

[We must congratulate the party on a magnificent expedition. The ascent of Mt. Fairweather is, we understand, the hardest yet accomplished among the 'Arctic' mountains of North America. We venture to reprint two sentences from a letter received from Mr. Carpe: . . . 'I wish that I could do justice to the careful and efficient arrangement of supplies in this expedition—largely the work of Ladd. We lived in luxury for two months on what we carried on our backs, and returned to civilization without a single unsatisfied craving. . . .'—*Editor*.

IN THE MONT BLANC MASSIF AND THE OBERLAND.¹

By Miss MIRIAM E. O'BRIEN.

I.—MONT BLANC GROUP.

NO plan or systematic climbing programme guides my summer holidays. I never attempt to do a series of climbs of the same type, or all the peaks in one region, or all of a certain height, or anything of an orderly and systematic nature. My choice is aimed rather at the greatest possible variety—a few climbs here and there, in the Dolomites or in the Dauphiné, in the Engelhörner or on skis in the Engadine, as fancy or—more often and more prosaically—weather and conditions may dictate. Sometimes with guides, sometimes guideless, and sometimes—best of all—manless (but that is another story). This paper, therefore, will not describe the carrying out of any purpose or definite aim in climbing, but will be, rather, a rambling story of some unrelated ascents, done in the last two or three years, that have seemed to me particularly interesting. And in order that the story shall have some semblance of unity, it shall be concerned with only two regions—the Mont Blanc massif and the Oberland.

The Mont Blanc massif has always been a favourite of mine, because it strikes me as the region *par excellence* for such rock climbing as is at the same time high Alpine mountaineering. In the Dolomites and similar exclusively rock-climbing centres,

¹ We desire to express our indebtedness to Mrs. Dawson and Messrs. H. de Ségogne, R. L. M. Underhill, and Howard Palmer for permission to use extracts from journals edited by them.—*Editor, A.J.*

although the general standard of the technical difficulty of the rock work may be higher, one misses those aspects of mountaineering that are essential parts of a big climb.

The Chamonix climb that has given me the greatest personal satisfaction is the first manless traverse of the Grépon, with Madame Alice Damesme, in August, 1929. But the Grépon, of course, is a commonplace to every member of the Alpine Club, and needs no further writing up. Its particular significance to me is derived largely from the fact that it was my first manless climb of any importance. Let us pass on quickly, then, to the second best Chamonix climb, the traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable, which would rank easily first if judged by objective standards.

Traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable.

The Aiguilles du Diable consist of five rocky spires, each exceeding 4000 m. in height, on the S.E. ridge of Mont Blanc du Tacul. The highest, and the first on the ridge counting from Mont Blanc du Tacul, is the *Pointe Blanchet*, formerly called *l'Isolée* (4114 m., *Vallot*). The deep *Brèche du Diable* (4054 m., *Vt.*) separates the *Pointe Blanchet* from the next two, known as the upper group, the *Pointes Carmen* (4109 m., *Vt.*) and *Médiane* (4097 m., *Vt.*). On the other side of the *Médiane* a second deep *brèche*, *Brèche Médiane* (4017 m., *Vt.*), marks off the lower group, the *Pointe Chaubert* (4074 m., *Vt.*) and the *Corne du Diable* (4064 m., *Vt.*).

Below this the ridge loses some of its boldness of outline. It drops down to the *Col du Diable* (3951 m., *Vt.*), rises again to form the *Aiguillettes*, then splits into two branches, with the *Clocher* and the *Trident* on the southern branch, the *Capucin* and the *Petit Capucin* on the northern branch.²

Among the earliest explorers of this region was Signor Adolfo Hess, who reached the *Col du Diable* for the first time, climbed the *Aiguillettes du Tacul* and was thus enabled to get a closer view of the *Aiguilles du Diable* above.³

After Hess, M. Etienne Henriot organized three expeditions into the *Cirque Maudit* and on to the ridge of the *Aiguilles du Diable*.⁴ The first expedition took place in September, 1920 ;

² See diagram, *La Montagne*, 1924, p. 277 ; or *Guide Vallot*, iv, facing p. 114.

³ *R. M.*, 1902, p. 303 ; *Boll.*, 1903, pp. 90-106.

⁴ *La Montagne*, 1921, p. 203 ; *Ibid.* 1923, p. 83.



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

POINTE MÉDIANE FROM POINTE CARMEN.



