
ERIC VOLA

The Devil's Needles

How Raymond Lambert Lost His Toes



The Aiguilles du Diable suitably lit. (*Alamy*)

In the telling of this story, I could not stop thinking of our late-lamented Doug Scott. Raymond Lambert and Doug had so much in common. Both were stars who did not behave as stars. They also had the same ‘mountaineering spirit’ and, if Raymond had lived long enough, he would have loved to help Doug when in 2007 he promoted the Spirit of Mountaineering commendation within the Piolets d’Or. Replace the ‘Devil’s Needles’ with ‘The Ogre’ and you will find the same superb mountaineering and human qualities in both men and in their friends who did more than their best to bring them down safely. Raymond, who was so proactive in helping Tenzing with his Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling, would have responded positively if Doug had asked him to participate in his Community Action Nepal activities. So, I hope readers will view this story as a tribute to the unique mountaineers Doug and Raymond were.

In March 2022, Victor Saunders, the Alpine Club president, sent the following letter (but in French) to the Androsace Club in remembrance of the feat on Everest 70 years ago by their members including Raymond Lambert who teamed up with Tenzing for the summit assault in 1952. He also thanked them for their contribution to the successful 1953 Everest expedition.

[To t]he president and members of the Geneva section of the Swiss Alpine Club.

Seventy years ago, climbers from Geneva reached their highest point on the south-east ridge of Everest. Their achievement was quite remarkable because most of their route had been exploratory.

Initially following Shipton's expedition of the previous autumn through the Khumbu icefall they were the first to cross its final huge crevasse to gain entry to the Western Cwm from where they reached the South Col alongside l'Éperon des Genevois. They [Tenzing and Lambert] then succeeded in placing a tent at about 8,400m where they spent the night without sleeping bags or even a stove with which to make a drink, and the following day reached their high point of about 8,595m. From there they were able to confirm that the route onward looked feasible as far as the South Summit. The information they gained was generously passed to the British expedition of the following year, greatly helping them to take the final step in the journey to the summit, making it the achievement of a succession of expeditions.

In the words of Dittert in Les Avant-premières à l'Everest, 'Les expéditions montent sur les épaules les unes des autres. Nous sommes montés sur les épaules de Shipton, lui sur celles de Houston, ceux qui viendront après monteront sur les nôtres.'

Those climbers of the Swiss expedition in Spring 1952 all came from Geneva and were members of the Androsace Club. It is interesting to note that the climbing team of the British expedition of 1953 were also all members of a single club (including the New Zealanders), namely the Alpine Club. It therefore gives me the great pleasure as president of that club to send our very warmest congratulations to climbers from Geneva on the 70th anniversary of their quite extraordinary achievement.

Victor Saunders

Many older climbers will remember the name of Raymond Lambert, the powerful and renowned Swiss guide from Geneva who with Tenzing reached a height 200m or so short of the summit of Everest during the 1952 Swiss spring expedition, a new level of achievement that contributed to the success of Hillary and Tenzing the following year. Most will also remember that Raymond climbed on Everest in specially made shoes, the size of a child's, after losing all his toes during a storm in the Mont Blanc range and

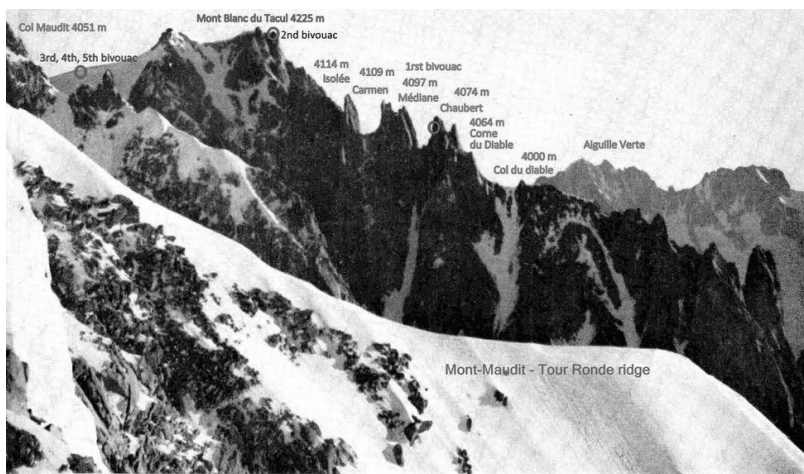


Raymond Lambert and Tenzing Norgay on Everest in 1952.

how this did not prevent him climbing extensively in the Alps and later in the Himalaya and Andes. But few will know the events that caused the loss of his toes, which ended with a rescue that will remain unequalled in the history of the Chamonix guides.

At the time Raymond was 24 years old and at his best. In 1937, he graduated first from the guide school of the Valais and before that, at the early age of 19, he had discovered the joy of winter climbing with a traverse of the Grépon. The year of his graduation as a guide, with his pal Marcel Gallay, about the same age, he made the first winter ascent of the Caïman and the Crocodile, two of the Aiguilles of Chamonix and quite a significant ascent at the time. Two years before, in 1935, with Giusto Gervasutti climbing with Renato Chabod and Raymond climbing with Loulou Boulaz, a top climber with quite a few first female ascents, he had made the second ascent of the Croz spur on the north face of the Grandes Jorasses, unfortunately learning on their way down that the first ascent had been done two days earlier by Rudolf Peters and Martin Meier. In 1936, also with Loulou, he made the second ascent of the north face of the Petit Dru, opening a variant to Pierre Allain's crack, the first grade VI in the Mont Blanc range, which became famous as the Fissure Lambert. In 1938, Raymond was already considered to be one of the best climbers and overall mountaineers of the time.

