

THE BRENVA FACE (II)

VIA DELLA PERA—1951

By CHARLES S. TILLY

Read to the Alpine Club on Monday, December 3, 1951.

THAT the Via della Pera on the Brenva face of Mont Blanc was only accomplished four times between its first ascent by Graham Brown and his guides in 1933 and the summer of 1951 can be attributed to a variety of reasons. First, of course, there was the intervention of war. The second ascent of the route was made in 1937 by Robert Gréloz and André Roch, and although there was an unsuccessful attempt in 1938 the climb was not in fact repeated again until after the War. Nevertheless, a perusal of the book in the fixed bivouac on the Col de la Fourche discloses that in fact a considerable amount of climbing took place from the bivouac during the war years, which is perhaps surprising when one remembers that the bivouac is situate on the Frontier ridge between two countries then at war with each other. Secondly, the route had acquired a considerable reputation for difficulty and, still more, for danger. It lies at a continuously steep angle and must, without a doubt, be classed among the more difficult of the great Alpine routes, while, as to its danger, Graham Brown says of it:—‘Although the route should never be treated as if entirely free from risk, it may be regarded as justifiable under certain selected and rare conditions. . . .’ He insisted that for the climb to be justifiable at all the Pear buttress itself should be climbed on its more difficult north-west flank, and Messrs. Gréloz and Roch, who used the south-east flank at the top of the Pear buttress, described the climb quite bluntly as ‘very dangerous.’ André Roch is confirmed in his opinion by his second ascent of the route made on July 31, 1951, and on which we had the privilege of accompanying him. He again used the south-east side on the upper part of the Pear buttress, and although he admitted that a party is in more immediate danger on this passage than if the original route were followed, his opinion is that this is compensated for by the saving of time. The longer a party is engaged in the lower and middle reaches of the climb, the greater is the danger from the upper séracs and ice cliffs which threaten portions of the whole route.

But whichever route is taken on the final section of the Pear buttress, it is only in certain years, and on certain days in those years, that the climb is feasible at all. In 1951 conditions were perfect for three successive days at the end of July and we were fortunate enough to be in the right place on one of them. This was really the deciding factor in our resolve to attempt the Via della Pera rather than one of the other

Brenva routes for, if we had not taken the opportunity when it offered, we might never again have found the right conditions during the all too brief period of a summer holiday.

For some years Ian Charleson and I have joined forces with André Roch for a week of our respective holidays. On each occasion we have had designs on one of the routes on the Brenva face of Mont Blanc and on each occasion we have failed to meet propitious weather. This year, after the exceptionally bad spring and early summer, I had no very great hopes that the Brenva face would favour us, but as usual it was in the forefront of our programme, and happening to meet Roch on my first day in Chamonix, a week before we were due to join him, I asked whether he had seen the Brenva side of Mont Blanc recently, and if so what condition it was in. Roch replied that he had four friends in Geneva who were anxious to climb the Via della Pera; he intended during the coming week to inspect the Brenva face and if it was in good condition he would wire his friends to join us, and he proposed that we should then make the assault with a double party.

Having thus laid our plans, we waited for the weather to demolish them, which, in the succeeding days, it seemed intent upon doing. James Carswell had joined Charleson and myself, and this being his first visit to the Alps he was inclined to treat bad weather as a personal affront. On the first day, when climbing the Aiguille de l'M in admittedly poor weather, we were chased off by a storm and had a difficult descent. Next day we merely watched the rain, and although we climbed again on the third day the weather was poor and there was much new snow. But then it changed and remained brilliant for the rest of the week during which we worked hard, so that when we joined Roch on Sunday, July 29, we were all fairly fit.

André Roch reported that the Brenva face appeared to be in excellent condition, and that although the wind was southerly he thought that the weather should hold for a day or two. He had telephoned his Geneva friends and they were coming at once in order to attempt the climb on Monday, July 30. So far as he, Roch, was concerned, however, he had been ill immediately before starting his holiday and after his first week's climbing he was very tired. He therefore suggested that we should take two easy days to reach the fixed bivouac on the Col de la Fourche and that we should try the Via della Pera on Tuesday, 31st. This suited us excellently since we also felt entitled to an easy day or two, and so on the afternoon of Sunday, July 29, we made our way to the Requin Hut and thence, in the early morning of the following day, to the Col de la Fourche. That day the Swiss party were on the Via della Pera and achieved it in a very fast time indeed, being on the summit shortly after 9 A.M. Clearly we, with our paltry week's training, could not have hoped to keep up with them.

The weather on that day at the Col de la Fourche was perfect and we spent a magnificently lazy day. The plan for the following day was that we should have no halts until we were out of the danger zone

and therefore Monday was used by us primarily for rest and for taking on board the maximum amount of fuel.