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

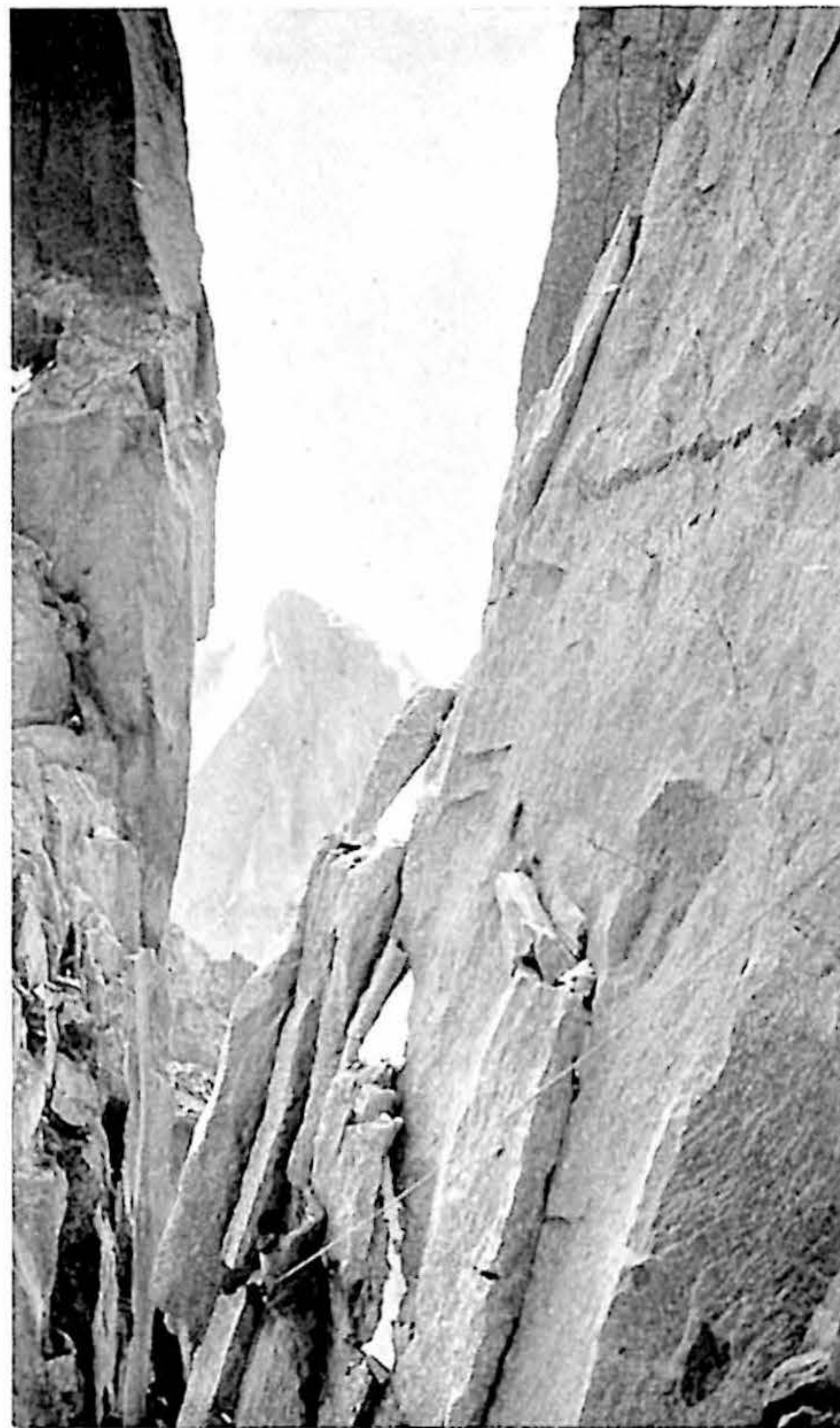
ON SUMMIT RIDGE OF POINTE CARMEN.

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Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

SLABS CLIMBED ON L'ISOLÉE.



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

L'ISOLÉE, CHARLET ON FIRST STAGE OF CLIMB.

the second on June 25–26, 1921. On this second expedition, with Camille Simond and Camille Ravanel, M. Henriot reached the ridge above the Col du Diable, but did not succeed in climbing the lower needle. On August 27, 1922, the same party started from the Rifugio Torino to attempt 'the traverse of Mont Blanc du Tacul, going up its S.E. ridge and climbing those of the five Aiguilles du Diable which should turn out to be possible.' It is this programme of M. Henriot's that we followed six years later, our predecessors having blazed the trail for us.

The Henriot party, after many difficulties, reached the *brèche* (Brèche Chaubert, 4047 m., *Vt.*) between the two needles of the lower group, now known as the Corne du Diable and the Pointe Chaubert. There, at 11.30, they were compelled to turn back, and they experienced some difficulty in descending by their route of ascent. The story of M. Henriot's experiences led the two following parties (MM. de Lépiney-Chevalier-Bregeault and Blanchet-Armand Charlet-Antoine Ravanel) to give up this method of approach and to take a large détour by way of the Col du Midi and the top of Mont Blanc du Tacul.

On August 13, 1923, a party succeeded for the first time in reaching the summit of one of the Aiguilles du Diable. MM. Jacques de Lépiney, Paul Chevalier, and Henri Bregeault started from the Rifugio Torino at midnight, and after having lost some time among the crevasses of the Géant Glacier and in going up Mont Blanc du Tacul, they arrived at 10.00 at the base of the Pointe Carmen. They glanced at l'Isolée on the way by, but considered it too easy! M. Bregeault writes: 'At the base there are a few slabs that might require some gymnastics, but the upper half is broken up and should be relatively easy. . . . Let us look for difficulty first, and if we have time left, we will try l'Isolée afterwards.'⁵ They considered, moreover, that the Pointe Carmen was more individualized than l'Isolée.

Attacking the Pointe Carmen by the N. face, they at first experienced great difficulty in traversing a slab of clear ice. Having once reached the rocks and passed a slight overhang, they found themselves at the foot of the wall itself, a smooth wall, which they succeeded in surmounting by means of a little crack between two slabs. This crack led them to a narrow ledge which gave access to a long chimney leading upwards towards the right. From this point, they reached a large platform,

⁵ *La Montagne*, 1924, pp. 273–292.

from which rise the two terminal spires. The true summit is the W. spire, higher, but not so sharp, as the east. Its 35 ft. are climbed by straddling the ridge *à cheval*. The party reached the summit at 12.30. The descent was carried out by the same route, and the snow saddle at the base of the needle was reached again at 14.40, too late, unfortunately, to attempt the ascent of l'Isolée. The party reached the Rifugio Torino at 22.30.