His next target with Marcel would be the first winter traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable, the 'Devil's Needles', up to Mont Blanc du Tacul, a traverse first done in the summer of 1928 by the famous French Chamonix guide Armand Charlet with another guide, George Cachat, and two American clients, Miriam O'Brien and her future husband Robert L R Underhill. At the time it was considered one of the best routes in the Mont Blanc range with five dramatic tops over 4,000m.



Les Aiguilles du Diable vues de la Brenva

Photo André Roch

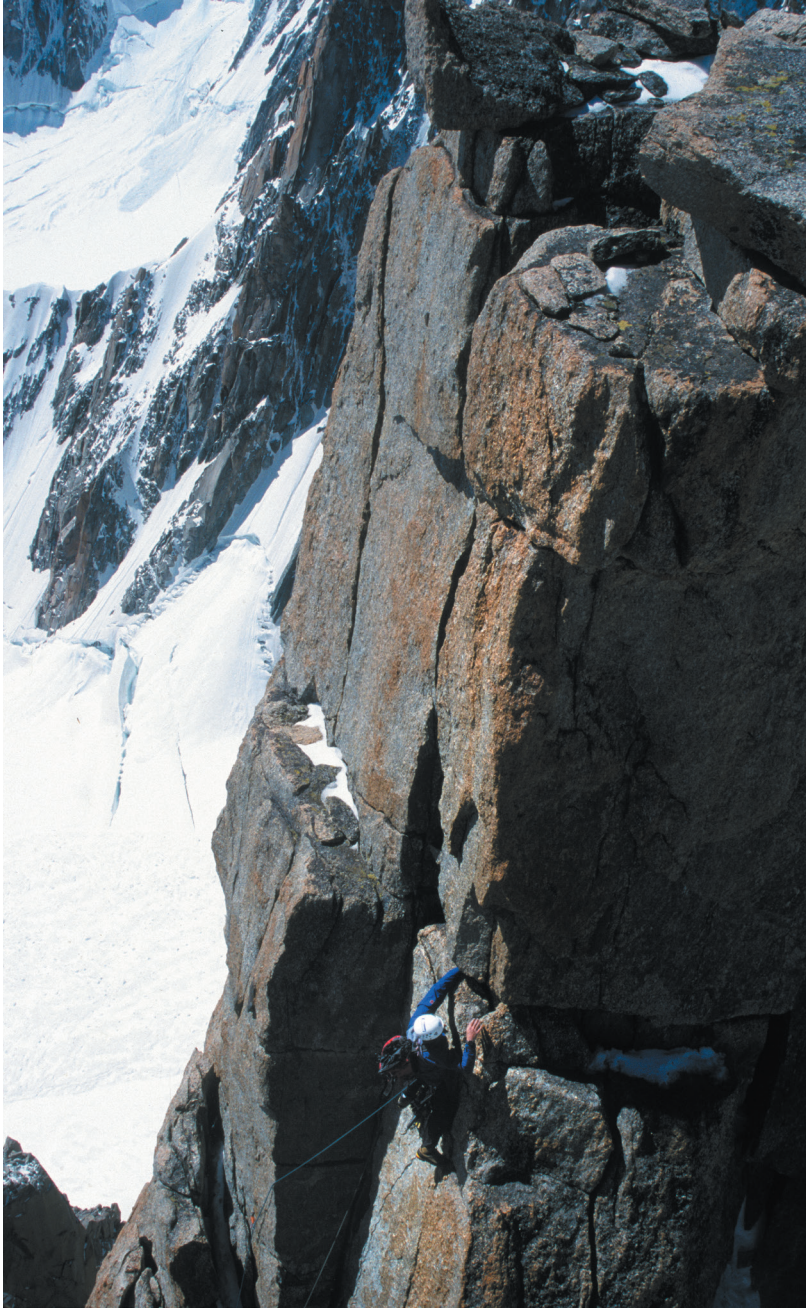
A visual glossary of the Diable ridge.

Raymond Lambert and Marcel Gallay prepared very well. During the summer they discussed thoroughly the use of snowshoes, skis, sleeping bags and the terrain (glacier, snow and rock). Raymond had done the traverse in the summer 1933 with Loulou Boulaz so knew the route well. Then, in December 1937, Raymond told Marcel that the party would now be three. Erika Stagni had become a regular client and that summer of 1937 Raymond had done a dozen significant routes with her in the Mont Blanc range including a first ascent on the Pointe de Nantillons. She was aged 22, was pretty, energetic and climbed fast: the perfect client for an ambitious young guide and her mother was a wealthy lady of Geneva, Mrs Amstutz.

In those days – no cable car of course – it took two days to reach the foot of the climb, stopping overnight at the nearest refuge, the Requin (2516m) four hours from the top of Montanvers railway. An attempt in early January, without Erika who is ill, is abandoned when the weather turns, so they wait for another opportunity.

