

THE NORTH FACE OF TROLLRYGGEN

BY JOHN AMATT

(Three illustrations: nos. 31-33)

IN the recognised climbing centres of Europe, the words 'last great problem' are often heard. They are, however, usually reserved for the isolated wall which has not been climbed even after repeated attempts. At Chamonix, Cortina or Zermatt, not many of these exist as the standard of climbing is so high. In the miniature Alps of Norway, however, there are literally scores of similar problems. Indeed, there are probably more unclimbed rock faces than there are recognised routes. One such unclimbed wall was, until last summer, the sheer precipice of 'Trollveggen'—the 4,500 ft. North Wall of Trollryggen (1,742 m.) in the Romsdal valley.

The Romsdal lies some four hundred miles north of Oslo in the midst of vast areas of jagged peaks of great beauty. Although some five kilometres long, the valley boasts as few as ten climbing routes, and only one of these can be compared with a major alpine problem. This is the Trollryggen East Pillar, first climbed in 1958. Even today it has had only eight ascents although the difficulties are neither as long nor as sustained as those on the North-east face of Piz Badile for example. It is, however, a remarkably long route of 6,000 ft. and as such is a serious undertaking.

I was first attracted to the Romsdal after reading the publication of the Norwegian Travel Association—*Mountain Holidays in Norway*. In this it is said of the Trolltind ridge (of which Trollryggen is a part)—'Its East face is for the most part absolutely vertical. This wonderful mountain wall is probably the highest overhang in Europe, a masterpiece of mountain architecture.' On closer investigation we were to find this was a masterpiece of exaggeration! The majority of the face was composed of vegetated slabs, but we were surprised to find that there existed a stupendous vertical precipice facing north which fell sheer for over 4,000 ft. at its highest point. Could this be unclimbed? It seemed so; and on making enquiries we were to find that it had never even been attempted. That such an obvious challenge had not been accepted gives some idea of the opportunities still to be found in Norway.

A reconnaissance in March of this year revealed two possible routes. One of these followed a huge corner out onto the Trollryggen East Pillar at half height, but the other followed the wall in its entirety. This was the one we decided to try, as the former avoided the main problem of the face—breaking through the barrier of huge overhangs



Photo: H. Sodahl, Andalsnes]

THE TROLLTIND WALL (ROMSDAL, NORWAY): NORTH WALL OF TROLLRYGGEN.

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which barred the whole of the upper part of the face. We believed that it could only be tackled by artificial means, but we were later to find that there were long sections of high standard free climbing, especially (to our great surprise) in the upper half of the route.

The beginning of July was heralded by the arrival of bad weather, but during the weeks that followed we busied ourselves with the task of establishing an Advance Camp on the screes below the wall. The next few days were spent here and by the evening of the 10th we had succeeded in fixing over 1,000 ft. of rope up the smooth slabs and dangerous snow patches to the base of the proposed route. Even this involved us in difficulties of VI and A.2. What would the wall itself be like?

Two days later, we left Base Camp in magnificent weather and began the long climb up the screes. Collecting some equipment on the way, we reached the foot of the wall at 6 p.m. Here, our colleagues who had been acting as porters returned to Base, leaving Tony Howard, Bill Tweedale, Tony Nicholls and myself to climb to the first bivouac cave 100 ft. up the wall.

At this time of the year, there is little darkness in these latitudes, so the next day we were able to climb for sixteen hours without stopping. The crux of the day's ascent was a long 180 ft. dièdre, climbed entirely by artificial means—this we nicknamed the Grey Dièdre. This led us to a bivouac ledge below the vast '200 m. wall'.

Tuesday dawned clear but there were obvious signs of bad weather. The valley floor was carpeted in cloud and we were disturbed to note that the wind had changed direction. The first pitch above the bivouac gave us a foretaste of the climbing we were to experience later in the day. A very hard free traverse led to a small ledge below the tremendous vertical upsurge of the 200 m. wall. While Tony set about the first few feet of peg climbing, I busied myself with hauling the rucksacks across.

Twelve hours later and some 300 ft. higher, after three pitches of the hardest climbing of our lives, Tony joined me on a minute stance below the dripping wet overhangs. We were still some 80 ft. short of the top of the wall and the weather was becoming increasingly menacing. It was obvious that it was impossible for the four of us to bivouac on the minute stances on this wall, so after a short conference, we began the first of the long abseils into the mists below.

We arrived at the bivouac ledge of the previous night, wet, tired and dispirited. A quarter of an hour later as the full force of the storm struck us, we fell asleep, the exhaustion after twenty-three hours of continuous climbing having taken its toll.