The second conquest in this group was l'Isolée, climbed July 14, 1925, by M. E. R. Blanchet with Armand Charlet and Antoine Ravanel.⁶ L'Isolée was at that time the highest unclimbed peak in France. The party approached by way of the Col du Midi and Mont Blanc du Tacul and reached a little *brèche* N.E. of the base of the peak. From the *brèche* they descended fairly easily about 50 ft. on the E. wall, to traverse afterwards towards the south. Then came the most difficult passage in the Aiguilles du Diable. Charlet went up direct by means of cracks and fissures of increasing delicacy and steepness, until, after having negotiated an overhang on the left, he reached the critical point of the difficulties—a large overhanging block which had to be turned by jamming an ice axe in a crack 3 ft. farther to the left, and lifting himself up first with the left hand and then with the right (extraordinarily difficult). Next, he straddled a very steep ridge where the holds were small. A 7-ft. crack, closed by a large block at the top, led to a platform marking the end of the difficulties, which had been extremely serious and continuous during these first 100 feet. Another 100 ft. led thence fairly easily to the summit. The descent was carried out by roping down from a platform about half-way up the needle and a little to the left of the line of ascent. (The times of the party making the first ascent: Rifugio Torino, 00.10; Mont Blanc du Tacul, 05.10; top of l'Isolée, 08.20; Mont Blanc du Tacul, 10.30; Géant Glacier, 14.40; Montenvers, 19.45.)

Two years later, September 1, 1925, M. J. Chaubert with Armand Charlet and Antoine Ravanel turned their attention to the lower group. Leaving the Rifugio Torino at 02.15, they followed Henriot's route and 'without any difficulty, over excellent rocks and couloirs of good snow,' reached the Col du Diable at 06.00, and, 25 minutes later, the col between the two lower needles. The Corne du Diable, about 100 ft. above the *brèche*, was climbed by Charlet in less than 10 minutes, direct

⁶ *A.J.* 37, 361; *G.H.M. Annuaire*, 1926, p. 22.

by the W. ridge (07.20). The descent was carried out by roping down.⁷

The same party on the same day climbed also the point 4074 m. (later named Pointe Chaubert), direct from the *brèche*, by its E. ridge, but here the difficulties, particularly at the beginning, turned out to be considerably greater. The first step necessitated a human pyramid. The descent was carried out by roping down twice, for which a rope of 130 ft. was easily sufficient. The return from the *brèche* to Montenvers required approximately 5 hours.

The next year Chaubert and Blanchet continued their series of climbs in the Aiguilles du Diable by attacking the last point which remained unclimbed—the Médiane.⁸ With Armand Charlet and Jean Dévouassoud, July 23, 1926, they followed Chaubert's route to the two lower needles, turned the Pointe Chaubert by the S.W. face and reached the *brèche*, 4017 m., at the base of the Médiane. This 260-ft. climb began by going up a series of steps separated by short and steep walls, then by small, very steep cracks as far as the bottom of a large chimney some 140–160 ft. high. After going up the first 90 ft. of this chimney, they made a very awkward traverse of 15 ft. to the right to reach a little notch in the main E. ridge of the Médiane. They followed this ridge as far as a first terrace, and then up to a second, larger terrace, by which they traversed the S.E. face of the needle. An easy and short chimney led to a third terrace just underneath the summit, which is formed of three huge, upright blocks, separated from each other by two tall and narrow letter-boxes.

The first party went down by the same route as far as the second terrace, whence they turned a little to the right of the big chimney. A *rappel* of 65 ft. enabled them to avoid the lower part of the chimney. (Times: Rifugio Torino, dep. 01.00; *brèche* of the Médiane, 08.15; summit, 11.15; Requin hut, 18.15; Montenvers, 21.30.) M. Blanchet says of this climb: 'Without offering any passages as difficult as those on l'Isolée, the Médiane is more tiring because of the accumulation of difficulties. It is infinitely more difficult than the Drus, and the most dangerous of the five Aiguilles du Diable.'

On August 26, 1926, Chaubert and Blanchet, with Armand

⁷ *G.H.M. Annuaire*, 1926, p. 35; *Die Alpen*, 1926, pp. 207, 255; *La Montagne*, 1926, pp. 97–100.

⁸ *A.J.* 38, 309; *La Montagne*, 1926, pp. 267–9; *G.H.M. Annuaire*, 1927, p. 66.

Charlet and Marcel Bozon, started out again for l'Isolée and the Pointe Carmen.⁹ Finding the N. face of the Carmen still covered with snow and *verglas*, they attempted to climb the peak by the W. face. Starting up scree and a slightly overhanging chimney, they reached a point about half-way up, from which Charlet rejoined the route followed by the first party. When he arrived at the platform just under the summit, he threw ropes to the other members of the party, who then succeeded in climbing a long, vertical and almost holdless chimney. This route is without doubt shorter than the de Lépiney-Chevalier-Bregeault route, but is probably not feasible without the help of the ropes. On this occasion, Armand Charlet succeeded in climbing also the second spire of the Pointe Carmen, some 20 ft. high, difficult and very exposed.

The second ascent of the lower group was carried out on September 7, 1926, by two parties: M. Blanchet with Armand Charlet and Marcel Bozon, and Mr. J. W. Alexander with Alfred Couttet and Vital Garny.

When we started for our traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable, therefore, in 1928, each peak had been accomplished, and all but the Médiane had been climbed twice. But no party had ever attempted to do more than two of them in one day.

Armand Charlet has summed up the difficulties of the five Aiguilles du Diable.¹⁰ He gives first place to the Médiane as being 'la plus grande course'; second place to l'Isolée, which offers the hardest stretch; third to the Pointe Carmen; fourth to the Pointe Chaubert; fifth to the Corne du Diable. The last sentence of this summary appealed to me particularly: 'The complete traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable seems possible under normal conditions.'