Day One

Monday 7 February 1938. The three climbers leave Geneva by car at 5am, an early start as they want to stay not at the Requin that night but at the La Fourche bivouac hut, then known as the Borgna, at 3,600m on the French-Italian ridge between the Tour Ronde and Mont Maudit. The following day they intend to make tracks up to the col du Diable. But on the road a heavy wet mist slows them down and they only reach Chamonix at 8am, stopping at the Hotel des Alpes to collect the special sleeping bags they ordered from Pierre Allain's Paris shop. They then stop at the Hotel des Tines to prepare their rucksacks, leaving behind anything unnecessary. At 10am they set not for La Fourche but the Requin hut. The weather is perfect,



An image from summer illustrating the complex terrain of the Diable ridge.
(Ed Douglas)

their spirits very high, but Raymond has a bad cold or flu. As soon as the snow allows, they put on their skis. When they reach the Requin hut at 7pm, Raymond goes straight to bed having swallowed a cup of tea and several aspirin. Marcel and Erika make a good soup before joining him.

Day Two

Tuesday 8 February. They leave the Requin at 10am. Raymond's illness has gone, the weather is magnificent: not a single cloud. The glacier is in perfect condition, better than expected, so they easily overcome the Géant seracs and reach the foot of the Capucin du Tacul where they stop briefly to drink. Right above them, the Aiguilles de Diable are lit up by the strong sun. It's warm and they take off their jackets.

They leave their skis at the foot of the slopes coming down from the Gros Rognon and a rucksack with some food, which they intend to take on their way down, and put on their snowshoes. They want to reach La Fourche before night falls. The snow is hard, the way up easy and they comfortably navigate the crevasse zone until a snow bridge breaks. Marcel is out in front and he falls in. Lambert, solid as a rock, soon has him back on solid ground like a package. They laugh like kids and Marcel in those few minutes realises that Erika Stagni knows her way in the mountains and that Raymond is as strong as ever.

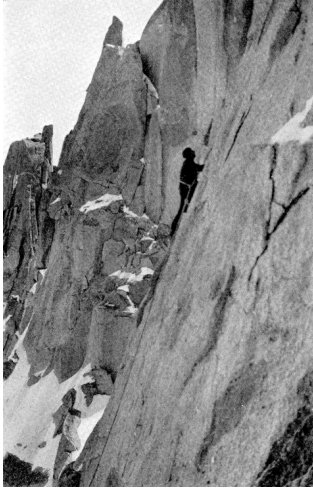
At last, having overcome La Fourche's bergschrund, they are on the ridge and at the small Borgna hut (3600 m) fully covered by snow. After clearing snow off the door, which overhangs the void, they enter the hut. It is tiny, just three mattresses with some blankets and cooking equipment. The weather is clear, the view magnificent and the night superb.

Day Three

Wednesday 9 February. They wake at 5am and after breakfast prepare their feet against the frost, putting camphor cream on their feet, then mustard flour and newspaper around the inner shoe. At 6.30am they start on the ridge and reverse quickly their way up the previous evening, thanks to the steps they have cut. The day is perfect, the five aiguilles are silhouetted against the sky: the Corne du Diable, Pointe Chaubert, Pointe Médiane, Pointe Carmen, l'Isolée and then Mont Blanc du Tacul.

They re-cross the La Fourche bergschrund and traverse the Maudit cwm, heading straight towards the Diable gully, climbing up its right side to reach the base of the aiguilles. Up to this point, the snow and rock conditions have been perfect; they did not need either to use their crampons or cut steps. For Raymond, such conditions are better than summer. At 10am they are at the col du Diable (3951m). The air is fresh. Following an easy crest and ledges, they reach the gap between the Corne du Diable and Pointe Chaubert. The day is warming up and they rest a few minutes.

They bypass the Corne du Diable and start on Pointe Chaubert, without gloves. Raymond leads. At each belay, Marcel joins him first and then they both lift the heavy rucksacks before Erika follows. The climb is on dry and



A Francis Marullaz photo of the Aiguilles du Diable. Marullaz was the lodestar of the Androsace, the Genevois climbing group of which Geoffrey Winthrop Young wrote: 'Mountaineers could not hope for a better guarantee for the future than that the younger generation of Swiss.' He was also the stepfather of distinguished neuroscientist Krešimir Krnjević, whom he introduced to climbing. (*Francis Marullaz*)

warm rock but the rucksacks seem to hit every snag and the snowshoes from one fall into space and down the gully. They reach the top of the Chaubert at 2pm. The weather is magnificent. They have now in front of them the Pointes Médiane and Carmen. Two 25m abseils get them to the gap (4017m) at the foot of the Médiane, a splendid 80m vertical wall of strenuous V.

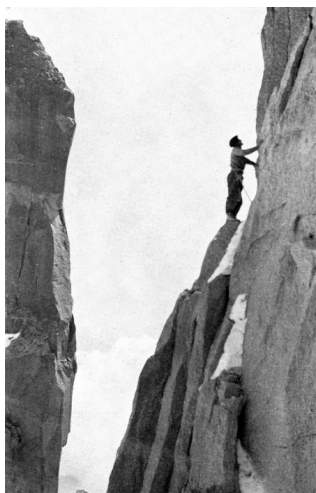
The difficulty increases but Raymond is fully fit again and his two companions climb well and fast. But the sun has turned and they need their gloves now. Marcel takes the lead and night is coming when they reach the top of the Médiane at 6pm. They look for their planned bivouac site, 10m below the summit. They have done three-quarters of the route and most of the difficulties are now behind them. They clear snow from their bivouac site against a wall. Everything seems fine, the view is magnificent and they all feel in perfect condition. They sleep peacefully in their sleeping bags.

Marcel opens one eye and sees the moon with a halo. He says nothing, goes back to sleep but with a little pinch in his heart. At midnight they are roused by an unusual sound: their kitchen is shifting from a gust of wind. Within a few hours, the sky is covered in clouds and snow starts falling. By 3am they are trapped in a storm.