During the next two days we dozed, drank and shivered alternately as the storm raged outside the nylon bivouac sack. By the morning of July 15, we could stand this ceaseless battering no longer. Taking the opportunity offered by an easing of the storm, we left the bivouac at

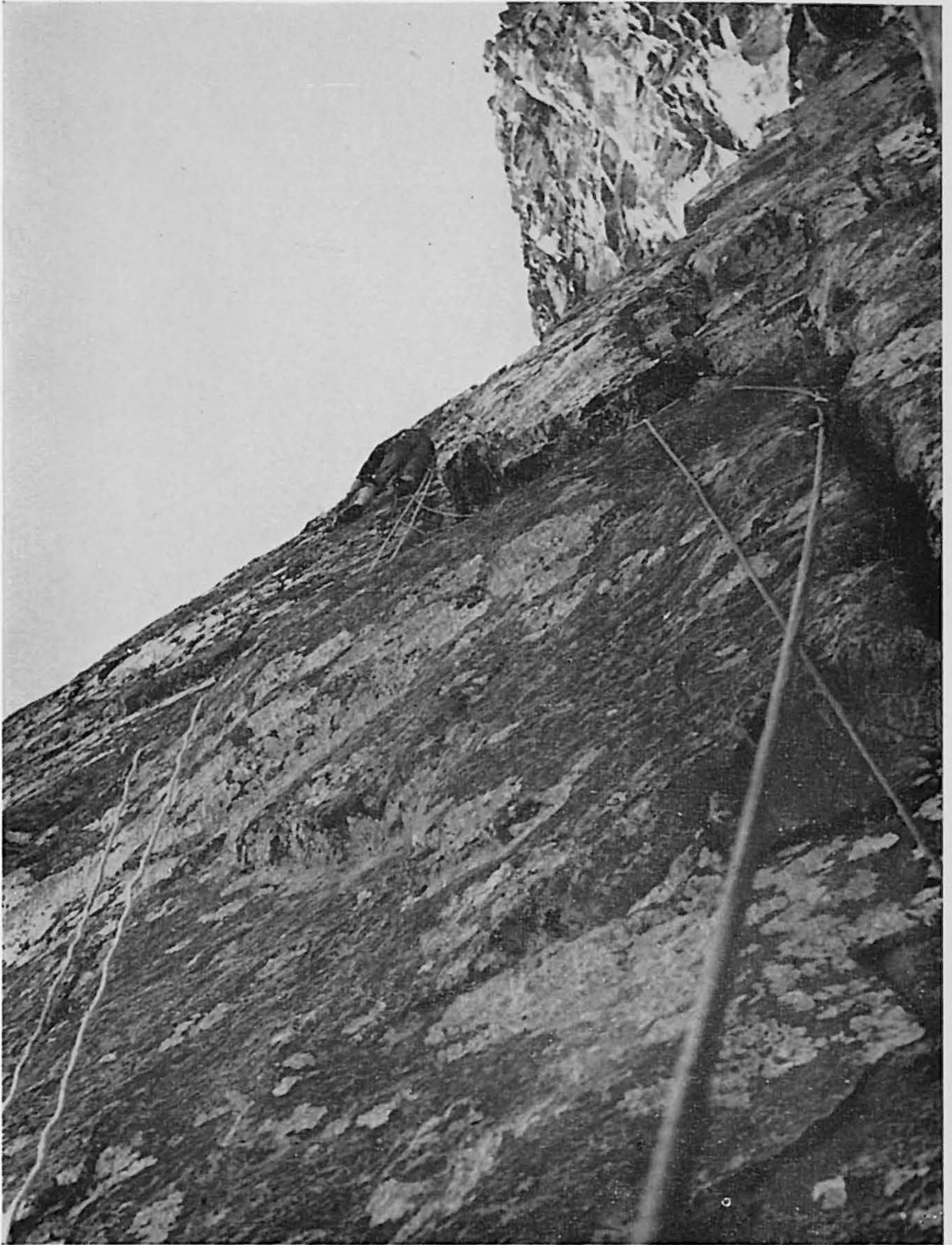


Photo: J. Amatt]

TROLLRYGGEN NORTH WALL: THE SECOND PITCH IN THE GREY DIÈDRE—VERY LOOSE PEGGING
(GRADE A3).

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6 a.m. and after twelve hours of desperate descent over rock covered in ice and streaming with water, we arrived back at Base Camp completely shattered. Altogether, in thirty-five hours we had climbed only about 900 ft.—less than half the major difficulties.

As one would expect, we were no sooner down off the climb than the weather began to improve. Sunday, July 18, was a glorious day and late that afternoon, Tony Howard, Bill Tweedale and myself once more toiled up to our Advance Camp. Here, instead of pressing on to the bivouac at the base of the wall, we settled down to await the passing of the twilight hours. As usual, nervous twitterings were at work; but eventually all possible excuses for giving up were eliminated, although our state of mind was not improved by the passage of a huge boulder within 60 ft. of the tent.

