

THE PEUTEREY RIDGE

BY J. NEIL MATHER

A CHANCE word in Chamonix, when we were both [without regular companions, led me to join Ian McNaught-Davis in an attempt on the Peuterey Ridge. Although I had not met him previously, Mac was well known to me as a competent rock climber and a fast mover. Arrangements were quickly made and we were soon en route for Courmayeur by motor-cycle.

Some rather sudden thunderstorms delayed our arrival in Courmayeur and caused us to wait another day before starting the climb.

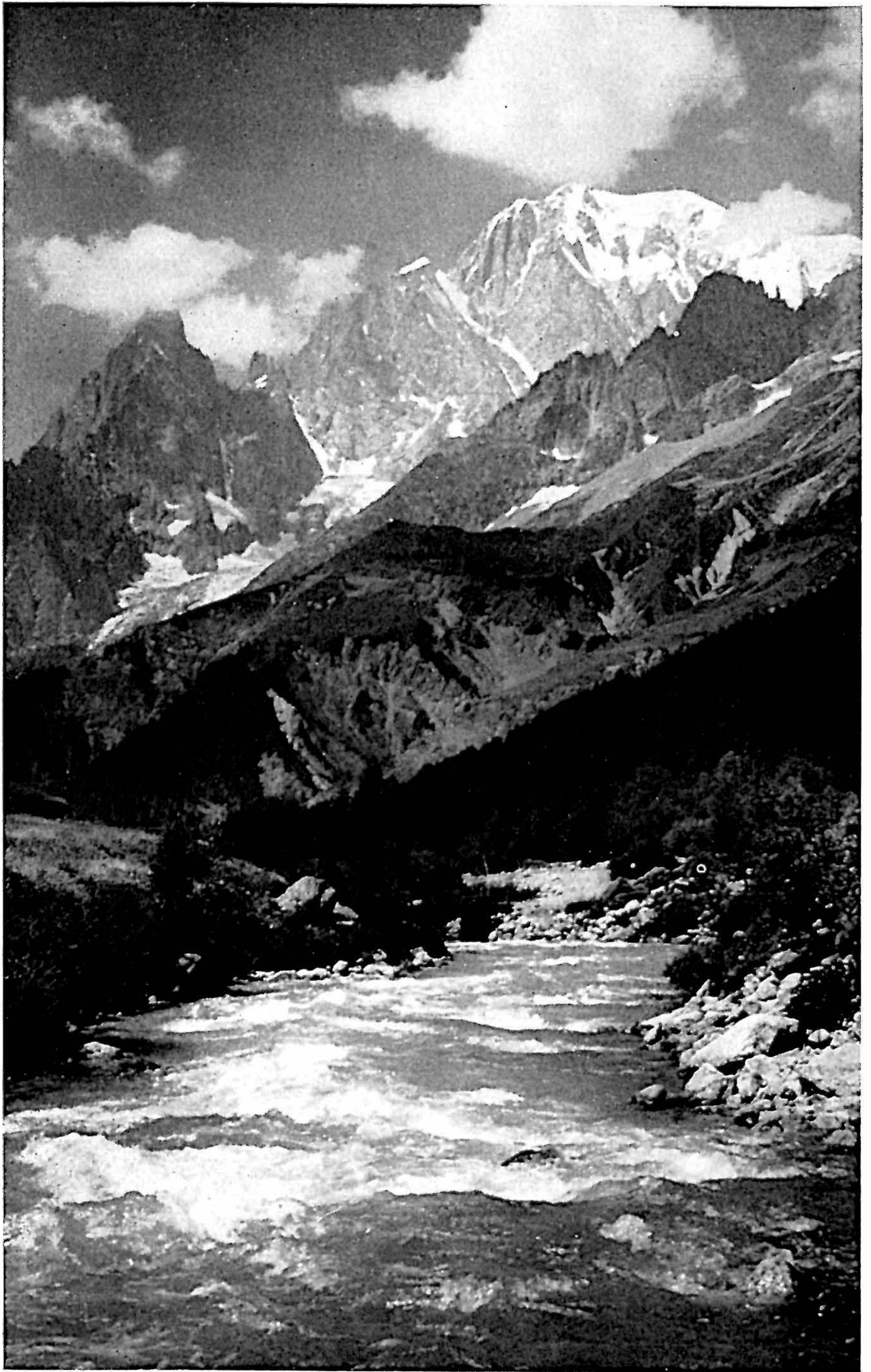
The classic ascent of the Peuterey Ridge attains the crest at the Brèche Nord des Dames Anglaises, between the Isolée and the Aiguille Blanche, and traverses the Aiguille Blanche to reach Mont Blanc de Courmayeur via the Grand Pilier d'Angle and the upper reaches of the arête. This route was first done by Obersteiner and Schreiner on 30-31 July, 1927. A swift party given favourable conditions can traverse Mont Blanc from the Gamba hut within the day, but most parties prefer either to spend a night at the Refuge-bivouac Craveri, a small hut which holds five people and which is situated at the Brèche Nord, or to make a more hardy bivouac higher up the ridge.