Day Four

Thursday 10 February. Morning comes but the bad weather continues. Around 50cm of snow has fallen on the rocks and they themselves are covered with a layer 20cm thick although, thanks to their equipment, they have not yet felt the cold. Their night has almost been comfortable.

At 7am they are ready to go. Their situation is serious and there seem to be three options. The first is retreat but climbing back over the Pointe Chaubert is impossible. The second is dropping down the gully between Chaubert and Médiane but the avalanche risk is far too great. They would be swept down like wisps of straw. The last and only realistic solution is to finish the



Climbing the Isolée. (*Francis Marullaz*)



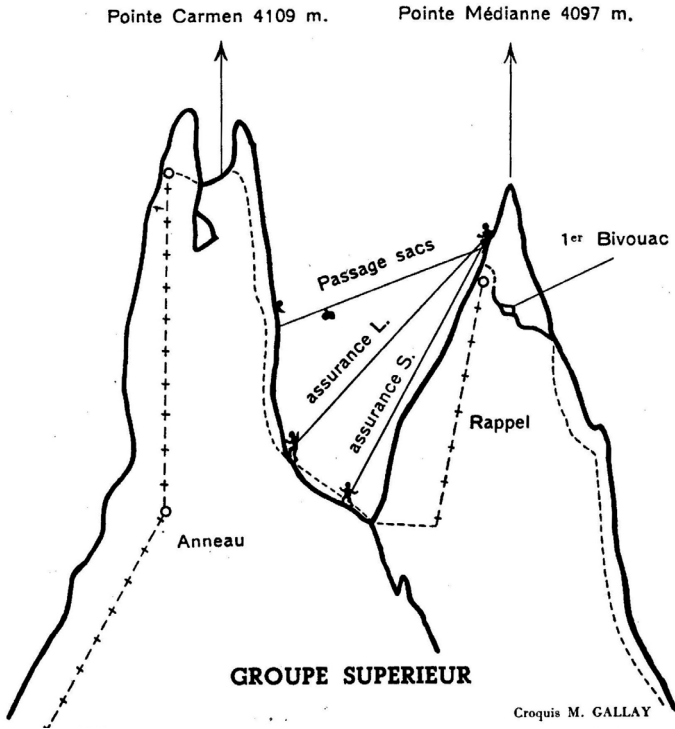
A view down the ridge showing its exposure.
(*Rémi Thivel*)

traverse and reach the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul where they know the way down will be easiest.

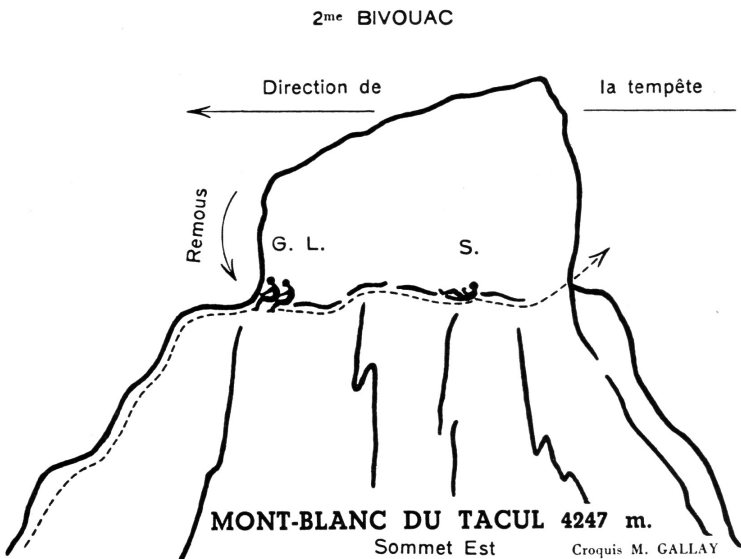
Raymond reaches the gap below the Pointe Carmen and traverses to its foot. The climbing is only mild IV but the rock is now white with falling snow and icy in places. Their ropes are frozen, their clothes wet and now they feel the cold. Marcel belays Raymond and at last he reaches a stance. It has taken two hours to climb 30m. Erika reaches Raymond and then Marcel, still on the Médiane and higher than Raymond and Erika, slides the rucksacks on a tight rope towards his partners. One arrives too fast, splits open and its contents, their food, disappear into the abyss. This will have a dramatic impact for their future bivouacs.

When Marcel joins the others, it is noon and the snow continues falling. They are also surrounded by fog. Soon after, they reach the summit of Pointe Carmen. Now they can see the last aiguille, l'Isolée, surrounded by grey clouds. Two abseils later they are at the gap beneath l'Isolée (4054 m) comprising overhanging cornices. The void beneath is masked with heavy cloud. From time to time, they catch fleeting glimpses of the Tacul ridge. They avoid the Isolée, crossing its foot to step onto the snow-covered ridge leading to the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul. The needles are passed. But it snows continuously, a thick blanket of treacherous powder. The first slope is steep and nothing to make a proper belay. Before, on the traverse, the wind could not get at them. This is no longer the case. The maelstrom throws snow in their eyes, blinding them, and it is now bitterly cold.

