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## THE NORTH-EAST FACE OF THE PIZ BADILE AND THE WEST FACE OF THE AIGUILLE NOIRE DE PEUTEREY

By BERNARD PIERRE

*Read at the Alpine Club on March 7th, 1950*

**W**HE French mountaineers think we are paid a very great compliment when we are invited to lecture at the Alpine Club. I am deeply thankful for this great honour, all the more so because I am a very new member here.

As a matter of fact, I must tell the Hon. Secretary that the invitation which was sent me—possibly, Bryan Donkin had something to do with it—was a most horrible snare. A French proverb says: 'May God look after my friends! I can look after my enemies.'

Indeed, speaking about the N.E. face of the Piz Badile and the W. face of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey is often a dull story, the various chapters of which are headed: Pitons, Karabiners, Stirrups, Double rope, and so forth. And I know how dead against artificial climbing you are. So, I wonder whether I shall not be kicked out of this club, owing to my reiterated use of artificial climbing.

John Barford, that delightful companion who made me discover Snowdonia in 1947, used to say, when he thought I was speaking too much about double rope and stirrups: 'That's mechanised climbing.' I did not quite agree with him. Sometimes, you cannot do without that sort of technique. But for it, the last big Alpine problems in Europe would have remained unsolved and the Walker ridge on the N. face of the Grandes Jorasses, the N.E. face of the Piz Badile, the N. face of the Cima Grande, among others, would never have been climbed. Artificial climbing has enabled mountaineers to overcome pitches which would have proved unscalable otherwise. But on the other hand, I quite agree that the usual climbing technique is that which gives the purest delight. To make a long story short, to my mind, artificial climbing is a means towards an end, and not an end in itself.

After all, before Cassin and others, did not Whymper carry his celebrated grapnel up the Matterhorn?

It was at the end of August 1948, that Gaston Rebuffat and I made the second ascent of the N.E. face of the Piz Badile.

During that very summer, when the N. face of the Grandes Jorasses had been climbed again by two Frenchmen, Rebuffat and Frenedo, and the N. face of the Eiger by two others, Terray and Lachenal, the Piz Badile was one of the aims that several French, Swiss and Italian parties were striving to reach. Its N.E. face was considered as more difficult, though a shorter ascent than the Walker ridge on the Grandes Jorasses.

The Badile is but 3300 m. high, while the Grandes Jorasses are above 4000, but this high wall, built of a succession of slabs 900 m. high, is quite impressive. Of course, you know that the first ascent was made by the Italian climber Cassin on July 14, 15 and 16, 1937. He struggled for 52 hours. Of his four companions, *two* died of exhaustion during the storm before reaching the summit. They were compelled to bivouac twice and hammer in more than fifty pitons to wrench this deadly victory from the mountain.

Rebuffat and I thought of trying that route again, and the idea dawned upon us on a Christmas night in Chamonix. We knew we were not the only party on the track and we had to train hard first. We began with a winter climb, the traverse at Easter of the Aiguilles du Diable, eleven years after the first winter climb, by Lambert and his party. (I am pleased to let you know we didn't use any pitons at all!) Our companion was Jean Deudon who had been a member of the French Himalayan Expedition in 1936. Later at Whitsuntide, the three of us succeeded in making the first direct climb of the E. face of the Aiguille de la Brenva, where we had to bivouac once. Then came the summer vacations and our opportunity for carrying out our plans. But the third man left us to climb down holes: Jean Deudon is very keen too on cavern exploration.

Early in August, we made a few small ascents in Chamonix, as the weather was bad. It became worse, and we resolved to go where we were likely to find the sun. We did several climbs in the Dolomites, amongst which were the W. face of the Sass Pordoï and the Spigolo Giallo of the Cima Piccolissima di Lavaredo. We went back to Chamonix to find more rain. Then we left again, this time to climb above the creeks near Marseilles. They are known as 'Calanques.' Back in Chamonix for the third time, we felt the weather was too unsettled to do big things on the Piz Badile and within the next few days, we found three new routes mostly ascended by artificial climbing, on the Clocher and Clochetons de Plan Praz.

