reached the bergschrund and snow. I shouted the good news to the others, who wisely put on crampons and used a brake. As, however, we had only one pair of crampons between the nine of us they had to be hauled up each time, with the result that the last man was not down till midnight. Barratt, though far from well, unselfishly came down last. On the ridge it was bitterly cold and I had a shamefully easy time down below. We eventually reached the hut at 1 A.M., after twenty and a half hours. This was our last expedition in the Dauphiné and we reached La Grave next day in time for a late lunch.

This season had taught us much. We had done some real guideless climbing, chiefly owing to the small number of parties about and the consequent lack of tracks. All our expeditions had taken far longer than they should have done according to the guide-book, and we felt duly humbled. However, we were

beginning to realise that on climbs where the route is far from obvious guideless parties must expect to exceed the statutory times. Most of the expeditions had been real adventures, where the issue had hung in the balance. I think most people will agree that the climbs which give the greatest pleasure in retrospect are those when the struggle is not easily decided. That is certainly my own view and that is why I prefer guideless climbing. One of the great delights of guideless climbing is the element of uncertainty. With a guide the whole issue is almost decided beforehand. You pay him so many francs and, unless the weather is bad, he gets you up your peak in so many hours and down in so many hours. He cuts the steps, finds the way, carries most of the food and cooks for you on your return to the hut. Without a guide you have to do all these things. You will take a good many more hours up and down. You may lose the way. You may never get up at all. You may even be benighted. Still the peaks you do climb are yours and your adventures will last you for ever.

We now come to the season of 1936. Again we were very lucky with the weather, which until we arrived at Chamonix had been continuously bad for nearly two months. The old saying that extremes meet is never more true than in the case of the weather, and on this occasion we had only two bad days in three weeks, with the last fortnight almost cloudless. We were the same party as before though Meade-King was only with us for ten days and Reed soon had to retire owing to a strain. This was a great blow to us all.

We began with energetic exercise on the Peigne and followed it up a few days later with the Blaitière, where owing to much fresh snow and bad route-finding we only climbed the N. peak. We made the mistake of descending the snow couloir facing the Grépon, which was in bad condition and gave us a lot of trouble. After this Reed had to leave us, and a day or two later we traversed the Grépon. This climb is so well known that I must apologise for mentioning it, but it gave me much pleasure at the time, and since, and I hope the photographs may bring back similar memories in others. The expedition was guideless only in name as there were four or five guided parties on the mountain that day. We reached the ledges on the E. face, just before the Mummery crack, at 8.30 A.M., and here had to exercise the virtue of patience while those in front were doing battle with the crack. Judging by the general tumult the guides earned their pay that day. We had a delightful hour and a half in the company of Messrs. Pasteur and Paynter who were making the ascent, and after they left us Hodgkinson took the lead and made short



Photo, T. A. H. Peacocke.]

AIGUILLE DE BLAITIÈRE: DESCENT TO THE SICKLE RIDGE FROM ROCHER DE LA CORDE.

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work of the famous crack. It cost me considerable effort. Fairly easy ground then leads through the Trou de Canon and back to the Nantillons side and the formidable Râteau de Chèvre. I found this the most difficult part of the ascent and arrived at the top almost speechless, but, like Mummery, ' after circulating the contents of a certain flask ' I was able to proceed again. On the top of the Grand Gendarme we began to discover that a 200-ft. line is not so easily managed as we thought. I fear that I completely lost my temper, but after much shaking and the use of appropriate oaths it was subdued and we enjoyed that wonderful *rappel*. The rest of the climb was uneventful and we reached the top at 1 P.M., very late as usual. The descent did not give much trouble, as we were beginning to get the better of our line, and we arrived back at Plan de l'Aiguille, where we had made our headquarters for the last ten days, at 7.15 P.M.