Overcoming this slope takes a long time but they believe that once up it they will be at the summit and safe. But when they reach the ridge below the summit, the storm has become an awful hurricane. The cold is terrible, and they have had no food since the previous night. They blindly follow a rocky ridge covered with ice. The strength of the storm is such that at one stage, Erika, two metres below the ridge on a tight rope between Raymond and



Schematics of the team's descent from the Pointe Médiane and the second bivouac.



Marcel, is lifted and blown to the other side of the ridge.

At 3.30pm, they reach the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul. They try to descend but blasts of wind throw them down in the snow. Visibility is now zero; it's impossible to find one's bearings, impossible to walk against the storm. The wind is so strong that they must hang on in order not to be swept away; they cannot breathe through the nose. Raymond fears their lungs will freeze if they continue.

In fact, to insist means certain death and so Raymond decides to bivouac. They look in vain for shelter. On the south side, they finally find a tiny ledge that will make a precarious niche where the wind is not blowing so strongly. Raymond and Marcel do their best to improve its defences for Erika. They tie her off to the rock. She will be able to spend the night well protected from the wind and the snow. But the shelter is small and only Erika benefits. Raymond and Marcel remain on a slanting slab facing the full blast of the storm. The wind is freezing them; the snow infiltrates their sleeping bags. Their long night is terrible.

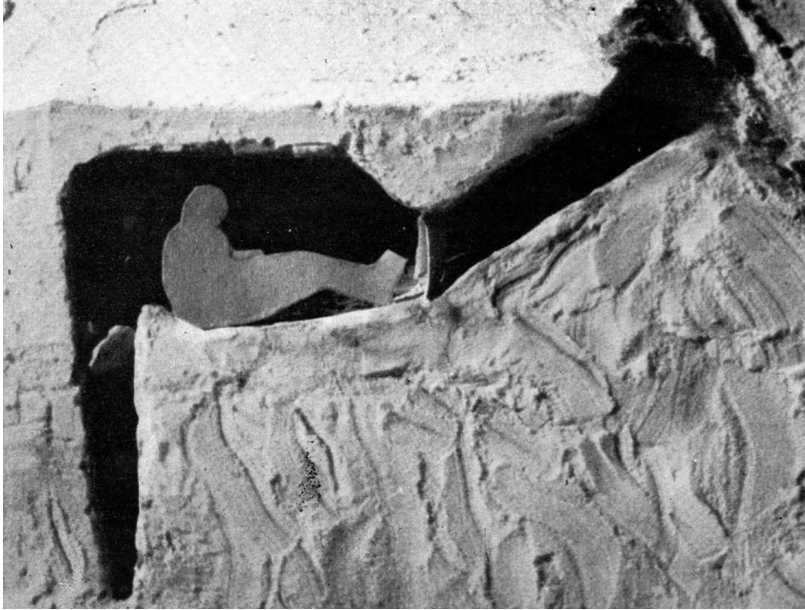
Day Five

Friday 11 February. At around 8am they get going again. Visibility is not good but they can't stay where they are. The temperature has fallen to -40°C . They decide to get down to the col du Maudit (4051m) following a ridge that should give them some protection from the wind. They are roped together with Raymond leading. Erika is picked up by a blast of wind and then starts slipping but manages to stop herself. They are constantly brushing ice from their eyelids as it totally blinds them within seconds. They go further down the ridge hoping to reach a point where the storm relents but when they reach the altitude of the col they are swallowed whole by the storm. They are separated by only five metres of rope but even so, they cannot see each other. The wind and snow blind them. Each feels as if they were totally alone in this freezing whiteness. Marcel catches Raymond to speak to him but is frightened by the sight of his totally white face.

'Raymond, we cannot get down further. We must find a shelter, if not we are lost!'

They have now reached the Maudit pass and are headed towards a slope that appears steep. By chance, Raymond discovers a small crevasse where they will spend their last two bivouacs. The hole is two to three metres long and at its end they discover a cavity. They start enlarging this until they have enough room for the three of them and then close the entrance with blocks of hard snow and ice. Outside the temperature is still -40°C but inside it's not much below 0°C . However, the crevasse is watery, so everything becomes wet quickly. Their first action will be to take care of their feet by rubbing each other. Marcel's left foot is already frozen. Raymond feels that both his feet are frostbitten and some of his fingers too from climbing the Pointe Carmen. Erika, thanks to her excellent circulation is still okay.

They are both hungry and thirsty, having consumed nothing for the last two days. Looking in their rucksacks, they discover only some bits of chocolate,



Model illustrating the final bivouac in the crevasse on the col du Maudit, taken from Marcel Gallay's account of the ordeal, *Une Tragique Aventure au Mont Blanc* (1940).

three dried fruits, a Maggi soup bag and aspirin tablets. Nothing else. They try in vain to light a fire. Everything is far too wet. They shave the wooden shaft of an ice axe into small pieces but even these remain frozen solid. With their last match they manage to light paper they had laid down. A small flame burns for a while but before they can melt any ice it sputters out. They still mix the Maggi soup tablet with snow and swallow that instead. They then cut each dried fruit in three and chew them slowly. Erika gives hers away.

Inside their shelter the darkness is complete. They use their rucksacks to block the entry. Night comes. The wind is still so strong that snow invades the crevasse and settles on their bodies. They finally manage to seal the entry with a pair of snowshoes. While Raymond and Marcel discuss the possibilities of being rescued, Erika promises that if they all get out alive, she will take care of all expenses for treating her companions' frostbite. She says she will buy a place where all three can live together and asks them to kiss a religious medal that she wears around her neck as if to sanctify this oath.

Raymond will name their shelter: 'the hotel of slow death'.