'How many do you want to do?' asked Armand, when we met him, Robert Underhill and I, at Chamonix on August 2, 1928. Now, of course, I wanted to do all of them, but modesty—or rather caution—led me to answer that I wanted to do as many as possible. Armand considered the situation for a few minutes, and finally offered the opinion that we could do the three upper ones—perhaps. It was so decided, therefore. When, however, two days later, at 5 A.M., I discovered myself on the Corne du Diable, it occurred to me for a second only—for I was quite busy—that this needle did not seem to be one of the three upper ones.

⁹ *G.H.M. Annuaire*, 1927, p. 68; *A.J.* **39**, 156.

¹⁰ *G.H.M. Annuaire*, 1926, p. 69.

On August 3, 1928, we went up to the Rifugio Torino, R. L. M. Underhill, Armand Charlet, Georges Cachat and I. The weather conditions seemed only moderately favourable; in fact, we were overtaken, on the Géant Glacier, by a slight shower which succeeded in wetting us more than we cared for. And when we reached the Col du Géant, the large black clouds lying low on the Péteret Ridge caused us some uneasiness. During the night, however, the weather improved a little, and we started out at 01.00 on August 4. We had originally planned to leave the hut at 22.00, and this delay in starting, combined with the threat of bad weather, served all day to quicken our pace, which was distinctly faster than it would have been under more favourable conditions.

Leaving the Col du Géant, we followed at first the usual route, taken by all the parties after the first two: up the upper W. branch of the Géant Glacier in the direction of the *Cirque Maudit* and up the S.W. flank of the ridge of the Aiguilles du Diable. The bergschrund presented some slight difficulty, and the rocks that followed, although easy, were not very firm. Slightly before reaching the Col du Diable, we traversed obliquely to the left, N., to gain direct the *brèche* between the Corne du Diable and the Pointe Chaubert (04.30).

After a few minutes' rest and some food we climbed the Corne du Diable, following the former route (by the W. ridge), and at 05.10 were on the summit. Since the cold was intense, and it was too early for photography, we left almost immediately, scarcely stopping to admire a beautiful sea of clouds over Italy. Five minutes later (05.15), we were back at the *brèche* preparing our attack on the Pointe Chaubert. An initial step on an ice axe replaced the human pyramid of the first party, and the other amusing passages followed in due order. We reached the summit at 05.45. Here began the first novelty of the expedition, the descent of the N. face of the Pointe Chaubert, which was carried out without difficulty with three *rappels*, two of 65 ft. each. From the base of the third *rappel*, a short traverse led us to the *Brèche* 4017 m., at the foot of the Médiane (06.20-7.00, lunch).

The Médiane was climbed by essentially the same route as that used on the previous ascent. Because of its length, it seemed to us more worthy of being considered a big climb, although it presented no overwhelming difficulty. When I reached the large terrace out of which rise the three big, vertical blocks forming the summit, I found Armand already busy arranging ropes for the descent. I went on to the top, none the

less. Two narrow and tall windows are formed between the blocks. Back and knee work in the left window, W., followed by a *rétablissement* (which means pulling oneself up entirely by the arms) on the middle block, and a second *rétablissement* on the higher left-hand block, led me to the summit (08.15).

The first party had come down by approximately the same route as on the ascent, but we, wishing to continue up the ridge towards the Pointe Carmen, made a descent of the N.W. face, a more serious undertaking than the descent of the Pointe Chaubert. Starting from the E. window of the summit blocks, we put our spare rope around a large iron piton. One needs 160 ft. of rope here. Ours was not so long and we experienced no slight difficulty with inadequate stopping-places, snow-covered, cold and slippery, for the different members of our party of four. From the bottom of our two *rappels* (which, with a 160-ft. rope, might have been but one), a delicate traverse over ice and rocks, covered with *verglas*, led us to the very narrow *brèche* between the Médiane and the Carmen (09.00). From there, following neither the route of the de Lépiney-Chevalier-Bregeault party by the N. face, nor the variant Blanchet-Chaubert by the long chimney on the W. face, we climbed straight up by the E. ridge, by fissures between big, unstable blocks. After a large platform, cracks and grooves led to the foot of the E. spire, which we turned on the right, north. We reached the summit (W. spire) as our predecessors had done, by riding up the ridge—some 110 ft.—*à cheval*. The ridge is steep, the holds are few and small and the situation is very exposed. (Summit, 09.50.)

We roped down the W. face of the Pointe Carmen to the *brèche* at the base of l'Isolée (10.20), where we delayed to eat another meal in spite of the weather, which was becoming more threatening. The initial stretch of 100 ft. on l'Isolée, which confronted us next, is the most difficult in the Aiguilles du Diable, and one of the most difficult rock passages in the Mont Blanc massif. Armand says of it that it is less hard than the 'Knubel Crack' on the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon, but he wonders if the 'Knubel Crack' would be climbed at all, if it were at 4000 m. instead of 3000! Armand started out for this step about 10.35, and we watched his progress with the keenest excitement, especially since at that moment a flurry of snow occurred. When one considers that I had ample time to take 11 photographs of Armand while he was engaged in climbing this passage, one can gain some idea of its difficulty. But with what precision and skill he climbed! After Armand came

Georges; and then it was my turn. First came the little descent down the E. side, to traverse afterwards towards the south. Then up the wall where the cracks and fissures become less convenient as the wall gets steeper. A little overhang, but not the hardest one. The difficulties increased, and I began to realize that the day had already held for me some serious rock-climbing. Finally I reached the culmination of the difficulties, the large overhanging block that must be turned by jamming an axe, or the left fist, which works less well, into a smooth-sided and open crack 3 ft. to the left. I had left my axe at the *brèche*, and I could not jam my left fist, one of its fingers—which I had broken a few days earlier—being in splints. This seemed to me an adequate excuse for being pulled a bit on the rope by Georges. The question as to whether I could have climbed the step unaided under better circumstances remains, perhaps fortunately, unsolved. The end of the passage was comparatively easy—the ridge, the little chimney, and I was beside Armand, who was most impatient to be on his way to the summit. What a change! The last 100 ft. were no harder than the Aiguille de l'M. (Summit, 11.40). It no longer snowed, but the weather looked very threatening, and we wondered if we were in for a real blizzard. 'The weather is not dangerous now, but it might become so,' remarked Armand thoughtfully. Down, then, as quickly as possible, by a *rappel* from the platform about midway on the Aiguille and a little to the left of the route of ascent.