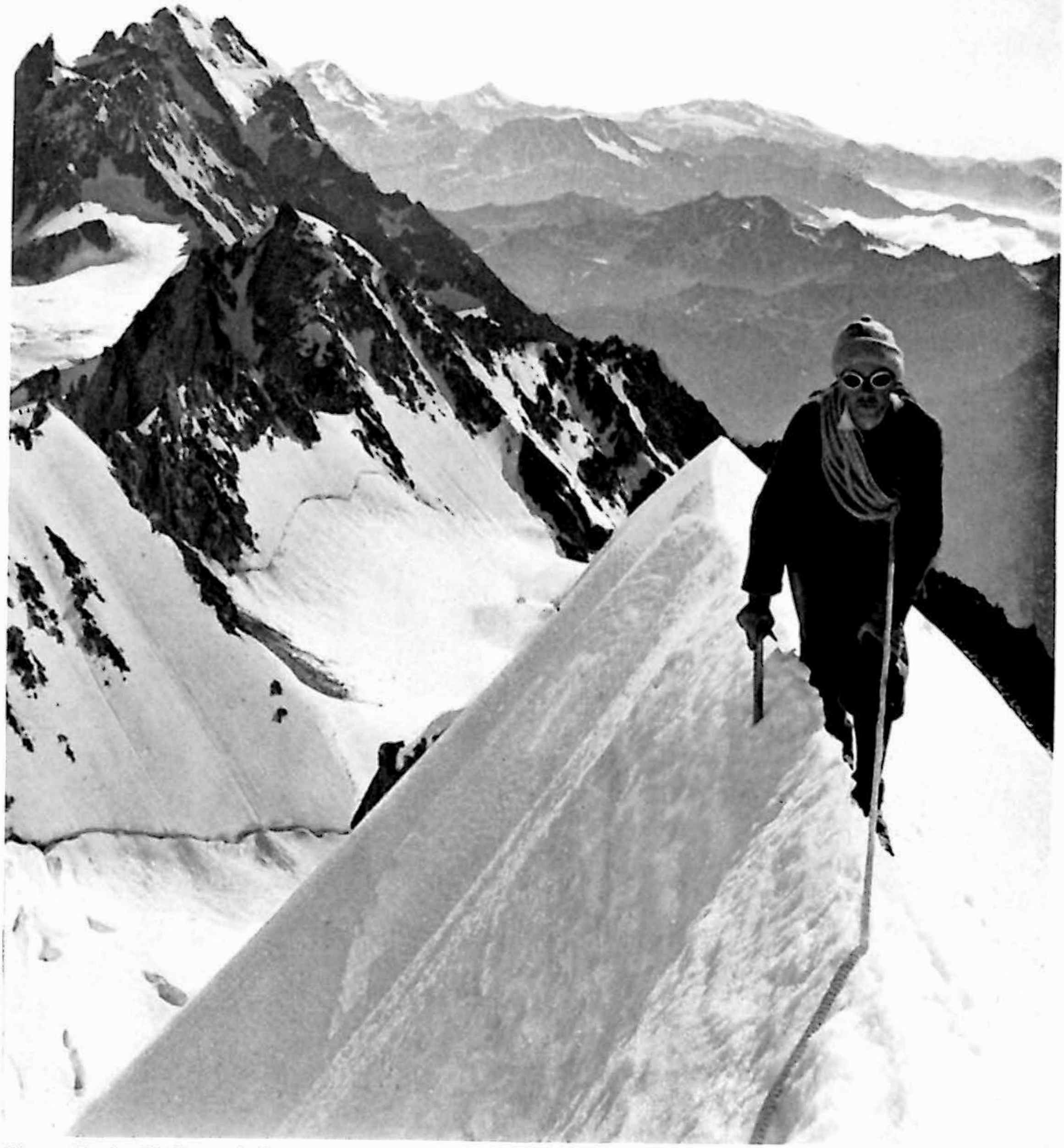
After this Meade-King had to return home much to our regret and Hodgkinson and myself were left alone. We decided that our gymnastics of the past eight days must have got us into training and so set out for the Col du Géant. We spent a delightful day traversing the Rochefort arête as far as Mont Mallet. We had intended to go much further, but a late start, at 7, this time with good cause as the weather was doubtful, prevented us. On the way up to the foot of the Géant we were behind the guide Camille Tournier, one of the pleasantest of the Chamonix guides. He had two Frenchmen in tow and seemed very dissatisfied with their efforts as he continually tugged at their rope and exhorted them with the command ' Avancez, Messieurs, avancez, avancez ! ' They paid such slight heed to his commands that we thought that we should never get up at all and suffered considerably from the cold. However, at length they turned off for the Géant and we, leaving its fixed ropes severely alone, followed the beautiful snow ridge which has so recently been described to you.