Day Six

Saturday 12 February. When they wake up, trapped inside the crevasse, they think that the weather has relented, but when Marcel pierces a hole in the wall with his ice axe, they realise the storm is still raging.

They are thirsty and hungry. To eat, they have only the aspirin tablets left. To drink, ice cut with an axe that burns their throats. Raymond and Marcel

take out their leather rock-climbing slippers to cut off small pieces to chew. When Erika sees Marcel's knife she screams.

'You're not going to kill me and eat me, are you?'

Marcel laughs. 'We're not there yet.'

Marcel and Raymond are convinced that rescue parties must have started looking for them. But will they find them? Usually storms last a maximum three days and then relent. Two days have gone, so maybe tomorrow the storm will cease? All they can do is wait. Raymond is overwhelmed by his responsibility. Marcel encourages him.

'You'll see! The weather will improve. We must hold on.'

Their thirst is atrocious. They will end up drinking their own urine using a cigarette box. The thirst and the need to absorb something warm are stronger than their revulsion. Erika tells them that her mother will do everything to have her rescued, so they must hope. The wind blows ceaselessly, the ice around them cracks and they do not even know exactly where they are. Night comes. They rub each other to make sure none of them will fall asleep to avoid numbness. This will be their third night without sleep.

Day Seven

Sunday 13 February. When daylight arrives, they can no longer hear the storm. It's 8am. Marcel punches a large hole in the door letting in the still strong wind but he also sees... the sun! He shouts:

'We are saved!'

They swiftly decide to go down but first they must dig their way out of the crevasse. This takes a lot of effort. Once outside, they recognise their position, near the Maudit pass and facing Mont Maudit. The altitude is 4,051m. The cold is so intense and the wind so strong that they have to go back to the shelter of the crevasse, which they can now see is on the edge of a 1,300m drop. After a long wait, they are ready to go again and leave most of their unnecessary equipment in the crevasse.

They don't get far. Advancing slowly, like drunken men, they suddenly find themselves in a thick mist: impassable! Raymond realises that with his two companions going so slowly, they do not stand a chance. They go back again to their shelter again and start enlarging it so they can stand but in doing so, part of the ceiling falls down, letting in the intense cold. They try to repair it but in vain. They throw much of their previously abandoned equipment outside in the faint hope that rescuers may see it. But in the crevasse, their hope is gone. They seem lost.

Their last chance would be to reach one of the rescue parties that must be looking for them. Descending as three would take too long and be too complex. But they do not want to leave Erika alone. So it falls on Raymond, the guide, and by far still the strongest, to go. It is his duty. He must, at all costs, find the rescue party and tell them where his companions are, even if he loses his life in doing so. Marcel embraces him, convinced he will not see his friend again and Raymond leaves.

Marcel and Erika start a long wait. Twice they will try to go down but in vain,

the clouds are much too thick. Their last attempt leaves them without any strength. Marcel never stops rubbing Erika lying in her sleeping bag. Slowly they enter into nothingness. Marcel is certain he will die but still he encourages Erika.

'Has Raymond succeeded?'

Although convinced otherwise, Marcel tells her he is certain that Raymond made it.

'Do you think my feet are frozen?'

'No. Not at all. You just don't feel them.'

'You're not going to leave me, are you?'

'No way.'

Erika asks Marcel to pray with her. She is obsessed with her feet, which Marcel continues to rub.

'I prefer to die than to have my feet frozen.'

Each time she says something desperate, Marcel reacts to boost her morale. Erika promises that if they survive, she will take care of Marcel and his young wife as well.

Night comes. Their fifth bivouac begins. Their clothes and sleeping bags are wet. All night, Marcel goes on rubbing Erika who has bouts of delirium about her feet. Since Raymond left, no one has taken care of Marcel's feet. He has nothing dry to put on them, particularly the heel of his left foot which is in contact with the ice as he braces himself to rub Erika's feet properly. Their thirst is atrocious and even Marcel becomes delirious at times.

Raymond meanwhile has been showing his best qualities as a mountaineer, finding his way down despite the fog. Tired, frozen, tortured by lack of food and sleep, he has only one fixed idea: get down at all costs and find the rescue party. He has left his two companions whose lives fully depend on him. He must succeed.

Several times he has to climb back up to find the route, crossing for a second time many crevasses. During one bright interval of clear weather, he sees the Chamonix valley in the sun. Two hours later he is back at his high point, a few metres from his companions' shelter, lost for three hours because of the heavy fog. He could let them know he's back, but he thinks it would have a disastrous impact on their morale and so he starts back down again.

Finally, he finds the normal route and seven hours after his first departure, he climbs down the bergschrund and reaches the col du Midi, continuing towards the Gros Rognon on the way down to the Requin hut. His tracks are those of a drunkard. He is wading now through snow that reaches his knees. His feet have no feeling. He could stop, and his ordeal would end, but no, his companions are counting on him, he must go down, always down: get to the Requin hut and the rescue party.

Walking towards where they left their skis, he sees one of the rescue parties that have come up from Geneva. Skiers! He shouts, but they do not hear him and continue down. He gesticulates and shouts again as loud as he can. At last, the skier leading them points his arm towards him; they turn around and come towards him. The rescuers have just decided to abandon their search.

They had looked for them in vain and were going down to the Requin hut. It's Loulou Boulaz, René Dittert, René Aubert, Muller, Robert Gréloz, Bader and Bonnant: his dear friends from Geneva.