But in point of fact a day spent at the Col de la Fourche in fine weather is a sufficient reward in itself. There can be few more impressive views in the whole range of the Alps than the Brenva face of Mont Blanc from the Frontier ridge and much more time was devoted to watching, and prospecting our route of the morrow, and merely absorbing the atmosphere of our surroundings, than to sleeping.

From about 11 A.M. onwards the face was never still. Usually only the noise of the ice-fall reached us and after a short time we ceased to trouble about any except the larger falls. But a number of them seemed to be in the vicinity of the Via della Pera and the culmination came at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon when an enormous mass of ice fell from the upper séracs, seeming at that distance to sweep the route from top to bottom and enveloping the whole face in a vast cloud of dust. It was a comfort to realise that two avalanches of that magnitude were unlikely to fail in the same place on successive days.

Roch and I discussed the best way to travel. I was in favour of climbing in two pairs, which I felt would make for greater speed and comfort, and it was provisionally arranged that Roch and Carswell should climb together and should be followed by myself and Charleson. Just before we turned in for the night, however, Roch told me that, after thinking it over, he had decided that we should climb as one party, himself in the lead, then Carswell, then Charleson and myself last. Of course I agreed and I am sure, on subsequent reflection, that he was right and that climbing on one rope we made a stronger party, with only a negligible and immaterial loss of time.

If the day on the Col de la Fourche was a delight, the night was a torment because, in addition to our party of four, there were three Yugoslavs, going for the Old Brenva Route on the following day, and towards evening an Italian girl arrived with two guides, also to try the Old Brenva Route. So the bivouac, designed for five, or seven at a pinch, had to take ten. Exactly where everyone was accommodated I am not sure, but Charleson solved his problem by sleeping on top of me with his face pressed hard against a hammock slung above, which was holding Roch. Personally, therefore, I was relieved when midnight arrived and I could shake myself back into my normal shape and leave the torrid atmosphere of the little hut.

Outside it was a brilliant night, but warm. On the Frontier ridge there was a steady drip, drip of melting snow and even at this hour there were occasional rumblings from the direction of Mont Blanc. Had I been in charge of the party I would there and then have vetoed the Via della Pera and I would have been wrong. Roch was satisfied that there would be enough frost on the mountain and that in other respects the warm weather would favour us. This, indeed, proved to be the case. Nevertheless I had certain misgivings during the steep descent to the Upper Brenva Glacier on wet snow and on the glacier itself, where every step broke through the frail crust

We left the Col de la Fourche at about 12.45 A.M. having put on crampons before leaving the hut, where the congestion was now such that in going out I contrived to spike a loaf of somebody's bread on each foot.

The three Yugoslavs left the bivouac on our heels but we reached the level glacier some way ahead of them. It was therefore a surprise, a few minutes later, to find that we had a fifth, and unroped, member of our party who followed closely in our footsteps. He endeavoured to keep a tenuous contact with his companions, who were nowhere visible, by frequent shrill whistles and occasional flashes of his light, but he had no intention of deserting us until we reached the bergschrund below Col Moore at which point our ways parted. And so we left him whistling away into the darkness.

The bergschrund was slightly awkward but the upper lip was of reasonably sound snow and we overcame it by planting all four ice axes in the form of a ladder. A rising traverse to the left on good snow then brought us at about 1.40 A.M. above Col Moore and on to the Brenva face itself. What had for so long been an ambition and a distant view was becoming a reality at last.

The night was very dark and our lights were necessary the whole time, which added to the difficulty of the long traverse across a succession of couloirs in the direction of the rocks below the Pear buttress. The ridge of the Old Brenva Route was crossed a short distance above Col Moore and a traverse was made until the rocks below Route Major were reached. We avoided these by a crossing descent on snow, and then ascended the edge of the snowfield below the Great couloir until an upward traverse could be made across its narrowest part to join the rock buttress below the Pear. The first part of this traverse was on snow, except for periodical descents into ice runs, but on the latter half some ice was encountered. The angle, however, was not steep and little was needed in the way of step-cutting.

We were lucky in that most of the way from Col Moore lay in good snow but nevertheless the traverse remains in the memory as a succession of vertical descents, short horizontal crossings of ice and ascents on the other side, with torch and rope in one hand, ice axe in the other and the constant and urgent desire for a third hand. The only mishap on the traverse was the dropping by André Roch of his torch which moved off at high speed down an ice run and then, incredibly, bounced, still alight, into snow about 40 ft. down. A descent was made to retrieve it and the whole event actually turned to our advantage because, whereas we had been finding some difficulty before, the going proved to be somewhat easier at our lower level.

We reached the rocks below the Pear with the first of the light and after a further twenty minutes' climbing we were able to put away our torches, thankfully, and also to remove our crampons. We found that this buttress below the Pear was of sound rock, well cemented into position by ice and of little technical difficulty. There was, however, as much ice as rock and, although it was a relief to remove crampons

at last, it is doubtful whether much time was saved by their removal. But we continued to progress steadily and reached the foot of the Pear buttress at about 5 A.M. We could not spare time for a proper admiration of the view, but it was impossible not to be profoundly moved by the grandeur of the immense mountain wall in the middle of which we were. At the same time it was impossible not to be conscious of the great ice cliffs on each side of the Pear above our heads and, far higher still, of the upper séracs which were now beginning to catch the morning sun.