At last, the weather seemed to get better. My holidays were almost at an end and we had to try our luck in haste.

On August 26, late in the evening, after a long journey by car across Switzerland to the val Bregaglia, we reached Promontogno, that charming village, lit up by an almost Italian sky. Far away, half hidden behind a screen of pines, the Badile was looming up, as if waiting for

us. The Sciora hut had been burnt down in 1947, and we had to start right up from the village.

We left the next day at 3.30 A.M. for an endless and silent march of approach. We hardly spoke, anxiously thinking of the adventure we were going to encounter on a strange mountain, with just a few technical notes and remembering almost word for word the dramatic tale of the man who had forced his way to the summit.

When the sun rose, we had just passed the rocks of Sass Fura and we were gazing up the precipice: it was perfectly smooth. How could Cassin have found a route up *that* wall?

By 8.30 A.M., we were right at the foot of the Badile; we made out the place where to begin the ascent; we breakfasted, sorted out our climbing equipment and started up.

The first step was awkward. The glacier was very low and the slabs were badly worn out. After a few unsuccessful attempts, I gave Gaston a shoulder up to make him reach a big ledge which was slanting upwards and then we followed it together; but we suddenly came in front of a *dièdre*<sup>1</sup> topped by an overhanging rock. Looking at our notes, we found that this pitch was the first difficult one. Gaston took off his rucksack and slowly fought his way up the *dièdre*, hammering in two pitons. We had some difficulties in passing the overhang.

We traversed back to the left along a crack which was slanting outwards, and we reached a ledge at the foot of a big loose rock. We looked for the route and found it, thanks to a piton which had been left by Cassin. It was rather moving to find after eleven years this bit of iron which had now grown into the Badile. The piton led us to a traverse into a slanting open corner: the rock had no holds and was topped by an overhang. We already had to use artificial climbing. I handed the tools to Gaston: carefully chosen pitons, karabiners, stirrups. He went into action. The *dièdre* had a repellent look, the cracks were all slanting in the wrong direction. He had to hammer his pitons with his left hand and rely on nails driven outwards. It was most unpleasant, and he went up very slowly. At last, he succeeded in conquering the overhang; he drove in another piton to belay and called to me to come up. Then began the slow, thankless task, one has to go through, when driving *out* the pitons.

Afterwards we found a new, though less severe *dièdre*, a few slabs, and then reached Cassin's bivouac. It was 2 o'clock and we had a short rest.

The route followed by the Italians was now going up to the left, across broad slabs in blinding light, studded with tiny, but reliable holds. We were just intoxicated with the pure joy of a normal climb and we were going up fairly quickly. Rope length after rope length we reached the névé in the middle of the face. This is the place where the Badile seems to pause before soaring up to new heights. The afternoon was almost over and the sun was hiding behind the summit.

<sup>1</sup> I mean by *dièdre* a groove, an open corner. That's the word we use in France.

We then decided to bivouac here. But we were going to use the last moments of daylight to reconnoitre for next morning.

I went down on a ledge and Gaston followed me. I stopped there to belay him while he traversed towards the big central couloir. This obvious route up was tempting but much too dangerous: stones, chunks of ice and waterfalls were rolling down it at a tremendous speed. We had to accept the notion of 'safety first' and go up a long open corner across the precipice on the right. With a huge overhang at the top, it was looking most threatening with a veil of darkness already floating down it. We went up just for a few minutes and drove some belay pitons.