They give him some cognac that burns his insides. Raymond tells them where the crevasse in which his companions are and the others help him ski down to the Requin. It is late now and they are exhausted, so they pass the burden of rescue to another party. When Raymond finally reaches the Requin hut, he faints. He wakes the following day in pain. His friends have been taking care of him all night, waking him every so often to make him drink warm soup and tea. But he only thinks of his companions, his mind tortured with the idea that one more night and the crevasse will become their icy grave.

At around 9pm, three guides from Chamonix arrive: Paul Démarchi, Arthur Franchino and Michel Payot. They had been on their way to explore the Mont Mallet area when they crossed paths with Loulou Boulaz and Robert Gréloz who told them to go to the Requin hut. Raymond tells them where his companions are. They ask him the same question many times as they believe he is delirious. They want to be certain. He tells them they must reach his friends before daylight, if not they may believe he has failed and attempt to come down by themselves, which would mean their certain death.

Raymond warns them of the terrible cold but that doesn't stop them. They leave at 11.30pm. At the Requin the temperature is -31°C ; on Mont Blanc du Tacul it must be -40°C . They reach the crevasse at 6.30am plunging through snow up to their bellies from the Midi pass onwards. Raymond's tracks have already been covered by fresh snow. During the night 20 more guides and friends from Geneva arrive with Armand Charlet at their head and the personal doctor of Mrs Amstutz sent to take care of Erika. He examines Raymond's frostbite. They plan to leave in the morning, to take over from the first rescue party of three, with orders to get Erika down and take care of Marcel Gallay.

Day Eight

Monday 14 February. At 6.30am, Marcel and Erika hear noises, then voices. One, two, three heads appear in the crevasse's opening. The Chamonix guides, Payot, Démarchi and Franchino have found them. The first thing they do is to give Erika and Marcel a one-litre bottle of rum that they drink in seconds, like it was water. Then the guides give them some dry clothes and blankets.

Their orders are to rescue Erika, so they start down with her. She leaves without even looking at Marcel who remains behind alone with some sugar lumps, some dry prunes and what is left of the rum. The Chamonix guides tell Marcel that at most he will have to wait two to three more hours before a second rescue party comes up to take care of him.

At noon he's still there, alone. He shouts and shouts and finally, after waiting six hours, the Chamonix guide Jérôme Bozon appears. Marcel gets himself out of the crevasse to the guides' astonishment. Armand Charlet arrives with Luc Couttet, Walter Marcuard and Francis Marullaz, the last

two being Marcel's friends from Geneva. An avalanche has covered the previous party's tracks and they have lost a lot of time. They cut off Marcel's wet trousers, tie him in blankets like a bundle and start the 3,000m descent. One of his friends tells him:

'Lucky, we didn't listen to the party taking down Miss Stagni. They had told us: "Don't go up. It's useless! Gallay is done for."'

Marcel learns that the first rescuers who took care of Erika came directly to their crevasse while the party that saved him had been looking a long time and may not have found him if he had not shouted. It takes three hours for the party to reach the col du Midi (3544 m) where more rescuers are waiting.

Some other friends from Geneva are there. They tie Marcel on skis and the descent continues until they reach the Requin hut at night. Raymond has refused to be taken down until he was sure Marcel had been rescued and was safe. Then five friends have started down with him on a sledge to the Tines, before he is taken by ambulance to the La Colline clinic in Geneva where he is soon joined by Erika Stagni, the Chamonix guides, Paul Démarchi, Arthur Franchino, Jérôme Bozon, Michel Payot and his friend from Geneva, Francis Marullaz and then the following day, Marcel Gallay.

Raymond writes later: 'The hotel of slow death could not keep its prey.'

Aftermath

Erika Stagni left the clinic after three weeks totally unscathed, thanks to Raymond but most of all thanks to Marcel's constant attention during their last two bivouacs. She continued climbing all her life, particularly with Robert Wohlschlag, (nicknamed 'Pellebrosse', because of his thick red hair that was hard as a brush) a powerful climber from Geneva who eventually married her. Among the top routes and first rock ascents Erika did with him was the first female ascent of the *Brandler-Hasse* in 1964. She was certainly one of the best lady climbers of the years between 1940 and 1960, and the richest: lucky Pellebrosse!

Several Chamonix guides who suffered frostbite were treated at the same Swiss clinic in Geneva, their expenses covered by Mrs Amstutz. Paul Démarchi and Jérôme had all the toes of their right feet amputated. Paul lost two from the left. He had been so badly frostbitten that he was brought down on a sledge from the Requin hut. A third Chamonix guide lost one joint on each toe of his right foot and two others suffered less severe frostbite that kept them in hospital for three weeks.

Raymond lost all his toes, three joints on fingers of his right hand and one of his left. That didn't prevent him from becoming the most famous Swiss guide of his time. 'I am now equipped with the hooves of a chamois,' he said when he wore his custom-made new shoes the size of those for a 12-year-old kid. As a guide, he was very much like Gaston Rébuffat, taking clients up hard routes, but as a climber (and as a character) he was much more like Lionel Terray: powerful, daring and very friendly. A unique combination!

