

THREE ALPINE CLIMBS IN 1949

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THE party whose climbs I am going to describe was one of comparative beginners. There were four of us, Hull, Simpson, A. Trower and I, and we had had three seasons in the Alps, trying first easy and then harder climbs, teaching ourselves, helped by the friendly advice of guides and of amateurs. Last summer we thought that we had learnt, at least, the rudiments, and we were keen to see how we would fare on some of the more famous expeditions. I am going to tell you about three of them, the Col de Zinal ridge of the Dent Blanche, which Trower and I climbed before we were joined by the other two, and two climbs from the Col de la Fourche de la Brenva, the Frontier ridge of Mont Maudit and Moore's Brenva route. On these last two expeditions we were all four together and climbed as two pairs. These are well-known climbs, they have been described many times, and not one of them was very difficult in 1949; but for us, fulfilling some of our old ambitions and treading at last in steps that we had often imagined, each one was a memorable adventure.

I used to think of the E. ridge of the Dent Blanche, as of the Vieresselgrat proper, as a hard, long, and even dangerous climb, but the spring and summer of 1949 were so dry that, after reading our President's article about it in last year's ALPINE JOURNAL, I added it to the list of expeditions we might reasonably tackle.

Trower and I were in Zermatt at the end of July, and had from the Trifhorn a good view of the Dent Blanche, which on that day looked most uninviting. There was a strong north wind blowing and the E. ridge showed here and there through cloud. With so little snow it was very black and the foreshortening made it seem steeper than it is. A few days later, from the Schönbühl hut, we went up to the ridge of the Pointe de Zinal and spent a lazy hour there examining our projected climb through a glass and comparing what we could see of it with the guidebook account. We could see nothing particularly hard but the ridge is high and long, and we came down to the hut feeling diffident. A week's training did not seem enough. The guardian of the hut, however, Emmanuel Biner, was encouraging. He has always been interested enough to help us with good advice, and now he was emphatic that the E. ridge had never been easier and that we ought not to miss this opportunity. We decided to do as we were told and went to bed early.

Next morning, August 1, we were down in time to wish good luck to three Englishmen who were setting out for the Zmutt ridge, the last climb of their first Alpine season. We ourselves left about two-thirty, and

almost at once, in spite of the lantern, we were lost on the screes below the Schönbühl glacier. We ought to have made a reconnaissance of this part of the route the day before, and now our neglect to do this cost us half-an-hour, spent floundering among boulders and following false scents.

Above, on the level glacier, the going was easy. We were in a deep hollow between the Dent Blanche and the Pointe de Zinal; in front was the notch of the Col de Zinal, and to the left of it we could see our E. ridge faintly against the starry sky. We reached the schrund below the col a little before dawn. It was too dark to see without the lantern, so we waited a quarter of an hour for first light. It was cold and still and quiet, then suddenly there was a crash of falling stones from the cliffs of the Pointe de Zinal, and silence again.

As soon as we could see, we stepped straight across the schrund to the rocks, climbed a gully for a few yards, and then bore away left, in the trough between a slope of hard snow below and a steep rock curtain above. Soon we could strike upwards over slabs covered with fine, loose grit, and we reached the Col de Zinal at its western end. Dawn was coming over the Mischabel, very beautiful, but we paid it scant attention. We were cold, and we had that sense of urgency that oppresses the early part of a big climb.

This E. ridge is in three parts. First a buttress and a jagged arête lead to a conspicuous yellow tower; then there is a steeper section to the junction with the Viereselgrat proper; and lastly there is a long, narrow, and more level ridge, a succession of towers and cornices, leading to the summit.

I took the first buttress, which was very broken and bare of snow, too far to the left, and we had to make an insecure traverse to the right, on steep, loose rock, to gain the easy N. slope of the buttress. Here we walked up a scree-covered incline until we came to the beginning of the jagged arête. We avoided the rock teeth of the next section by an upward traverse on the S. face, crossing some steep ribs and gullies. There was hard snow in the gullies and a few steps had to be cut. Below the conspicuous yellow tower we regained the crest, and saw that this tower, which looks so formidable, could be passed by wide ledges on its S. side. Here, too, the rock was bare of snow.