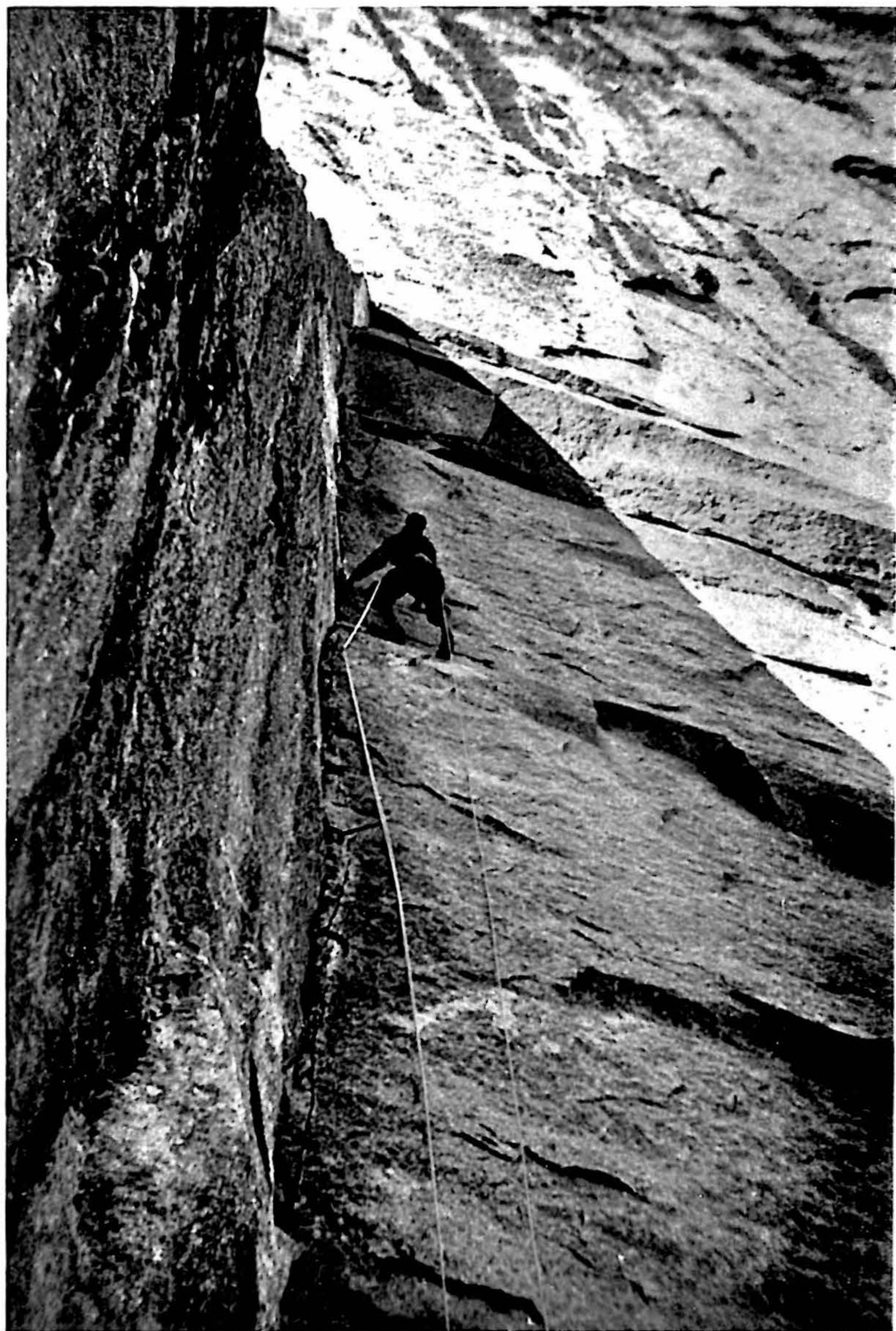
Night had almost fallen when we reached our bivouac again. We made slow careful preparations to try and shorten a night which was bound to be much too long, as it was the end of August. Shrunken with cold in spite of our down-lined coats and hoods, we hung on to the Badile like pictures on a wall, in dull sleepless inaction just waiting for dawn. At long last, day came but the sun kept hidden above us: we decided to move towards it.

We returned to the *dièdre* we had reconnoitred the day before, stiff with cold, we struggled up the first few metres. This passage is extremely difficult. The left side of the angle was a thick slab, the right one was chiselled into rounded grooves which we had to grasp with all our might. Now Gaston was climbing up slowly and he reached a narrow cave into which he stuck, to have a short rest before tackling the overhang which barred the way out. 'This is quite disgusting' he said. The overhang was mastered after a fight of above one hour.