Raymond and his friends from the Androsace performed incredibly well during the spring 1952 attempt on Everest, considering they effectively

climbed without oxygen. The apparatus they had could only be used properly at rest and was only used by Raymond and Tenzing above the South Col. Their friendship with the Sherpas and particularly Raymond's with Tenzing was unusual at the time but typical of 'the best mountaineering spirit'. After the 1952 attempts, Tenzing did not want to join John Hunt's expedition, preferring to wait for the Swiss to return. Jill Henderson, secretary of the Himalayan Club in Darjeeling, tried to convince Tenzing but to no avail. So she wrote to Raymond Lambert asking for his help. Raymond wrote the following letter to his pal Tenzing:

Hop Tenzing, ça va bien?

My life is back to normal in my quiet Switzerland, far from Everest where we have lived those intense moments. No day goes by since that I don't think again of the moment we turned around, with our finger touching the summit. But at least we are here to talk about it.

Miss Henderson told me of your hesitation about returning to Everest with the British. You would be too tired; you would not want to go back without us. You, Tenzing, tired? I find it hard to believe it ... In case, here is a jar of Ovomaltine to perk you up. As far as we are concerned ... After the English, it is the French who got the permit, whatever happens. For me, the summit of the world will remain forever a dream. But for you everything is still possible: your quest has not ended. The mountain that no bird can fly over is waiting for you. And if you get to the top, my friend, a part of me will also be on the summit. So, we will not have given, risked everything in vain.

After receiving this letter Tenzing went to see Miss Henderson and told her that he agreed to join the British team. On their return, after their success, John Hunt's expedition made a stop at Zurich where the whole Swiss team, Raymond Lambert at their head, toasted them with champagne and Tenzing gave back to Raymond the scarf he had taken with him to the top of the world.

Tenzing returned to Switzerland several times, each time staying with Raymond, his dearest friend, who trained him for his new job as director of Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling. This comradeship between Tenzing and the Swiss was very different from his relationship with the more hierarchical British. (Tenzing had been to Garhwal with André Roch's Swiss team in 1947.) The Swiss considered Tenzing to be like them: a mountain man and their equal.

After the Swiss expeditions in 1952 to Everest, in 1954 Lambert made an unsuccessful attempt on Gaurisankar and then went to Cho Oyu with Claude Kogan, another great female climber. What happened there was typical of Raymond's mountaineering spirit. Arriving at base camp, they discovered a small Austrian expedition was already there and had already made a first attempt on the summit. Exhausted, they were resting before

their second try. Raymond's companions wanted to press ahead after the Austrians refused to join forces. But Raymond told his companions:

We will not! In the mountains there is a law, an unwritten moral code that does not allow competition to take over even between rival parties and even if those are from different nations! And there also is a principle of anteriority!

Despite his team insisting, Raymond didn't budge and with support from Claude Kogan he decided to let the Austrians have two attempts before making their own. The Austrians duly succeeded but by then the weather had worsened. Raymond and Claude Kogan reached 7,730m before turning around. In 1955 he finally succeeded in the Himalaya, making the first ascent of Ganesh Himal (7429m), again with Claude Kogan and Eric Gauchat. There were further expeditions, to the Andes in 1957 and an attempt on Distaghil Sar (7885m) in 1959. After that Lambert started a new career as a famous mountain pilot.

In his tale of their ascent of the Aiguilles du Diable and the subsequent rescue, published in the journal of the Swiss Alpine Club, Raymond ended thus:

*I have the feeling I did my duty despite everything and I am happy that Miss Stagni has been brought back safe and sound to her family. Time, the great healer, will help us forget those painful hours, but in the bottom of our hearts, we think: **long live mountaineering!***

For Marcel, the ordeal was longer and more damaging. Erika's promises of help, particularly with medical expenses, were brushed aside by her mother on the grounds that Marcel should have had insurance. So Marcel was moved from the private clinic to a public hospital in Geneva. He was well looked after but in those days frostbite treatment was quite crude, particularly when the damage was so deep as it was for Marcel. His toes and the heel of his left foot were so badly frozen that all these were amputated and he never climbed again. His misery was accentuated by the feeling he had been abandoned by Erika but in fact it was only her mother who was able to dispose of the family's wealth. Marcel expressed his gratitude to his rescuers:

I am indebted to the guides and my friends, who risked their lives to rescue me, and I express once again all my gratitude.

But he added:

They, at least, did not bargain with their dedication. What I have never understood is the cruelty of the fate which since the arrival of the first rescuers separated me from my companions, always keeping me apart, with no aid or encouragement, even from my partner Erika who, as far as she is concerned, got out unscathed from this adventure.

Marcel Gallay showed unequalled courage but was psychologically as badly injured as physically due to the attitude of Mrs Amstutz.

One final question remains. Considering the extreme weather conditions, why did Chamonix guides agree to a rescue party? Their past and future behaviour shows that in such horrendous conditions and with so many hazards, they ordinarily refused to risk their lives, particularly in winter. Why in this case did they show so much bravery and such unique mountaineering spirit? In my opinion, the answer is threefold.

First, Mrs Amstutz promised double pay to all the guides agreeing to rescue her daughter. Second: Armand Charlet. He was at the time the leading Chamonix guide and his word and moral authority with the Chamonix guides were paramount. The money alone was not enough, since in almost all other cases it was offered to no avail. Armand had great panache and the Aiguilles du Diable were his domain. Finally, Raymond and Marcel had many climbing friends in Geneva and the Valais. Those friends shared gallantly the burden of the rescue with the Chamonix guides. They all showed real boldness and true mountaineering spirit despite the premium wages offered to the guides. All his life, Raymond felt deeply indebted to all the rescuers, the Chamonix guides and his friends from Geneva. As he wrote:

I cannot find strong enough words to express my gratitude.

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