One of our reasons for doing this climb was to get a good view of the Brenva ridge, which was our next objective. We studied the route through my monocular and saw that it was in good condition, though a certain gleam about the upper slopes looked rather suspicious.

We spent the next day in walking to the foot of the Col de la Fourche, which seemed to offer the quickest and most direct way across to the Brenva basin, toiling through the soft snow for we had started far too late. We wished to make steps up to the col that day, but the vile condition of the snow quite prevented us. There was only one bridge across the bergschrund and this was in such a rotten state of decay that we adopted the unusual

course of strengthening it with a lot of soft snow and leaving it to the frost. Then we waded back in ever-deepening snow to the Col des Flambeaux, where we made the foolish mistake of taking off our boots and stockings to dry them. The result was as might be expected, legs skinned raw by the sun, and we spent a pretty miserable night as blankets were a torture.

We arose next morning at 1.15. At these times I generally feel reminded of A. W. Moore's remark that getting up at this hour is 'a very sad business,' but on this occasion our thoughts were so concentrated on the classic climb before us that all else had sunk into oblivion. We left the hut at 2 A.M. and followed our tracks of yesterday, finding the bridge which we had constructed in excellent condition. We reached the crest of the Col de la Fourche at 5 A.M. and the full magnificence of the Brenva face burst upon us. The sight of those endless slopes of pure ice and snow in the grey light of dawn is not easily forgotten. We descended and worked across the upper Brenva Glacier, just as the red flush of sunrise struck the summit of Mont Blanc. We crossed Col Moore and climbed rather to the left of the ridge, by rocks, eventually regaining it near the base of the great tower which marks the beginning of Moore's arête. The arête was all good snow and took us only forty minutes to cross, including a halt for photography. Above, the snow was in good condition, but before we had half climbed the great slope it thinned and cutting in ice—good black ice—became necessary. We had hard work for one and a half hours, and then reached a small patch of rocks on the edge of the great Güssfeldt couloir, where we had a short halt. Then up again by a little ice couloir which led to the foot of the séracs. These we turned by an upward traverse to the left, finding a convenient breach and meeting for the first and only time in my experience that curiously tough brand of ice where the axe almost sticks in and is withdrawn only with difficulty. After this we were soon through the séracs, and an hour's steady plodding took us to the summit of Mont Blanc, where we arrived at 2 P.M., some twelve hours from the start. The weather was still perfect and the view we saw of course defies description. We had an hour's rest just below the summit and then walked down the broad highway to the Vallot hut, arriving there at 3.30. After a short halt we set off for the Aiguille du Goûter and Tête Rousse. On the way we had a very curious adventure. We were somewhat ignorant of the topography of this side of Mont Blanc but felt sure that the route was both easy and obvious, as indeed it certainly is. Just below the Vallot we saw two tracks. Most guideless climbers will probably agree



Photo, T. A. H. Peacocke.]