We went on, climbing on the right; we crept under a sort of roof which led us to a wide open corner and to a second roof. We could hardly see the ledge on which we had bivouacked, as it was almost completely hidden by the overhanging precipice. On the right and on the left, huge slabs were barring the way. We were amazed by this almost fantastic route: what bliss must have been Cassin's whilst he was piecing out his climb, foot by foot, and what tremendous moral strength he must have had!

Gaston tackled the next *dièdre* which immediately proved extremely steep. Once more, we had to rely on pitons driven in upside down. The stirrups were floating over space, and the third rope—the one we used to haul up the rucksacks—was not touching the rocks any longer. Gaston reached a ledge and I followed him after having with much exertion driven out all the pegs.

We had now reached a ledge to which we clung, tied to one belaying piton, one foot on a slanting slab, the other hard pressed against an equally slanting loose rock, grasping the rope with both hands and peering anxiously upwards to find a route. We looked at our notes and saw we had to tackle a *dièdre*. Gaston crept up carefully, for it was difficult to drive in pitons. There was no intervening ledge and the whole length of the rope—30 m.—ran out before he succeeded in getting out of the pitch. I went up a few metres and he was able to



*Photo, Bernard Pierre.*]

[9.15, 27. viii. 1948.

**NORTH FACE OF PIZ BADILE.**  
Gaston Rebuffat on the 1st Grand *dièdre*.

[To face p. 448.

resume his progression upwards. He got up the overhang. We had the impression that it was the last one, as we were certainly not very far from the Italians' second bivouac.

From our resting place, we reached up to a horizontal crack which had been difficult to find whilst the storm raged during the first climb. Cassin wrote about this pitch: 'Here, every hope of further progression seems vain.' We rediscovered this key-passage and tackled it, then traversed to the left across a large slab. We got up one more rope length and reached a platform, which was Cassin's bivouac site.

We had conquered the big overhang after seven anxious hours. All our halts had been made on such tiny ledges that sitting down had been out of the question, and we had always been compelled to belay ourselves on pitons.

We had to rest, relax and eat; so that we made a short pause on this stone to which tragic memories still cling. Neither Gaston nor I were very talkative; yet Gaston spoke to confess that he had never met with such a constant sequence of difficulties.

We could not rest for long as we wanted to reach the summit before nightfall. But would it be possible? A strong south wind was blowing, driving black clouds across the sky. Were we about to meet with the same ordeal as that of the conquerors of the Badile?

We got up along a crack which was progressively opening up into a huge chimney which we began to scale gingerly. The rock was very wet; the crack was full of water flowing down in broad sheets. When we laid our hands on the holds, the water ran into our sleeves and froze our chests.

The storm was drawing near, the light was failing, we could not distinguish the relief of the rocks any longer and a stealthy mist was creeping up behind us.

We were climbing in haste. We *had* absolutely to traverse towards a ledge somewhere on the left. The top of the chimney got steeper and we must hammer in two pitons. We wasted much valuable time scrambling up over two low walls and at last reached the ledge under heavy rain. It was very narrow and covered with snow. We quickly started to organise a bivouac, drove in a piton to hook up our rucksacks on, and pulled down our hoods. The storm was on us before we had had time to get ready.

For the moment, we could but endure it, curling up and trying to keep warm. Night then fell. The ledge was definitely ours.

The storm grew more and more furious and the scene was amazing. An army of greenish clouds soared up the Badile, whilst blinding flashes of lightning flew out in every direction, striking the rocks round us in the semi-darkness of a thick milk-white fog. Hail rattled on the slabs, driven by the wind and rolled here and there in a mad race.