Gathering up our things where we had left them at the *brèche*, we started on (12.10), for Mont Blanc du Tacul. The next hour to the summit (13.10), adding nothing of interest to a climb already sufficiently long, demanded a real effort. Clouds and a little snow greeted us there and we resumed our former accelerated pace. The descent from Mont Blanc du Tacul to the Col du Midi (14.05) remains in my memory as a series of enormous and terrifying crevasses which had to be crossed by fearful leaps. Occasionally, much too frightened to jump, I would solve the situation by walking to the edge of the upper lip, knowing that it would break sooner or later, and that Armand, already below and seeing me fall, would give the necessary pull on the rope that would bring me over to the other side. It happened that once, landing upright on my feet, I sank into the snow as far as my knees. It froze immediately and I was unable to extricate myself. While Armand worked with the axe to free me, he advised me earnestly, in similar circumstances, always to get out at once. 'Suppose you were



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

SLABS ON AIGUILLE DE ROC.
(Mer de Glace Face.)



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

COUTTET ON TRAVERSE.
(N. face, Aiguille de Roc.)



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

CHARLET AT WORK.



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

L'ISOLÉE, APPROACHING THE EDGE.

[To face p. 240.]

here all alone, and without an ice axe.' This supposition seemed, to me, highly improbable. On the last part of our descent to the Col du Midi, we all slid, sitting down. Perhaps this method was a little lacking in dignity, but it made up for it in convenience and speed, since the slope was steep and the snow soft. We stopped at the Rognon (14.20–14.35) for the last tin of pineapple, and then worked through the maze of the Géant icefall to the Requin Hut, which we reached at 16.30. (Montenvers, 19.30.)

The new *Guide Vallot*,¹¹ in its description of this traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable, says: 'Ascension de tout premier ordre. Etant donné le haut degré et la longueur des difficultés d'escalade que l'on y rencontre, il ne semble pas exagéré de dire que le parcours de cet itinéraire constitue probablement la grande course d'arête, la plus difficile des Alpes.' Although I do not personally care for statements quite so sweeping,¹² the fact remains that the traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable is a magnificent rock climb, of serious and continuous difficulty, while the altitude of these spires, all more than 4000 m. high, surely adds something to the difficulty of the climbing. The traverse in the opposite direction, starting with Mont Blanc du Tacul and the Pointe Blanchet, would afford, we think, approximately the same sort of climb, of about the same difficulty.

The traverse has been repeated once on September 5, 1929, by MM. André Roch and J. Belaieff; *Die Alpen*, 1930, pp. 267–75.

The Aiguille de Roc du Grépon.

In Mummery's *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus* appears a picture entitled 'A Crag on the Grépon.' It shows a curious pinnacle, now called the Aiguille de Roc (3409 m., *Vt.*), that stands out on the eastern (Mer de Glace) face of the Grépon, or, rather, on the wall between the Grépon and the Bec d'Oiseau. This spire was still unclimbed in 1926, and it remained unclimbed for a year, resisting the four attempts that I made on it.

The first attempt took place on August 7, 1926. My brother, Lincoln O'Brien, and I, with Alfred Couttet and a second guide, who had probably better remain anonymous, set out from the Montenvers and went up the Mer de Glace and the Trélaporte Glacier towards the Tour Rouge to see if it might be possible to attack the Aiguille de Roc from that side. (The hut that

¹¹ iv., 'Mont Blanc-Tour Ronde,' p. 123.

¹² And we concur entirely with the writer's views.—*Editor.*

now stands near the Tour Rouge to facilitate ascents of the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon, etc., was not then built.) Unfortunately, when we had climbed up the rocks above the Trélaporte Glacier high enough to get a good view of the formidable-looking wall of the Aiguille de Roc, the second guide reported that he was very ill—much too ill to continue. I am afraid we showed him scant sympathy, leaving him to wait alone while we went on as far as the Tour Rouge to look over the ground. We were not able to see very much on account of mist, but it was obvious that snow conditions made an attempt from that side inadvisable. We therefore returned to the Montenvers, planning to have a look at the other side of the peak from the *brèche* between the Grépon and the Bec d'Oiseau. (*Brèche*, 3385 m.)

Accordingly we (Alfred Couttet, Vital Garny and I) set forth on August 13 for the Col des Nantillons, and proceeded from there to the *Brèche*, 3385 m. We had with us a rope of about 200 ft., which we fastened full-length at the top of the couloir leading down from this *brèche*. The use of this fixed rope was necessary on account of the condition of the couloir, which was badly iced and steep—indeed overhanging at the start. Needless to say, we left the 200-ft. rope in position until our return. Since our climbing rope, however, permitted only 65-ft. intervals we were obliged to cut several platforms in the ice for the different members of the party to stand in while the others were roping down. This consumed a great deal of time. When the end of the 200-ft. rope was reached, we continued roping down, using a 130-ft. *corde de rappel* twice over—that is, we descended the couloir for a total of 350 ft. From this point we had an excellent view of the Bec d'Oiseau face of the Aiguille de Roc, which in its lower part looked impracticable. We therefore turned to the left to go up the couloir leading to the *brèche* (unmeasured on the maps) between the Grépon and the Aiguille de Roc, cutting steps in hard ice. From this *brèche* Couttet worked up on small icy holds to a little platform, covered with snow and ice, upon the Aiguille de Roc itself. From there he lassoed a small projection of rock some 20 ft. above the left, N., end of the platform, arranged a fixed rope and climbed up, hoping to traverse to the left along a narrow ledge. On closer view this appeared impracticable, however, and he came down. His next effort was to drop down slightly from the farther end of the platform on to a lower ledge, and attempt to traverse along that. It was, however, very narrow and outward-sloping, and the wall above was overhanging. But the greatest