We had a meal on the snow neck behind the tower. The next bit, to the junction, looked easy scrambling on sound rock, and the top of the mountain, where we could see Alexander Taugwalder, with the Pinnacle Club, waving to us, looked deceptively close. The last part of the climb to the junction was up a shallow couloir, then we stepped out on the very crest of the ridge and could look down the great N.E. face and see the ice-covered slabs up which the route from the Mountet comes.

From here the ridge was clean and airy. It was sunny, and we had no idea what a long way it was to the top, so that at first we enjoyed every minute of the climbing, which was of about the same order of difficulty as the traverse of the ridge of Crib Goch. First there was a light yellow gendarme, perhaps thirty feet high, split in two. We climbed it by

the cleft up the middle. Then there was a forbidding tower about a hundred feet high, presenting a vertical knife edge towards us, and overhanging at the top; we turned it on the N. side by traversing beneath it to the foot of a loose chimney, climbing up that, moving now one at a time, and then up a steep open wall with good holds to the ridge again.

Soon we encountered the first little snow ridges, delicate arches slung from tower to tower, overhanging towards the N. They were lovely to look at and too small to give any trouble. Not so, however, on the last few hundred feet. Here the ridge was entirely under snow, rather soft by now, very steep on the left and beginning to slip away in little patches here and there under the influence of the sun. It was midday. On the right, at first, there was a small cornice, and we climbed along beneath it. Here we were in shadow and it was very cold. All the cracks and hollows of the rocks were filled with ice. We were glad when we could turn our backs on the face below and scramble back again into sunshine. On the last bit of all there was no cornice and the S. slope was less steep. We went gingerly along the crest, rope-length by rope-length in the rotten snow, until a few steps on broken rock landed us on the summit.

After an hour's rest we came down the ordinary S. ridge and reached Zermatt long after dark, but not too tired to enjoy a dinner which had been specially put aside for us, even on August the First, in case we should be late home.

Two weeks later, now with Hull and Simpson, we were at the Torino hut, planning two climbs from the refuge bivouac on the Col de la Fourche. We left for the col rather late in the day, about ten, threaded our way through the crowds on the Col des Flambeaux, and walked in softening snow into the remote basin between the Frontier ridge and Mont Blanc du Tacul. The schrund below the Col de la Fourche was climbable in only one place. Above that place the diagonal ascent of an ice slope led to the lowest rocks of a climbable but disintegrating rib.

I had just cut a good halting place on the upper lip of the schrund when there was a small stonefall across our proposed line of steps. Even a small stonefall is intimidating but in this case, where the slope above as far as the col was bare ice, our way was the only one practicable; so as soon as the others had joined me, we crossed this ice, cutting steps as fast as we could, and keeping an anxious eye on the rocks above. We reached the rib safely and found the rock very loose, but after two hundred feet the angle eased, we could move all together, and we reached the col with no more difficulty. We all thought this passage unpleasant, and harder than anything on the Frontier ridge itself.

The hut on the col is big enough for five people and we had it to ourselves. It is built on a rock platform, just below the crest of the ridge, on the Brenva side. We spent the afternoon melting snow on a tin sheet which we rigged up in the sun, in order to economise the small stock of petrol we had brought with us. The cold wind of the previous days had dropped, and when we turned in the weather seemed settled.

We started for the Frontier ridge of Mont Maudit a little before four o'clock, by moonlight, on August 16. As we clambered along the ridge, made more fantastic by the deep black shadows, there was a breath of cold air from the depths below, but it soon died away, and for the rest of the day we were not troubled by a wind. The dawn came as we reached the foot of the first rise of the ridge; just enough grey light to see into the shadows, then delicate colouring on the horizon, lastly the sun's warmth.

The Frontier ridge, in some ways like the E. ridge of the Dent Blanche, is also divisible into three parts. First there is a buttress and ridge leading to an enormous gendarme, now christened the Punta Androsacea; then a steep section, some of it on good rock, leading to a point of junction with a ridge coming up from the right, from the Col Maudit; and finally a snow and rock arête at an easy angle as far as the summit.