A huge flash of lightning tore the sky and a deafening roar of thunder followed at once. Our nerves were taut to the point of breaking. A new wave fell over us, and then the storm seemed to abate, rolling further away into the heart of the valley to Silvaplana. Was this to be

the end of our ordeal? Hope was returning. We swept away the mass of hail stones which had covered the ledge and we tried to light our stove, but all our matches were wet and petered out lamely. We watched the last one with dazed eyes, realising too late that we had not even tried to smoke a cigarette.

Instinctively we drew back our heads and tried to hold our breaths. A new flash of lightning suddenly whitened the rocks: we had been granted but a short respite. Hardly had darkness settled in again, enabling us to rest our tired eyes, hardly had our bodies relaxed and our anxiety disappeared, when, all of a sudden, a new fiery ball started rolling and roaring over the slabs.

For hours on end, the storm returned, shook us madly and then suddenly rolled away again alternately bringing us hope or fear.

At midnight, at last, heavenly peace overcame all this violence.

On the following day, the sky was perfectly serene. We waited for the warm rays of the sun to come forth. We had to force our way along an extremely exposed traverse, get back into the central couloir, and then scale the last slabs. Eventually we reached the top of the Badile by noon, having fought our way for fifty-one hours.

There we met two Italian climbers who had come up the normal south route. After all this wildness, we were glad to come into contact with human beings and we merrily went down together to the Gianetti hut.

Last year, the W. face of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey was also the coveted aim of several French and Italian parties.

A first route on that peak of 3700 m. high had been found in 1935 by Miss Pietrasanta and G. Boccalatte. Though it was an extremely picturesque one, it could not help reaching the South ridge instead of the very summit. Four years later, on August 18, 19 and 20, 1939, two other Italians, Vitali and Ratti, one of the best Lecco climbers and one of Cassin's companions on the Piz Badile, opened the direct route, which was much more difficult. The main obstacle was a huge overhang under a sort of roof which had to be overcome under a raging storm and compelled the two men to fight for hours in perilous conditions. The party bivouacked twice and used something like 50 pitons.

Such was the route it was our most ardent wish to climb.

After the Badile, it seemed to us the most natural thing to do, and we accepted the notion without another thought. Was it because we were most interested in the ways opened by the Lecco rock climbers? That was quite possible. But I believe that this passionate longing was born of a deeper, and more personal desire: that of being again tied to the same rope, the two of us, living together a new and exciting adventure.

Before our plan materialised, we could not train as thoroughly as in

the preceding year. Winter was late in coming to the Alps and later still in giving way to spring. The mountains were not climbable at Easter, nor on Holy Thursday. However, I met Gaston in the calanques near Marseilles during Whitsuntide. In sunny weather, we trained hard on dry limestone. Some week-ends at Fontainebleau also afforded me a few good climbing opportunities. You probably know that there are things described as 'circuits' on our Fontainebleau rocks—which may be likened to your Harrison Rocks. Those 'circuits' are a succession of pitches more or less like those that can be met with on a real mountain. Most Parisian climbers go to Fontainebleau to better their technique and they get into training by going through them.

Summer came at last and, early in June, I got a letter from Chamonix telling me that conditions were excellent. I had to try and be free in the first days of July, but it was not yet real holiday-time for me and I could not take more than one short week off. I arrived at Chamonix on July 2, where Gaston was awaiting me. He was in splendid form, having just climbed the N. face of the Matterhorn with a friend, R. Simond.

Early in the afternoon we arrived at the Montenvers, slept at the Requin hut and reached Courmayeur on the morrow, after having traversed the Col du Géant at dawn. We decided to spend the night there and go up to the Gamba hut on the next afternoon, together with the hut keeper who was opening the place for the season: we were his first guests.

Whilst we were going up the path towards the hut, the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey seemed to be slowly soaring up above the mass of peaks which, when seen from the Val Veni, looked like one continuous range. Its structure was becoming more and more precise. Little by little the various towers, which had seemed intermingled, could be identified one after the other. On the left, the W. face lit up by the setting sun, stands erect. Whilst looking at it, we had the same impression as we had had the year before at the foot of the Badile. The rediscovery of a grand route always makes for mystery which both moves and charms. When we reached the tiny hut lost amongst all these grandeurs, it was too late to reconnoitre.