We left the chalets of Fresnay at 12.30 P.M. on August 4, 1952, bound for the refuge. Our way took us by the Gamba hut and proved a most pleasant walk. The hut-book there contained an entry under that day telling of the tragic deaths of John Churchill and Jocelyn Moore in the Eccles bivouac. Churchill's brother, whom we had passed on our way up to the hut, had made the entry.

The guardian questioned us as to our intentions as we gulped some watery soup. Our reply was evidently broadcast, for not many minutes later three Austrians approached us. They also were intent on the Peuterey and wanted some reassurances about the route to the Brèche Nord bivouac. I must confess that I was not very pleased; to have to share a climb with a strange party seems to lower its quality. We determined to be the leading party.

We left the Gamba at 3.15 P.M., closely followed by the Austrians. Our route lay up the little Châtelet glacier, the snow of which was soft in the afternoon sun, to the smooth 'rochers moutonnés' which give on to the short steep snow gully just below Col de l'Innominata. Both parties reached the col at 4.25 P.M., after the Austrians had relieved us of the step kicking for the last few feet.

From here we could see in detail the route we should have to take to the bivouac. Mac produced some biscuits and we munched them as we watched stones crashing down the couloir from the Brèche Nord. After half an hour or so, by which time we judged the others would be clear of our stones, we dropped down the far side of the col to the floor



Photo, B. R. Goodfellow.]

THE PEUTEREY RIDGE FROM VAL FERRET.

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of the Fresnay glacier. We roped up here and after half an hour's zigzagging round numerous obstacles, reached the rimaye below the Aiguille Blanche. This gaped hungrily but fortunately provided a rickety bridge at its left-hand end by which we gained the upper lip. An extremely steep ice slope then led without difficulty into our couloir.

The Austrians attacked the rocks of the Blanche directly above the ice ridge, fortunately for us, since we were not endangered by their stonefalls.

The couloir was straightforward as far as the bifurcation, where the couloirs from the Brèches Nord and Centrale separate. At this point the enclosing walls steepened and forced us into the bed of the gully which we had to share with a ribbon of polished grey ice. Belays were almost completely absent and the rock was both loose and rotten. We climbed a rope length at a time—a slow task, but the only way to feel safe. Small pebbles which we dislodged were veritable avalanches by the time they reached glacier level. When dusk fell we were still creeping up, with accompaniment from the murderous thunder of the falling debris.

Eventually the angle eased and we moved together on the right bank of the couloir. A friendly glow appeared; it was our Austrian friends who had reached the bivouac some ten minutes before us. They assured us that their route had been far safer than ours. The time was 8.45 P.M. Ice from the upper reaches of the couloir provided the water for our meal, and at about 10 P.M. we settled down for the night.