THE BRENVA RIDGE.

in their dislike of tracks, for half the interest is removed if the way is clearly marked out and no route finding is left to be done. We had found tracks most of the way up Mont Blanc and so had not lost the route too often. Here, however, the track divided. Should we go right or left? We decided left as we felt that the right-hand track led round the Dôme de Goûter and by some means got straight down to Les Bossons. We plodded steadily up and round the summit of the Dôme and then saw a fine shapely peak in front. We noticed that it was separated from us by a great gulf, in fact we had to descend some 1200 feet, but down went the tracks and right along to the top of the peak, so still no doubts entered our minds; at all events, I still felt convinced that this really was the Aiguille du Goûter. This was the more curious because we had felt sure that there was no pronounced col between the Dôme and the Aiguille du Goûter. Despite the views we had had of the Dôme ridge I remember thinking at the time that this col must have been hidden by some shoulder of Mont Blanc. Well, down we went, reaching the col at 4.30, and then started up. Our respect for the numerous tourists who ascend Mont Blanc by the Aiguille du Goûter began to increase very rapidly. The ridge was very difficult, I might say exceedingly difficult at this late hour: narrow and avalanchy on both sides as the snow was in the worst possible condition. We were forced to tread the very crest and sometimes to proceed *à cheval*, or when a cornice appeared boldly attack it and send it into the depths. At 6.15 P.M., when we judged that we were getting towards the top and the last of the really bad sections had been left behind, the doubts which had, I feel sure, long been in Hodgkinson's mind at last found utterance. 'I suppose we are on the correct mountain,' he said, 'as I see a peculiarly attractive hut far below us on the right.' Then the awful truth dawned. We had mistaken the Aiguille de Bionnassay for the Aiguille du Goûter and there to our right was our peak, connected to the Dôme by the easiest of snow ridges but separated from us by the great gulf of the Bionnassay Glacier. The shock was profound. It was entirely my fault as I was supposed to know the way. As one man we turned and started down. It has been my lasting regret that we did not continue over the summit to the Refuge Durier, but at the time we were far too frightened, at all events I was, to do anything but beat a hasty retreat. It seemed immoral to be so high up a mountain at this hour.

How we came to make the mistake I do not know. Either it was a belated and very pronounced attack of midsummer madness or we were suffering from high altitude deterioration. I think

that it really must have been a temporary form of insanity brought on by fatigue and oxygen lack, for I cannot believe that we would have made such a mistake under normal conditions. Once on the ridge we had no time to think as we needed all our concentration to prevent ourselves from falling off, and so had looked neither right nor left.

The descent proved much easier than the ascent as the snow was now freezing up again. We reached the col at 7 P.M. and then started the tedious business of climbing up again to the Dôme. It took us all our remaining energy to do it. When a short way from the top we realised that our error had its compensations. We were witnesses at close quarters of the sunset on Mont Blanc and found ourselves in the centre of an Alpine glow. The snow at our feet assumed a delicate shade of pink and we watched the sun sink from view and the western sky change from red to gold.

We felt the time had come for brandy and by its aid conquered the last 200 feet and quickly ran down the easy slopes to the tiny hut on the Aiguille du Goûter. At that time it was only intended to hold fifteen people but sixteen were already there. Despite this, the occupants welcomed us with open arms, having been for some time past very mystified by our movements, and after receiving a cup of warm coffee and munching some dried apricots, we packed in like real sardines, head to toe.