We climbed the first buttress by a very open couloir on the left of the line of the ridge. There was hardly any snow here, and we climbed on loose grit, bits of rock, and patches of ice. The going was easy but insecure. Above the couloir a steep snowslope took us to a narrow, steep snow ridge of great beauty. The snow was hard frozen and in crampons we followed the ridge without check as far as a small snowy point, after which it fell slightly to the foot of the great gendarme. This is a big rectangular block, set on end, on the crest of the ridge, over a hundred feet high. We by-passed it on its S. side, our left, mainly by scrambling over big blocks of sound red rock, but in one place having to cross a little ice. Behind the gendarme was a snow saddle, above which our ridge was less well defined. We climbed up a succession of recesses and small buttresses and then came to an open platform where we halted. From here we examined the passage through the séracs on the Brenva route. We had an excellent view of it but, as we discovered later, we greatly underestimated the length of that section of the Brenva climb.

We now bore away to our right, to join the ridge from the Col Maudit, going up a wide couloir on great flakes and slabs of rock, intermixed with small snow patches. The climbing was simple as far as the junction, but for a short distance above that the ridge narrowed and was composed of a mixture of snow and poor rock. We could now look down over wide snowfields into the Chamonix valley and after a few hundred feet we reached the top of the snow shoulder which is easily seen in photographs of the upper part of the ridge. The climbing now was on snow only; the ridge fell gently to a broad saddle before its last steep rise to the rocky outcrop which forms the summit.

We were rather pleased with ourselves. The expected difficulties had not proved great, the day was perfect, and the way to the top was plain. We reached it in seven hours from the refuge and settled down to an hour of bliss which was exceptional even for an Alpine day. The descent was an anticlimax. We came down the Col du Midi route in the deep furrows ploughed by the multitude that follows what is now the

most popular way to Mont Blanc from Italy, and toiled back to the Torino in the heat of the late afternoon.

Next day we went again to the refuge on the Col de la Fourche, this time to climb Moore's Brenva route. The weather was now unsettled, and we thought that we might well have to retreat from the refuge instead of going on with the climb; so on the ice slope we enlarged the steps and produced a staircase that we could come down, even in a blizzard. Once again we had the hut to ourselves, and while Hull and Trower improved the design on our snow-melting machine, Simpson and I had a look at the route down to the Brenva glacier. Most of the way lay over unstable earth and loose scree, but near the bottom there was a short slope of hard snow and ice. The schrund was choked with *débris* and was easily crossed.

After getting back to the hut we spread ourselves to enjoy our evening meal, secure in the knowledge that no one would come up from the Torino as late as this. We forgot that some might descend upon us, and it was not long before voices without announced the arrival of two Frenchmen. They had tried the Brenva route and had retreated in thick weather from a point below the *séracs*. They were all in, one had a bad scalp wound, and it was clear that they could not be expected to go on to the Torino. We moved over and offered them tea; they refused, realising the shortage of fuel, and said that they had a little petrol of their own.

We had barely congratulated ourselves on being no more than six in the hut when more noises outside signalled the arrival of another party, this time three Italians, who had been up and down the Frontier ridge because, when they reached the top of Mont Maudit, it was too misty for them to seek the ordinary Col du Midi route. We were now nine, and when every source of fresh air had been hunted down and stopped up, we resigned ourselves to a few hours of stuffy discomfort. Simpson, with a naval tradition behind him, had been hoisted into a hammock over our heads. I lay on an iron bar between two cots, trying not to roll one way or the other, and the rest of the inmates, to judge from their perpetual movement, were equally uncomfortable.

At one o'clock, on August 18, I got up and tried to light our candle, but the atmosphere was so thick that match after match went out. The Frenchmen were clearly used to this, for one impatiently asked why we did not open the window. This did the trick, and an hour later we started off, glad to get out into the cold night. The sky was overcast, and even with the lantern we made slow progress down to the glacier. On the last slope my lantern came adrift from its handle, and after bouncing and sliding down, disappeared into the schrund. Fortunately its work was already done, and the sense of its loss was eased by the thought that we had not now to carry its weight up the mountain.

On the Brenva glacier we took a wide circle to the right, walking fast, and after crossing several cones of avalanche *débris*, reached a stone runnel, the only way, so far as we had been able to see, of crossing the schrund below the Col Moore. Above the schrund we traversed

horizontally left on good snow to the col, where we took off our crampons and paused to look at the Pic Moore, which was just visible. It was still pretty dark, and in turning on the left the first small step of Moore's buttress we started a rock fall from which came a great display of sparks. We followed the crest of the buttress, walking easily over screes and piled boulders, as far as the foot of its main step.