By 5 A.M. we were roping up on 120 ft. of nylon line. There were some disturbing effects in the sky that morning. A peculiar yellow glow surrounded the Grandes Jorasses whilst further eastwards a huge mushroom cloud dominated the sky. We agreed to climb until more definite signs of a break should appear.

From the bivouac the route avoids the overhangs of the Aiguille Blanche by a traverse to the left, then returns to the south-east ridge by the slabs of a subsidiary ridge. Almost immediately it leaves the ridge to contour, at a low level on the Brenva side, the Pointe Gugliermina. Memory is vague as to details of the climbing, but a number of rocky ribs and grooves were crossed until one of the ribs provided a way back to join the main ridge at a small semi-circular brèche which is clearly seen from the Torino. As this ridge had now resumed a more reasonable angle, we followed it direct to the south-east summit. From the Brèche Nord to a point some 100 ft. below the south-east summit is all rock and although it is not difficult climbing, the rock is consistently loose, and steep enough in places to dictate moving singly. We reached the summit in 3 hours 30 minutes from the bivouac which falls within the guidebook allowance of 3–6 hours.

After a short halt to eat and fix crampons we resumed the climb by the delightfully airy summit-ridge of the Aiguille Blanche. The other two tops, the central and north-west peaks, are by-passed by steep ice on the Brenva face.

From the north-west peak the ridge plunges steeply down some

600 feet to the Col de Peuterey. The upper part is a steep rock wall without any prominent feature ; this gives on to an ice slope which gradually eases into the flat snow of the col.

On the rocks we moved together, utilising a series of corners as a route of descent. The rock was firmer than usual ; probably because it was steeper. After about 200 ft., Mac discovered a piton from which we rappelled 50 ft. Another rappel of 60 ft. led to the top of the ice slope. We were now on the Fresnay side of the ridge. After traversing to the crest we made an easy, though laborious, descent on ice to the col. It was now 11.10 A.M.

We were now confronted by the Grand Pilier d'Angle, a huge rock buttress which dominates the Col de Peuterey on its south-east face and further to the right plunges with breath-taking steepness almost to the floor of the Brenva glacier. The Vallot guide offers a choice of routes to overcome this obstacle. The first, which is less exposed to stonefall and 'la plus élégante,' crosses the rimaye on the Fresnay side, attacks the sound rocks above, then gains the crest of the Pilier which it follows to the shoulder. The alternative requires the climber to traverse further left and ascend direct by the flank of the buttress. The latter route is described as quicker but as the former seemed to offer a greater chance of survival we chose that.

The rimaye was steep and was followed by an ice slope of 200 ft., where we had to cut steps to reach the rocks. We were now exposed to the full power of the sun, and although the rocks were easy and sound enough to permit continuous movement, I began to feel tired. On a convenient ledge we lay basking and eating for about 50 minutes.

Mac, who had been going very strongly, called me to my feet to resume work. Soon we were passing the conspicuous gendarme on the shoulder of the buttress. The next section was almost level. I thought at first that we should be able to relax a little. There were, however, further difficulties in store for us. New snow, which had been lying perceptibly thicker as we climbed, was here some 6 inches deep and lay on top of verglas which in turn covered the rocks. Progress was laborious and the gently rising ridge from the gendarme to the start of the final snow arête, some 150 yards, exacted an hour's toil.

I looked upwards. The prospect was not a heartening one ; mist had already enveloped the summit of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur and several lower summits were also in cloud. It was 4 P.M., and we still had to climb the 500 metres of ridge to the Italian summit which, the guidebook warned us, could be of ice and would then necessitate a long and fatiguing bout of cutting. However discouraging was our position, that of the Austrian party was even worse, for they were now only on the descent to the Col de Peuterey.

We embarked on the final arête, which gradually steepens to the summit cornice, after a short pause to fit crampons. The recently-fallen snow had a crust which wasn't solid enough to bear our weight ; we had to kick through it and force our claws into the hard ice beneath.