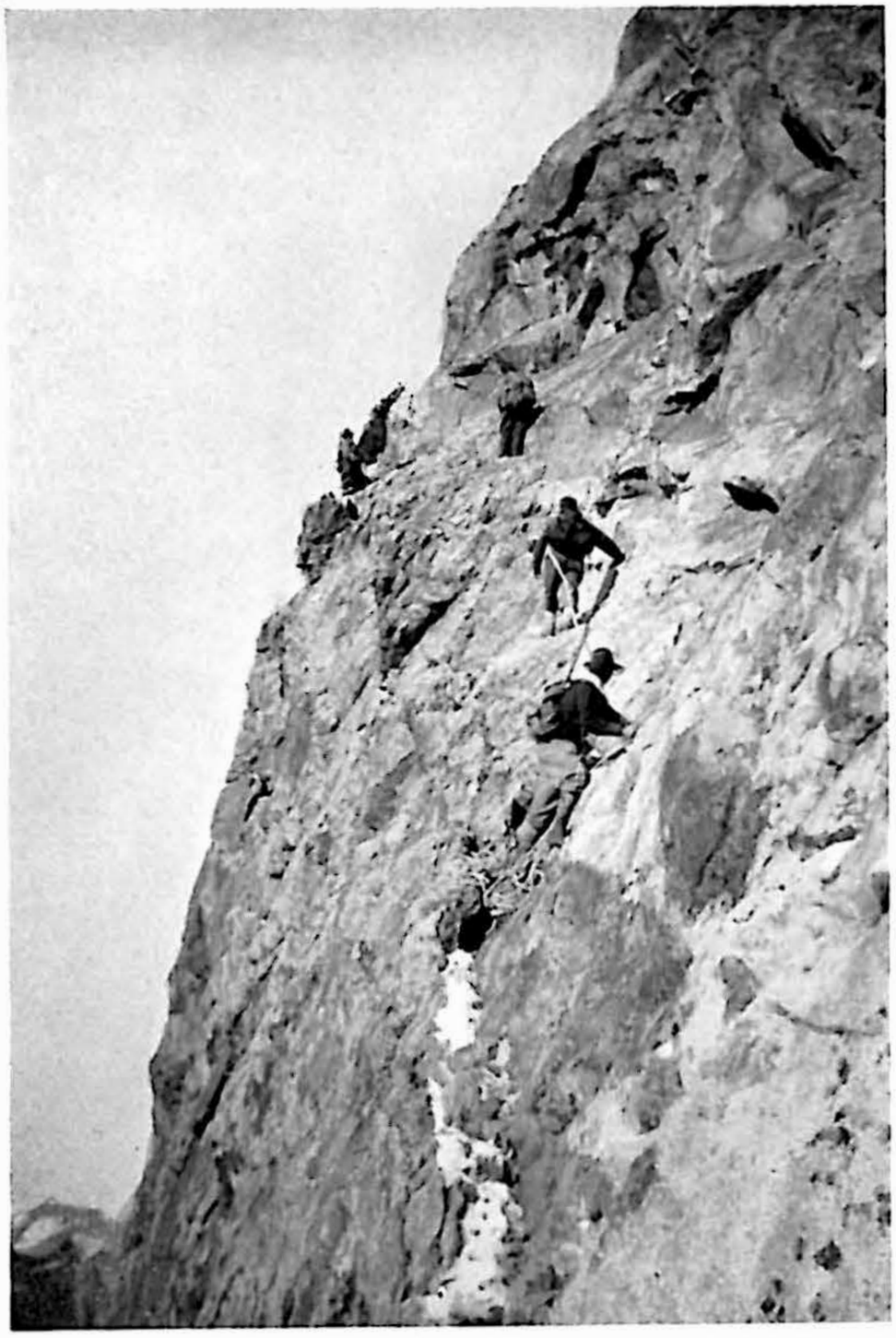
After an hour of this I awoke feeling sick, my head being lower than my feet, so crawled out and spent the next hour reclining on a bench and meditating, like Whymper in similar circumstances, ' on the immortality of the soul, and kindred topics.' Eventually, getting rather cold, I crawled back again.

About 6.30 thoughts of breakfast stirred us into action, and as we had no fuel with us and practically no food we descended to the Tête Rousse, and after an excellent meal, in which we drank the hut dry of milk, continued in leisurely fashion down to Les Houches where we arrived in time for lunch. Chamonix was eventually reached by bus.