difficulty was afforded by the snow, with hard ice underneath, that covered the ledge. This traverse also proving impossible, there was nothing left but to return the way we had come, and to decide that this was another reconnaissance (the usual term for a mountaineering defeat). While we were resting and eating near the *Brèche*, 3385 m., on the Nantillons side, MM. Jacques de Lépiney, Bower, and Jean Morin¹³ arrived with their tent to spend the night, on their way to the Aiguille de Roc—as I learned later. They greeted me courteously, but perfunctorily, and then turned their attention to our couloir. Was it possible that they detected steps down there? Considering the enormous platforms we had cut every 60 ft. or so! They have told me since that it never occurred to them to consult us on the subject, assuming that we were merely a belated party returning from the Grépon, and I, being ignored completely, felt a little shy about offering information.

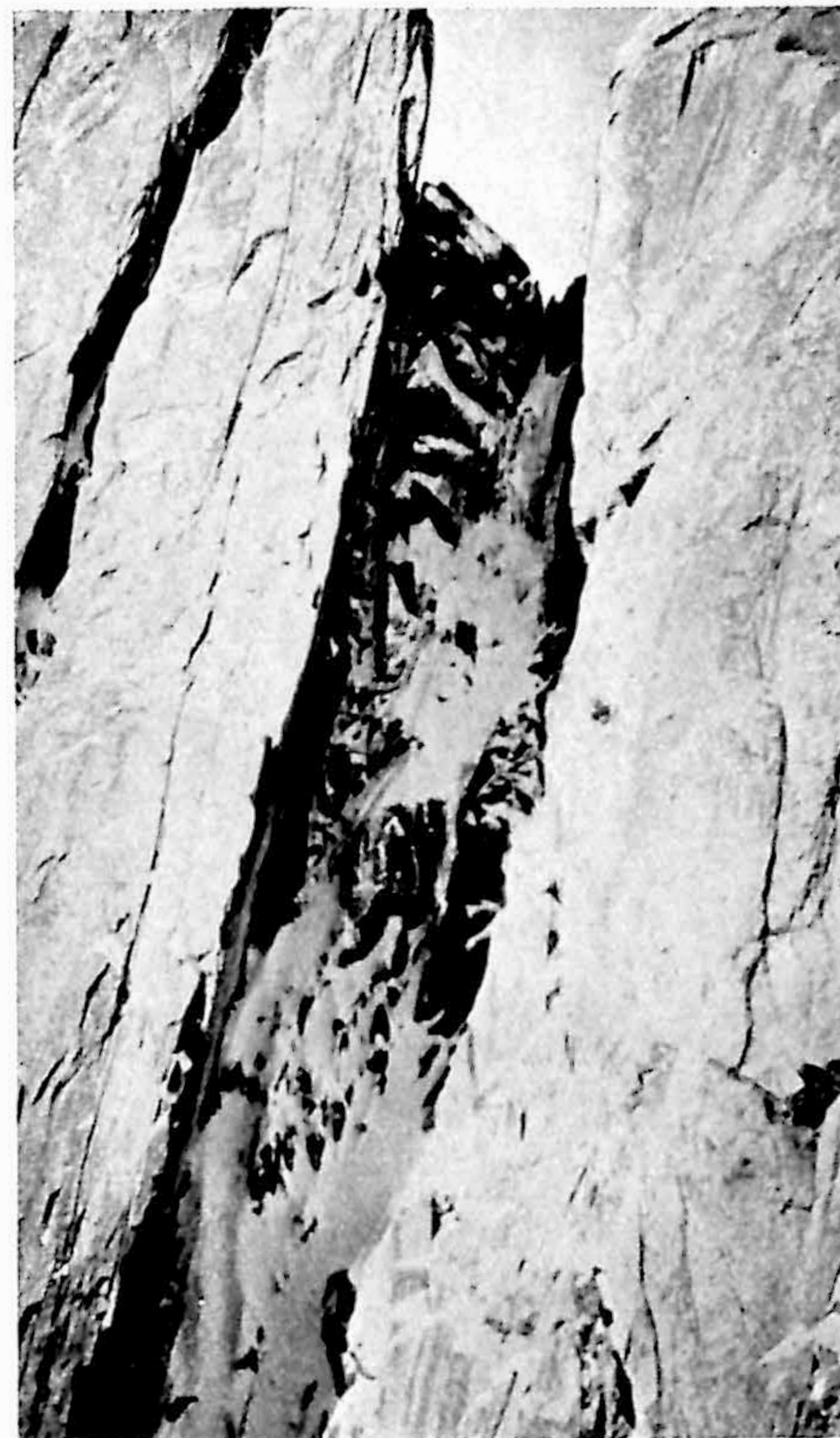
Our third attempt took place two weeks later, August 29, with the same party and over the same route. The weather had been dry and warm in the meantime and we found conditions, as we had expected very much improved. The rocks of the first couloir had lost so much of their snow and ice that we did not consider it necessary to leave our 200-ft. rope fixed in place, but carried it along for *rappels*. We made much better time, reaching the *brèche* between the Grépon and the Aiguille de Roc earlier by an hour than on our second trip. This time, when Couttet lassoed the same rock splinter again, and attempted to climb up the rope, the former pulled out, proving to have been held in place only by the ice. On the lower ledge, however, in *espadrilles* and over dry rocks, Couttet succeeded in making the traverse that had stopped us before. This turned out to be an extremely awkward passage, about 35 ft. long. It brought us into a broad, almost vertical, gully which we climbed without great difficulty for about 70 ft. Here the gully merged into a steep and formidable wall, at the bottom of which was a large detached leaf of rock. Climbing this (it moved slightly during the process) by means of a human pyramid, Couttet was able to reach a small crack some 2 inches wide, and perhaps 25 ft. high, which led up the wall to an overhang composed of large and apparently loose rocks. He worked his way up the crack for some distance, but it was obviously impossible to go up over the overhang without touching the rocks, and a closer view made this seem as unwise