The frequent bends in the ridge formed a convenient measure for our slow and laborious progress. After an hour or so we noticed a group of climbers on our right ; they were negotiating the ice-cliffs on Route Major. It was cheering, and reminiscent of climbing in England, to hear their reply to our shouts.

As the angle steepened, our pace slackened. Although we were still able to kick steps I counted 100 paces between halts ; later this speed dropped to 50 and, when altitude really took effect, 35 paces.

Quite suddenly the ridge disappeared, to reappear some two or three hundred feet above our heads. Just at the point of disappearance the slope reared up by an extra 20° . We found that the snow was not stable enough to hold us and the underlying ice was too hard to admit crampons. It was clear that here was the fatiguing step-cutting of which the guidebook had warned us.

I cannot estimate the time required to fashion each step or even the time we spent on this short slope, but our rate of climbing was so slow that I began to count the remaining hours of daylight. First, the new snow had to be scraped away, then a flat step, large enough to hold a crampon, had to be cut. I counted from 20 to 30 blows of the pick to make a satisfactory step. We had no time to belay and stood close together in our steps.

Back on the ridge we were able to kick steps again, but as this required quicker movement it proved even more exhausting than cutting ; after a few minutes we sought relief by traversing to a small rock buttress overlooking the Fresnay glacier. We climbed this buttress, which was about 60 ft. high and ended with a very strenuous pull-up. As the rocks were overhung by a sérac we were forced back to the ridge and were surprised and delighted to see that we were a mere 50 ft. below the cornice. With Mac firmly belayed I hacked a stance, then swung a blow at the 3 ft. or so of cornice. With a swish, a large piece broke off and all but swept me with it. At 7.5 P.M. we stumbled from the grey stillness of the Italian face into bright sunlight and a biting wind on the plateau.

A new vitality came with the sunlight. Mac tore across the snows to Col Major and within half an hour we were standing on the roof of the Alps, with Chamonix a cluster of lights below. Another 25 minutes sufficed to see us at the Vallot hut, by which time my left arm was paralysed by the cruel south-west wind, which constantly hurled powder snow into our faces.

We met friends in the hut ; five climbers who had done Route Major and with whom we had exchanged greetings some hours previously. They too complained of the abundance of ice. It was an hour later, at 9 P.M., when the Austrians arrived, although they had been 5 hours later than we on the Col de Peuterey. After thanking us for our steps, which surely had saved them from a night out, they offered to guide us back to Courmayeur via the Dôme route on the morrow.

Sleep was elusive for me that night ; with only a waterproof sheet between me and the wires of the bunk, and partly covered by a small

blanket, I did little but shiver, doze and then turn over. This cycle was repeated until 5 A.M. when the Route Major parties left for Chamonix and we were able to use their mattresses and blankets for a further 2 hours.

On the easy but interesting slopes down to the Gonella hut and on the interminable moraines of the Miage glacier we had ample time to reflect on the incidents of the climb. Without doubt the approach to the Brèche Nord via the couloir had been both the most difficult and most dangerous section of the climb; the variant which the Austrians took appears to be more recommendable. The rocks of the Blanche, although intrinsically sound, are loosely embedded and care is needed if a party is to move fast. The difficulties of the Grand Pilier d'Angle were, I think, enlarged on this occasion by the newly-fallen snow and it was here and on the final ridge where we lost our time.

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| Left refuge bivouac | 5 A.M. |
| South-east peak | 8.30 A.M. |
| Col de Peuterey | 11.10 A.M. |
| Grand Pilier d'Angle | 4.0 P.M. |
| Mont Blanc de Courmayeur | 7.5 P.M. |
| Mont Blanc | 7.35 P.M. |

Total time from Brèche Nord to Mont Blanc—14 hours 35 minutes.

Vallot guide—8 hours 45 minutes to 23 hours.

We salute the anonymous climbers whose best recorded time of 10 hours from the Gamba to Mont Blanc is quoted in the Vallot guide-book—certainly an 'horaire rapide.'