The next and last expedition I am going to describe took place a few days later. We decided to attempt the traverse of the Drus, taking it the easier way, up the Grand and down the Petit. The weather was still perfect as we toiled up the objectionable boulder-strewn slopes leading to the Charpoua hut where we arrived at 3.45 P.M. We found it empty except for a rucksack and ice-axe belonging to a Swiss party of two who were making the first traverse of the peak that year. The description of their climb appeared in a recent edition of *Die Alpen* (1939, p. 392 *sqq.*). We fetched water and then set off to prospect the way. The glacier

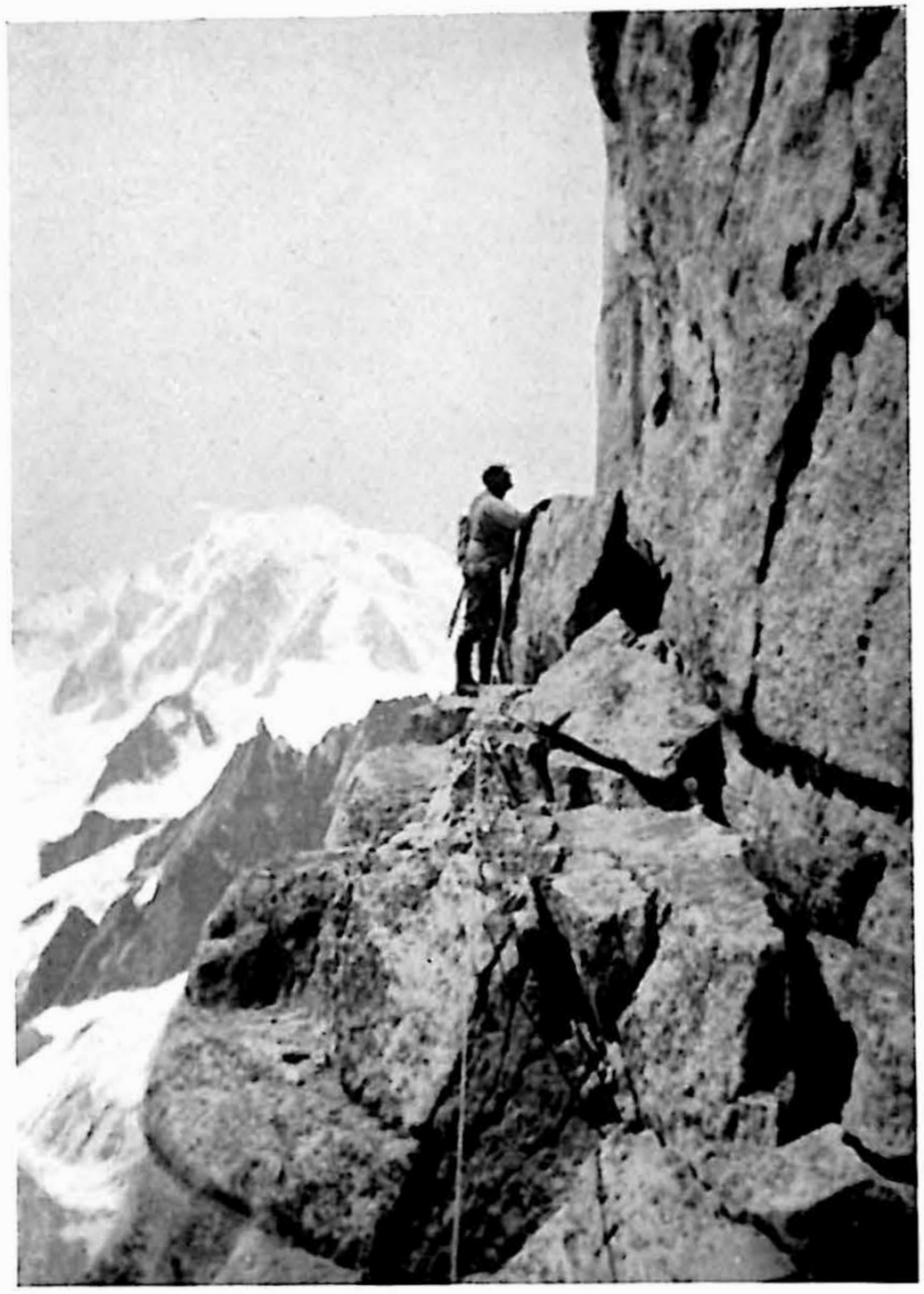
looked very difficult and we made the worst possible mistake by not attempting to find a route through it that day. We had no excuse; it was pure laziness, for which we paid in full. We turned in early after a good supper; still no sign of the Swiss. They arrived at 11.30 P.M. They had sucessfully accomplished the traverse, in the reverse direction to us, in twenty hours.