¹³ See *A.J.* 38, 265.



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

AIGUILLES DU DIABLE.



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

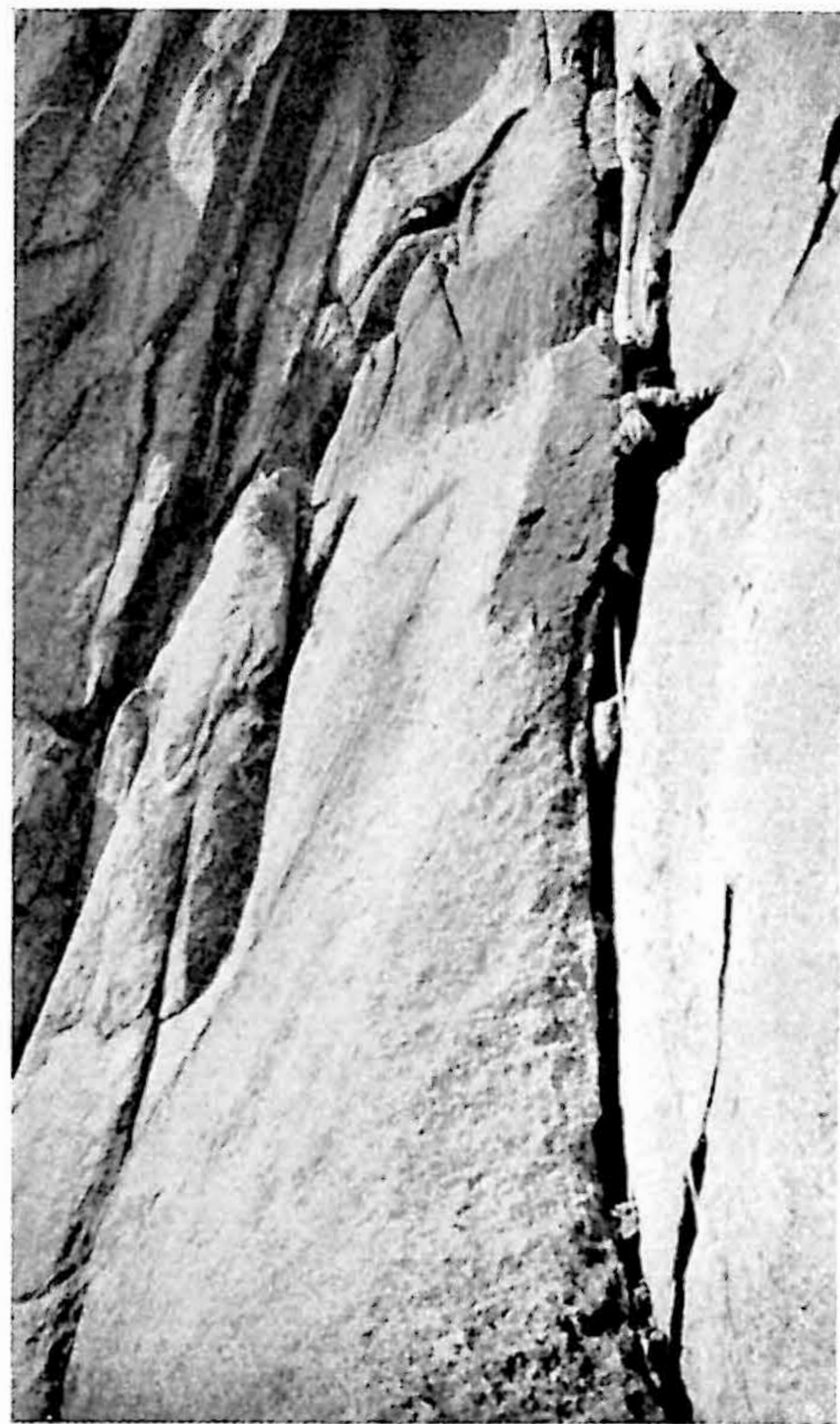
COULOIR BELOW BRÈCHE, 3385 M.
(Mer de Glace Face.)

[To face p. 242.]



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

THE AIGUILLE DE ROC, FROM E. FACE OF
GRÉPON.



Photo, Miss O'Brien.]

CHIMNEY ON AIGUILLE DE ROC.
(Mer de Glace Face.)

as it had appeared from farther off. Couttet came down and we started back for the *Brèche*, 3385 m., and the Montenvers. (After Couttet had made the third ascent of the Aiguille de Roc, and had come down by this route, he told me that those loose rocks had indeed fallen during the winter.) Since we had left no fixed rope at *Brèche* 3385 m., we turned the top of the couloir—the part that overhangs—with considerable difficulty by a diagonal move to the left on the face of the Bec d'Oiseau.