On the next day, we left by lantern light. It was already 8 A.M. when we reached the Ratti route. We had had indeed a trying time, traversing the very much crevassed Fresnay glacier.

Difficulties immediately arose. After having gone up a long slanting ledge, we found a narrow chimney, closed in by a block. We had to get up at the back of the chimney and finally reach a small ledge. We had had trouble to get so far. The rock was cold and depressing and the sun had not yet reached the face. Physically and morally, we felt done up.

Yet we went on climbing and discovered with pleasure that the ground was becoming easier. Little by little, our muscles were responding better to our will and at last the sun poured down on us. And when

we reached a broad couloir of broken rocks which has its source on the left of the Pointe Bich, we felt happier in body and mind. We went up quickly from one small terrace to another to reach a precipice of slabs, which we climbed without artificial means.

We had now got to the top of the big ridge, which was still heavily covered with snow. This is the place where the Italians spent their first night. It was 2 o'clock and we halted for a while, to rest and have lunch. This first stand was delightful: the weather was fine and so was our morale. We were, more or less, half-way up, but we had no illusions: we knew that we had not yet met with the great difficulties which were in store for us. An hour later, we started again.

We began by moving up together along a snow-filled couloir. After a few rope lengths, we found a chimney in the middle of which was a small overhang; then it opened up into a *dièdre*. Gaston took off his rucksack, went up very slowly and had to drive two belay pitons: the rock was not good and there were few firm holds. He came out on a platform which I laboriously reached after an awkward scramble, feeling rather out of balance on account of the two rucksacks on my back. There, we had to face an open corner which must have been something like a hundred feet high. Ratti's note made us even more sure that the pitch was rather a severe one, and that there were worse things to come.

I produced the artificial climbing equipment out of my bag, (in France we call it *quincaillerie*, which means *ironmongery*). Gaston tied pitons, karabiners, stirrups, grasped his hammer and attacked. I mechanically looked at my watch: it was 5 o'clock.

He progressed up the right side of the crack, then down into the angle of the *dièdre* to top the overhang foot by foot. To be able to get over it, he had to hammer in several pitons and tie stirrups to them. When he put his foot into them to haul himself up, his body was dangling over the abyss. He heaved himself up with great difficulty, drove in a belay piton and I gave him a little rope for him to untie the stirrups.

It was far from being over: he was just half-way up the pitch. Forty feet above him, another overhang was barring the way out. I wondered whether we had pitons enough.

This time, Gaston went up on the left side and again came down into the angle in the *dièdre*, driving in four pitons. On the last one, he hooked up a stirrup which was once more completely clear from the precipice. Above the top of the overhang, he would have to hammer in a fifth piton which, with the help of another stirrup, would allow him to get over the top and on to the ledge.

I gazed intently at this hard fight with the wall which pushed him back into space. Gaston was groping the rock like a blind man and finding no cracks. After endless seconds, he managed to hammer in a piton. At last on the platform, he remained there for several minutes without uttering a word. Then, quite coolly, as if the whole thing had been but a usual climbing school exercise, he said: 'Now, *you* come up.' When I was again at his side, the sun was setting behind the Mont Blanc. The idiotic, yet unavoidable, task of driving out