We left the hut at 3.45 A.M. and worked up the glacier to the south of the icefall, hoping that this would soon straighten out and reveal a simple passage. Our hopes fell steadily lower, however, as the pinnacles took on ever more fantastic shapes in the uncertain light, and finally at 5 we came to a full stop with yawning crevasses right, left and centre. We were quite near the final slopes under the Verte. After waiting a little while, we grew tired of inaction and made our next big mistake by descending to see if there was not after all a reasonable passage farther down, but we still could see nothing but a mass of twisted crevasses and tottering séracs. Finally, in despair, we went right down to the hut and fetched our crampons thinking that they would help us through the icefall and save time, for it was now 6.10 and we had lost nearly two and a half hours. We should have realised at this stage that the expedition should be postponed. I think that this idea probably occurred to both of us but we were too proud or too foolish to admit defeat without at least ' having a look ' at the peak, and so set off again. This time we went right up close to the rocks under the Verte where we found the descending tracks of the Swiss party. We crossed the slopes fairly easily here and reached the bergschrund leading to the rocks of the Grand Dru at 8. The schrund was not quite so bad as usual but it gave us some very pretty ice work. Above we found a chimney and, removing our crampons, strapped them on to the one sack we had with us, which together with the 200-ft. line made a difficult load. Hodgkinson then took the lead and sailed up with his customary skill. Then as the rocks became easier we changed round again, Hodgkinson very nobly insisting on carrying the sack, which he did for practically the whole of the ascent. At 9 we halted on a convenient ledge for a hasty breakfast, and we set off once more at 9.30. The climbing follows a fairly well-defined couloir keeping mainly on the E. wall. The work was more difficult than lower down and we had some interesting cracks and slabs which landed us in the gap east of the Grand Dru. Here we consulted the guide-book and then descended a sloping chimney and a short steep little wall by *rappel*, reaching the place called La Pendule. The pendulum is in fact unnecessary and we climbed round the corner and followed an upward traverse



Photo, D. A. Hodgkinson.]

THE TRAVERSE ACROSS THE GRANDE MURAILLE, LA MEIJE.



Photo, D. A. Hodgkinson.]

ON THE GRAND DRU, ABOVE LA PENDULE.

on easier rocks on the S. face reaching a rock cleft. We continued horizontally round this as upward progress was impracticable, and then after a further stretch of upward climbing reached the well-known chimney, which leads up in three sections for 100 feet. Here Hodgkinson actually allowed the sack to be hauled up. The route was still far from obvious, and we made several mistakes in attempting to traverse to the E. ridge too soon. Some bottles reassured us hereabouts and at length by a fairly difficult and exposed crack we gained the ridge and the summit soon after, at 1 P.M., too late in view of the long descent ahead. We could not bring ourselves to leave the summit at once. Such unseemly haste would seem irreverent, as though we had not enjoyed that wonderful ascent. It is certainly quite the best of the few climbs I have done in the Aiguilles. It has all that a really good climb should have—an intricate route, a difficult glacier, some interesting ice-work and a pleasing variety of rock, not too sound, so that some care in selection of the holds was always necessary.

Our summit feast was limited as we realised the importance of conserving our slender stores of food, and after a pipe we set about the descent at 2 P.M. As we had a 200-ft. line with us we had already decided to make the long *rappel* straight down and not waste time with the intricacies of the Z. The weather was as glorious as ever.