We found ourselves climbing on magnificently sound granite, quite steep but amply provided with holds so that for the most part we were able to move together. As was to be expected the rocks were fairly heavily iced, especially in the cracks which formed our principal means of progress, and in this fact the chief difficulty of the climbing lay. Above the lower steep section, our way continued somewhat to the left, or south-east, of the centre of the buttress, up a succession of little walls and steep chimneys. We were now full in the sun and the climbing left nothing to be desired, that is to say, it was never sufficiently difficult to cause any major hold-up of our progress and never so easy that one's mind was not wholly absorbed with the immediate problem.

Eventually, a short distance below the large and permanent snow ledge which is a conspicuous feature of the upper part of the Pear buttress a traverse was made to the right. At the end of the traverse a short but difficult vertical wall ended on a sloping ledge of ice. Steps were cut across this diagonally upwards and a short chimney then landed us on the snow ledge itself.

From here we moved left, under the overhanging crest of the ice cliff on the left of the Pear, which was now full in the sun, running with water and from time to time shedding little fragments of ice. Although it was an inspiring sight we did not stop to admire it but continued without pause over rock which was of greater technical difficulty but perhaps less incumbered by ice than the lower part of the buttress.

Finally, a very difficult wall and a constricting chimney, up which the rucksacks had to travel separately, brought us above the level of the overhanging ice and out on to an airy little ridge. And so we reached the top of the Pear where we made a short halt. We had left the Col de la Fourche at 12.45 A.M. and the time was now close on 8.15—seven and a half hours, of which about four and a quarter had been occupied in reaching the foot of the Pear and about three and a quarter in climbing the Pear itself.

Above the Pear the climb deteriorated in interest because in the main it consisted of moving up steep, and by this time, wet snow. It started by a narrow horizontal and unstable snow ridge and continued endlessly up easy rock and steep snow, mostly the latter. The snow had just sufficient lack of coherence to let one's foot down an inch or so at each step and this, coupled with the tedium always attending a long snow slope, induced a desire for a proper rest and a meal.

Our route, so far as I can recall, went up snow and rock until we were about level with the Aiguille de la Belle Étoile, then crossed the Couloir and continued up the snow close to the rocks on its left side until we were nearing the level of the top of the upper ice cliff. At this point we traversed diagonally upwards to the right in the direction of Col Major, passing above the upper ice cliff and below, but close under, the line of the upper séracs until we were clear of the latter and with nothing but a steep walk between us and Col Major. The climb was done, and with nothing threatening us overhead we thankfully subsided into the snow for a meal and a long rest.

As we took off our rucksacks André Roch said to me, 'That is the last time I ever climb the Pear. It is too dangerous.' Its dangers had, of course, been obvious but it is only fair to say that throughout we had neither seen nor heard anything falling. However, it was just 11 o'clock when we halted above the upper séracs and on the previous day we had not noticed any movement on the face until after this hour.

After a prolonged rest we continued up to Col Major, very slowly because Carswell was feeling the altitude, and thence to the summit of Mont Blanc which we reached at 12.30 P.M. and which was chiefly memorable for the fulfilment of a vow by André Roch that he would stand on his head there if we achieved the climb!

The descent of 12,000 ft. to Chamonix does not, even now, bear thinking of, and only one further fact remains to be recorded. On the latter part of the climb the weather was seen to be deteriorating, on the summit it was extremely cold and the sky was nearly obscured by cirrus, and by the time we were comfortably off the Bossons Glacier the storm came. The weather had broken; we had been just in time.

The details on the photograph facing p. 302 taken from the Tour Roside are:—

———— Via Della Pera

— · — · — Route Major

..... Traverse to Sentinelle (1927, 1928), and route to '1928' arête used that year.

— — — — — Route de la Sentinelle

A. Mont Blanc de Courmayeur.

B. Col Major.

C. Mont Blanc.

D. Sentinelle rouge.

E. Pic Moore.

F. Foot of S.E. arête of Pic Moore.

1. Col Moore.

2. N.W. end of crest of Col Moore.

3. Edge of snow slope under Brenva face.

4. Foot of Pear buttress.

5. Top of Pear buttress.

6. Aiguille de la Belle Étoile.

7. Top of sérac wall on Via della Pera.

8. Route Major: lowest snow arête.

9. Route Major: rocks between middle and upper series of snow arêtes.

10. Route Major: final buttress.

11. Lower part of great couloir.

12. Sentinelle route: Twisting rib.

13. Branch couloir.

14. Ice arête on Brenva route.