At 3 a.m. the next morning we were moving sluggishly up to the foot of the fixed ropes. We rested at the bivouac cave at the base of the wall and then moved quickly up the Grey Dièdre to the foot of the 200 m. wall. As the time was only 1 p.m. we decided to press on up the wall and to try and get off onto the ledges above before we bivouacked. After one or two startling moments when pegs came out, we were once again below the wet overhangs within sight of the top of the wall. The time was 11 p.m. The thought of a bivouac in *étriers* was not very thrilling, so Tony came up and attempted to push through to the top. After 30 ft., however, it was obvious that this pitch was going to be more difficult than anything we had yet met and he was forced to come down to the small stance that I had occupied for over three hours. All we could do was to make ourselves as comfortable as we could in the circumstances, myself standing upright on the minute ledge and Tony sitting in *étriers* nearby. Bill had a reasonably good ledge about 100 ft. below. During the day, we had climbed from Advance Camp, a distance of 2,300 ft., in twenty-two hours.

Obviously, sleep was out of the question, so as soon as it became warm enough to climb, we set off once more towards the sun which was striking across the wall towards us. Five hours later, we were once more in shadow but we were across those last 80 ft. of very difficult and loose pegging.

What a relief it was to be off that wall! Altogether, including the time spent on the first attempt, we had spent thirty hours climbing it. The difficulties had been extreme from the start—VI, A2, followed by two long passages of VI, A1, and finally the A3 pitch to the top.

However, relief soon gave way to complaint as our parched mouths and swollen tongues began to spur us on in search of water. Some 70 ft. higher up, we climbed an overhanging chimney which led to a sloping slab below more overhangs. The only way out was by a viciously overhanging crack. This was much too wide to take pitons or wedges and



Photo: A. Howard]

TROLLRYGGEN NORTH WALL. AMATT LEADING THE SECOND PITCH ON THE '200 M. WALL'.

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it was only after a desperate struggle that we managed to get to its top. Here, to our great surprise and relief, we found a small drip of water and a bivouac site close by.

Wednesday was treated as a rest day. Altogether we gained only 300 ft. in height, but this brought us out into the central basin below the next difficult section. Here there was snow and an ideal bivouac ledge and we were quite content to rest. Over to the left lay one of the most sensational pitches that I have ever seen. A steep slab or rock curved up from where we now stood to lose itself in the wall above. Above and below it were huge rock overhangs, but along this route lay our means of escape. We knew that if we were unable to pierce this barrier we would be faced with a long retreat.

Our fourth day on the face started at 6 a.m. as Tony led off to a minute stance below the overhangs. Leading through across the slab, which rose in an impressive sweep vertically above my head, I reached a point some 15 ft. from its end. The only hope here was to tension across those few feet of blank rock. But how?

Above was a small overhang. By reaching out over this it was possible to hammer in a piton above and then swing across the void. Another short groove, and it was possible to move back right across some 6 ft. of vertical rock sandwiched between the huge roofs to a sensational ledge on the very edge of the top overhangs. While I set about the task of hauling up the sacks, I accidentally dislodged a stone which fell in one immense sweep of 3,000 ft. before it hit slabs at the foot of the climb.

Sixty feet higher, we found our fourth bivouac—a small ledge where we could sit, our legs dangling over the void. Again we had climbed only about 300 ft. during the day, but we were content in the knowledge that we had put one of the most difficult sections behind us. Since the bivouac in the central basin, each pitch had involved us in difficulties of VI and the climbing across the slab had only been possible with considerable artificial means. Above us now lay the last barrier before the summit gully—a long line of overhangs cut by a series of wet overhanging chimneys. Although these looked hard, we were confident of success.

Seven o'clock on Friday evening saw us at last above these difficulties. Although the climbing had been sustained grade VI we had managed to overcome this section in three long rope lengths. At last we were able to shout and yodel to our friends on the ridge opposite in the knowledge that now nothing could stop us. Or so we thought. Above lay 1,000 ft. of climbing in the summit gully . . . and then the top. What a relief it would be to reach the summit. But we were not there yet, not by a long way.

After a short rest, we set off carrying the 60 lb. weight of our rucksacks on our backs. After some 500 ft. of easier climbing up the left wall of the gully, our triumphant progress was brought to a full stop. The gully

had steepened up to vertical and we were forced once more to slip into the slower business of sack hauling. One pitch was as hard as anything that had gone before—a good VI+—climbed free because we had no pitons of the required size. Some 280 ft. higher up and some five hours later, we reached a bivouac ledge—our fifth of the ascent and only 300 ft. from the top. The time was 2 a.m. on the morning of Saturday, July 24—the date of our final triumph.

During the previous day, we had climbed over 1,200 ft. of most difficult free climbing. Rarely had the standard been below sustained VI.

After three hours of fitful dozing, we awoke to find ourselves enveloped in cloud. However, by seven o'clock, the weather had cleared sufficiently to allow us to start climbing, by 10 a.m. we had reached the West ridge leading to the summit, and by noon we were standing on the highest point of Trollryggen.

In the valley, over 6,000 ft. below us, our friends at Base Camp acknowledged our frantic signals and we knew that the past months of planning, strugglings, frustrations and doubts had been repaid in full.¹

¹ A technical description of this fine route will be found under 'Expeditions', *infra* p. 139.—EDITOR.