This face of the Grand Dru overhangs considerably, which is not apparent from above. I went down first and Hodgkinson remained as sheet anchor. The *rappel* is steep for the first 40 feet but then comes the overhang and a free swing in space. The place is certainly exciting. At this moment the seat of my trousers, which had been severely tried by Chamonix granite, elected to come in two, and during the last piece of the descent I had a convincing proof of the conversion of kinetic energy into heat, arriving very uncomfortable on a ledge just as the *rappel* rope was coming to an end. Hodgkinson then swung easily down, making a very impressive figure suspended above my head. We completed the descent to the Brèche des Drus and easily gained the summit of the Petit Dru at 3 P.M., with barely five hours of daylight left.

We had an extra 50 ft. of line with us for making slings but we used it all in the course of the descent. The way starts down a chimney on the S. side of the S.W. ridge and after this keeps fairly close to the crest of the ridge. We descended on one side or the other almost exclusively by *rappel*. This wasted a good deal of time as the rope continually twisted itself into innumerable

knots, but at length after about fifteen *rappels* of 100 ft. each we found easier going, and coiling the spare rope soon reached the top of a branching couloir which connects with the main broad couloir leading to the Charpoua Glacier. It was now 7.15 P.M. and the sun fast setting. We made the mistake of descending the little couloir instead of continuing right down the ridge to the head of the main couloir. This cost us more valuable time. The climbing would have been easy in daylight, but in the gathering gloom much care was necessary. At 8 P.M. it became so dark that despite a full moon anything that was not dead easy demanded the double rope and we had a further five *rappels*. At 10.30 P.M. we reached a broad ledge and feeling that we had had enough decided to bivouac.

After a frugal meal we put on all our spare clothing, which only amounted to a sweater and pair of gloves, and lighting our pipes and wrapping ourselves in the ropes prepared for the night. The view was superb. Away to the left fell the Moine ridge of the Verte, then came the Jorasses, Rochefort arête, Péteret arête of Mont Blanc, Mont Blanc du Tacul and finally the whole range of the Chamonix Aiguilles, all bathed in the gentle light of the full moon. What a sight to behold from one's couch ! But, as I think Leslie Stephen wrote, ' the true appreciation of mountain scenery is incompatible with bodily discomfort,' and as the frost got to work we became acutely conscious of the cold. About midnight we decided to move in the vain hope of being able to find the way down after all. We had not gone far, however, before we discovered a magnificent cave—an ideal spot for a bivouac. It was closed all round except for one end and a small window which we soon blocked with stones. It had certainly been used before and we hoped that famous pioneers had slept there as well as guideless incapables like ourselves. Even inside it was sufficiently cold and we crawled out at intervals to perform vigorous exercises. At length at 4 A.M. a certain lightness in the eastern sky and increasing crispness in the air announced the approach of dawn, and with infinite slowness the peaks appeared one by one. At 4.45 we breakfasted, one quarter of cheese each, but had to wait till 5.15 before it was light enough to move. The rocks were surprisingly easy in daylight.

As we neared the glacier we met three parties bound for the Petit Dru. They seemed highly amused at our presence and tactlessly inquired if we had slept well. We ignored this sally and proceeded on our way, making our final mistake of following their tracks down the glacier. At the far side we found a steep icy slope where they had roped down, but it was only hard snow

and we were soon up. Then, however, we saw that they had roped down a vertical wall leaving a thin line behind. Not feeling in trim for strenuous morning exercise we sought another way and found a vertical chimney, but this was full of loose blocks arranged rather on the principle of a card house. However, the rocks proved rather more stable than they appeared and by dint of careful treatment we got up, persuading ourselves that this might even be a new variation. This was the last obstacle and we reached the hut at 7.15. What a meal we had ! I have never enjoyed one more. Still, all good things must have an end, so after a pipe we stumbled down to Montenvers and thence to Chamonix. That day was a succession of meals and we retired to bed, with a good bottle of champagne inside us, to sleep as only those who have had a forced bivouac know how.