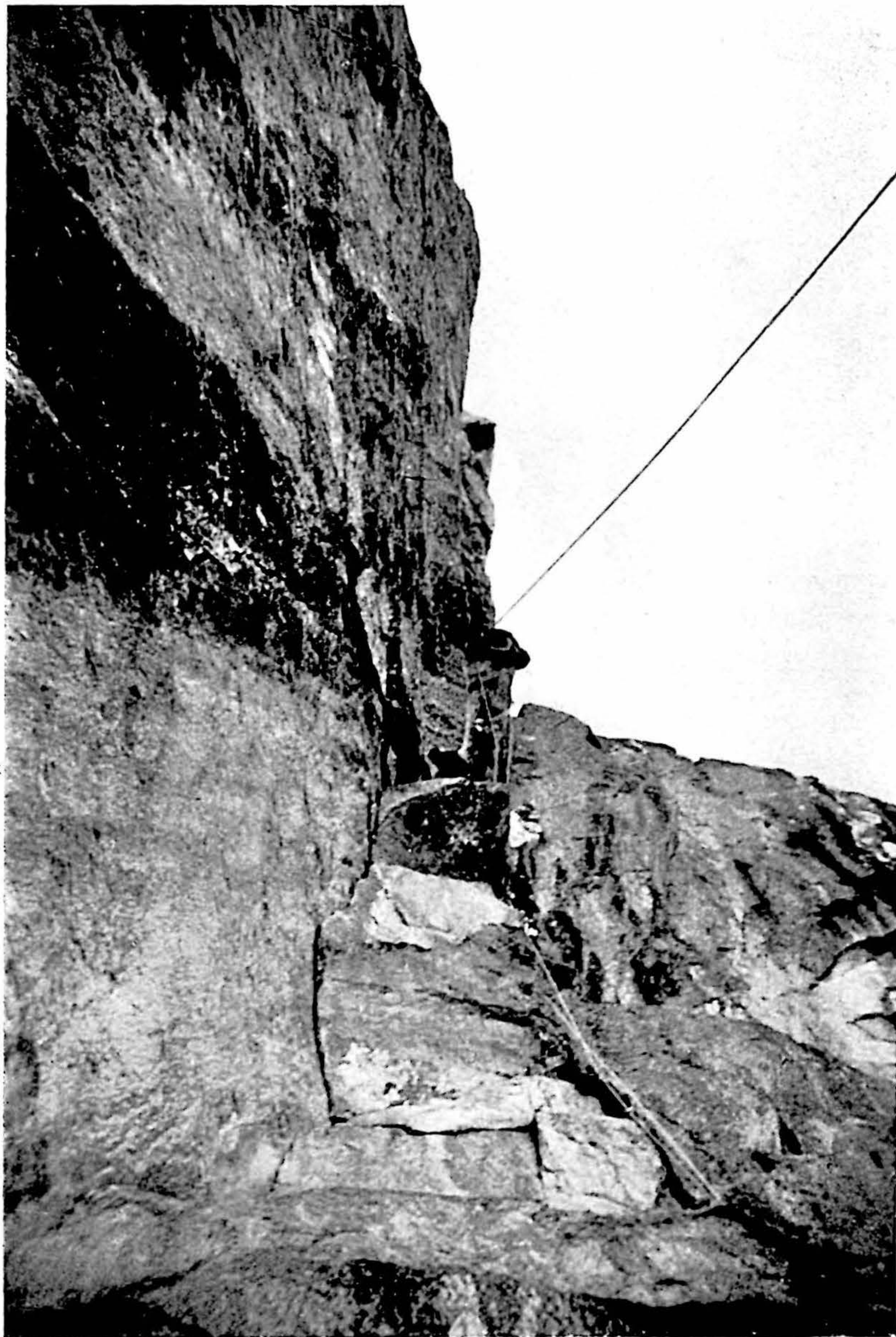
Photo, Bernard Pierre.

7.30 a.m.

AIG. NOIRE DE PEUTEREY, W. FACE.

Gaston Rebuffat at the beginning of the great *dièdre*. The camera points up nearly vertically.

[To face p. 452.]



Photo, Bernard Pierre ]

11.30 a.m.

#### AIG. NOIRE DE PEUTEREY, W. FACE.

Gaston Rebuffat on the great *dièdre* at the end of the passage, which in all took 8 hours and required 22 pitons. The camera points up, and the third rope (for hauling up the sacks) is really hanging vertically downwards although it appears to rise to the right.

pitons had also called for much exertion, but I was well belayed. Whilst trying to drag out a piton or force open the spring of a karabiner, I swayed many times into empty space.