The direct line of the ridge ends here against a smooth wall, and we avoided this by going to our left, first horizontally, and then diagonally upwards along a rake, which shows clearly in photographs taken when there is snow on the ledges, but which we had a little difficulty in finding last year. There was one place here where we moved one at a time, but only because the rocks were very loose. Above the end of the rake we climbed at first straight up, then to the right, and regained the crest of the buttress. Following the crest we came without difficulty to the outer end of the famous ice ridge.

It was now light, but the weather did not look good. There was a low bank of cloud in the east, the sun had not shown its face, ragged clouds hung about the Aiguille Verte, and above us the séracs were in mist. We felt gloomy ourselves but decided to go on for a bit and see how the day turned out, keeping retreat in mind as a last resort.

We now traversed the ice ridge, which was rather a disappointment. Though it was all ice, and very narrow in places, it was not very exposed. On both sides the drop was broken by projections from the slope and the traverse was less sensational than that of the snow arête below the big gendarme on the Frontier ridge. We walked in crampons on the crest, or to the left of it, and in only one place, towards the inner end of the ridge, was there any need for Simpson, who was in the lead, to cut steps. At this place we walked in steps on the left of the ridge, using the crest as a hand-rail for our right hands.

On the slopes above the inner end of the ice ridge we found good snow, and, keeping well to the right, passed by two small schrunds. Soon the snow began to thin out and, higher up, remained only in some superficial fissures in the ice. We were aiming for the rock islet which borders the séracs, but the snow in the cracks gave such good holding to our crampons that we followed them upwards to the left at first, only later traversing right, below the séracs, to the foot of the islet. On the traverse there was no snow, and the slope was too steep for us to be happy trusting entirely to crampons, so we cut steps.

We climbed the islet up its lower rocks, then on the left, up the ice between it and the séracs. We halted on top of it, on a shelf where someone had built a low, sheltering wall, but the spot was too exposed for us to stay long, as a strong gusty wind was coming over from the Col de la Brenva. So far the weather had showed no change; suddenly however, the cloud cleared slightly over the Mur de la Côte, and we saw blue sky beyond. Then the cloud came down again; but we had seen enough to conclude that it was purely local.

The top of the islet seemed a dead end. To the right, the original route looked hopelessly impracticable, a jumbled chaos of ice cliffs.

Above and to our left were some ice walls, up which, if anywhere, our route must go. It was too cold to linger, and we wanted to know if we could find the way through, so we set off at once. We went up a hundred feet or so, then horizontally to the left, along a gangway under the cliffs, going one at a time, and using patches of snow in the hollows of the ice for anchorage. The gangway brought us to a steep ridge, beyond which we could not see. The first few feet of the ridge were nearly vertical, then it curved back out of sight. We climbed the first part on the right of the ridge, then stepped over the edge where the angle was less, and found that the slope beyond the ridge was easily inclined. Fifty feet higher was a crevasse which did for a stance. The ice on this passage was of a kind new to us, white, opaque, and flaky; it gave a poor grip to the hand and was difficult to cut into satisfactory steps.

A little way above the crevasse we again came to what seemed a dead end, but a descent into a crevasse on the left and a climb up its far side took us into a broad, easy couloir. We followed this up to a wide snow plateau, and our doubts and difficulties were over. The mist was thinning out and we could see where we were. We climbed a snow slope and, after shouldering each other over one last schrund, we stood on the easy slopes below the upper Rochers Rouges.

We now walked up to the summit of Mont Blanc, chilled through and through by a strong north wind, and came down the Bosses ridge to the Vallot hut. In spite of the damp and filth which we found here, we were glad to have shelter, and we stayed long enough to brew coffee before continuing the descent by the old Dôme route into Italy.

The Dôme glacier was badly crevassed, and we found the afternoon long and tedious. We beguiled the journey by discussing all that we would order to eat at the Dôme hut. We found a stone against the door, the hut empty, its cupboards bare. We got out the map and soon realised that we were still high up on the mountain side, separated from the nearest habitation by nine miles of the most desolate glacier valley that any of us had ever seen. We voted, however, to push on, and got off the moraine of the Miage glacier as it grew dark. An hour later we reached the Cantine de la Visaille, after the most satisfying day's climbing that any of us had known.