On reaching Chamonix in 1927, and finding the Aiguille de Roc still unclimbed, I set forth on August 6 with Couttet and Georges Cachat over the route of our original reconnaissance by way of the Tour Rouge. Leaving the Montenvers at 02.20, we crossed the bergschrund of the Trélaporte Glacier at 05.20 and stopped at 05.45 upon a rocky platform slightly beyond. Here we took great pleasure in digging up and eating a tin of apricots that we had hidden almost exactly a year before. After following the ordinary route to the Tour Rouge for a little while, we crossed the couloir which comes down on the N. side from the *brèche* of the Aiguille de Roc, where there is some danger of falling stones. We continued up to the left, then over easy rocks and a zone of large terraces at the foot of the first important gendarme of the ridge of the Aiguille de Roc—the ridge forming one edge of the great couloir Aiguille de Roc—Grépon. On a nice ledge that looked as if it would be comfortable for the possible bivouac on the way down, we left extra clothes and provisions. From here, Couttet climbed in *espadrilles*, Georges and I in nails. Although we took one ice axe with us, we had no use for it and it might as well have been left behind. Leaving the platform at 07.50, we traversed a little farther to the left to get into the long chimney that runs up behind (to the left of) the ridge, and which is hidden until one has actually crossed the ridge. This chimney, the key to the climb, presented no great difficulty, although it contained some water and snow. We ascended for the first 80–100 ft. on the left bank, then crossed to the right and continued on slabs of moderate difficulty to the top, where the chimney comes out at a little *brèche* on the ridge, behind a gendarme.

The real difficulties may be said to start at this point. Although the rock is firm and solid, the climbing throughout is of a delicate nature. We began by climbing to the left over a small ledge that led into a chimney of moderate difficulty. At the top of this chimney we traversed first to the right, then climbed up over enormous smooth slabs, traversing back and forth to take advantage of whatever likely-looking cracks and

chimneys presented themselves, and working always in a general direction toward the ridge seen on the left skyline. This ridge, bounding the great slabby face, is the main S.E. ridge of the Aiguille de Roc and forms the edge of the couloir lying between the Aiguille de Roc and the Bec d'Oiseau. Having reached the ridge, somewhat above a series of small gendarmes, we proceeded up along and occasionally slightly to the left of it to the foot of the summit block. This immense block is split completely through. The crack, over 100 ft. high, between the two parts gave us by far the hardest bit of climbing on the peak. It is very narrow, and good holds are far apart. At its top, we came out on a little ledge on the N. side of the peak, where we could look over toward the Grépon. The summit, some 20 ft. above us, looked difficult of access, to put it mildly. Finally, Couttet discovered that by climbing up a little above the ledge, he was enabled to throw the rope over a spike of rock some 10 ft. to the left. A swing over, and a climb up the rope to its point of support, enabled us to gain the farther edge of the summit block, whence we made the few remaining feet to the top, arriving at 11.20.

We did not stay long on the summit, accommodation being scant and the weather looking decidedly unfavourable. We felt that if we could get down over the slabs and to the top of the chimney before the storm broke, everything would be all right. We did not succeed in doing this, however, but were caught about 13.00, still considerably above the chimney, by a violent thunderstorm with rain, hail and lightning, just as we were about to start the seventh of the twelve *rappels* which we found necessary. With rocks and ropes wet and later taking on a glaze of ice under a cold wind, our descent was slow and difficult. We finally got down to the platform below the chimney, where we had left our extra things, at 15.25. Stopping only to pick these up, we hurried on down as fast as cold hands and wet rocks would allow. When we stopped below the Trélaporte bergschrund to take off the rope, we found each knot a mass of ice, and not to be loosened even after much prising with ice axes. In the end we cut them. We finally reached the Montenvers at 20.10, having spent about 18 hrs. on the climb.

A week later, we did the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon for comparison. Although the type of rock is in general the same, as might be expected, it seems to me that the Aiguille de Roc is more delicate, and there is nothing on the Grépon, except the 'Knubel Crack' just under the summit, that is so difficult

as the final 100-ft. chimney on the Aiguille de Roc.¹⁴ Although the Aiguille de Roc is 73 m. lower in altitude than the Grépon, the two climbs required approximately the same time for the ascent. No doubt the bad weather conditions encountered on the way down the Aiguille de Roc increased the difficulty of that climb to a considerable extent ; probably for this reason I found it much more fatiguing than the Grépon.

(To be continued.)

APRIL DAYS.

By R. L. G. IRVING.

NOT till I set to work to fulfil my promise to the Editor did I realize how difficult it is to write of April days. Fact, not fiction, is the material that must be used, and such days are not rich in the facts that are considered 'news.'

How the Editor must love the men who bring back, freshly gathered from some distant range full of strange names or names that appear strange in unfamiliar spelling, or from the smoothest and most glaucous faces of the Alps, a seasonful of adventures that appeal to young and old, to those who long to have been there as well to those who are thankful they were not. Less fortunate, but still enviable, are those who with more modest peaks can offer us the pleasant pastures on which we can pass the hours in willing abandonment of greater heights. Alas ! in April the pastures are still in the cold grip of winter that allows no dalliance. In April the rocks are cold and the snow too often soft and deep ; the sophisticated climber either stays in Britain to climb the steepest slabs to which the latest nailed or rubber footgear can adhere, or goes abroad to ski. It is only thus that up-to-date technique can find its fulfilment. The unsophisticated, wandering ski-less in the winter snow, seeks in vain among his April memories for the achievement that can adorn a tale.

April, however, is a month of hope, of revival of old familiar things which in August may have lost their freshness. And something may be claimed for April mountaineering, even if

¹⁴ Modern parties invariably avoid the main difficulty of the lower portion of the face, conquered, however, by the first party in 1911.—*Editor*.