When we had collected our equipment, we traversed to the left. This rope-length only seemed a walk-over to us, but it did not last long. We were now faced with the key-passage of the Ratti route: a huge *dièdre* which as it soared higher, jutted more and more outwards and was finally topped by a roof; the way out on the right was hardly noticeable.

We stayed there for a few moments, not saying a word. The whole thing was quite formidable. There had been nothing like it on the Badile.

It was too late to reconnoitre and we had to bivouac where we were. Luckily, the ledge was long and broad and it was possible to lie down at full length. Yet, whilst Gaston was making the spot ready by throwing down rocks, crashing hundreds of metres below, on the Fresnay glacier, I drove a belay piton, untangled the ropes and lighted the stove.

Then the vigil began. We did not sleep much that night, for we were thinking of the next day's ordeal.

Dawn came at last to free us from darkness. The summits around were already bathed in light but, on the W. face of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey *we* were still captives of the cold shadow, and feeling almost crushed by the weight of the roof we had now to climb.

It was 7 A.M. when we started hammering at the first piton. Gaston got into a crack a little on the right of the *dièdre*, drove in three pitons and came down again: it was too cold. He blew on his fingers, crunched a few lumps of sugar and started again. He reached his third piton and got into another crack: the one which was at the deepest angle of the *dièdre*. The way up was hard and, driving more pitons and intently looking at the route to follow, he said to me: 'I shan't have pitons enough: I shall have to recover the first ones.' He came down again and had much trouble, tearing them off. He climbed back to the last piton he had driven in, progressed further on the left, under the impression that he saw a piton left by the Italian party. Indeed it *was* one of theirs. He tried it, hooked up a stirrup for his left foot, and leaning with the right in opposition against the other face of the *dièdre*, he drove in two pitons within one metre, one from the other, and hooked up two stirrups. Then some rope trick got him right under the roof.

The way out was on the right. Before overcoming it, he rested for a few moments, his stirrups under his thighs, dangling over space. The third rope, which we used to haul up our rucksacks, had been far from the wall for some time already. It was swinging five or six metres away.

The last stage was the top platform. The twentieth, twenty-first and the twenty-second pitons were driven in. The fight had lasted for five hours for the leader to progress up 80 ft.

Driving out the pegs was long and horribly exhausting. It needed almost two hours to do so. I had to hammer in a few more pitons so

as to get the others, for the fact of Gaston's having recovered the pitons during the ascent had left two large gaps between them.

We suffered terribly at this point which we called the *Dièdre of Sufferings*.

When I joined Gaston, it was 2.30 P.M. We did not halt: the ledge was too narrow. And yet, that had been the very place where Ratti and Vitali had been compelled to bivouac under the storm, hooked up to a peg.

We went on, looking for a more convenient spot, climbing up an ice-filled crack, then traversing along a very exposed slab on the right to avoid another crack which had been ascended by the two Italians, for our arms were wretchedly weary. We traversed back on the left to re-enter the Italians' route and reached several large ledges where we had a good rest.

The last rope-lengths were still far from easy—a *dièdre* topped by an overhang where we had to drive in more pitons, another long traverse, a chimney, and finally, at 7 P.M., we got out on to the summit.

For once, we did not find the bivouac too long. Between sky and earth, we lived a heavenly night on our peak.

On the next day, the descent was interminable and we only reached the valley in the afternoon. It looked unreal and mysterious to me. In spite of the blinding glare, the village of Péteret was lifeless and sad. We were walking like machines on the moss-covered ground of the pine forest, dragging along our dead-tired limbs. Our sun-dazed eyes were half closed. Free from the haunting nightmare of perpendicular drops, overhangs and unbelievably exposed positions, we were gliding like shadows, silent as in a dream, back to a surprisingly verdant landscape.

We spent the night in Courmayeur and then went over the Col du Géant, the Vallée Blanche, the Mer de Glace and Montenvers to Chamonix which seemed overcrowded and noisy. It was indeed a return to earth. . . . And that very evening, I left for Paris, feeling all the richer for this marvellous experience.