THE PETIT DRU BY THE WEST FACE

By RON MOSELEY

(This article is based on many conversations in which Mr. Joe Brown described the climb he did with Mr. Willans; the text has also been checked by Mr. Brown. Mr. Moseley has retained the first person of the original narrative. Mr. Brown's own technical notes will be found on p. 166.)

At Montenvers a group of climbers stood surveying the scene before them. The Jorasses was a great wall of ice-glazed rock surging up through a grey ceiling of boiling clouds. Across the glacier, the Dru was more inviting. The day before, in the slanting rays of the sun, the west face stood out in a bold relief of dark corners and sunlit walls. Today it was a dark and sinister wall of wet rock showing no details and appearing even more enormous in the gloom of the storm clouds.

We turned down the track to Chamonix, leaving behind the depressing landscape of the Mer de Glace.

Ten days later, Don and I were back again, this time in a very different frame of mind. After learning that during a short fine spell the second ascent had been made of the west face, we were resolved to try it ourselves.

We left Chamonix on the 10.30 train on a fine sunny morning. After spending some time at Montenvers, looking at the face, we crossed the glacier and climbed to the foot of the great couloir on the right of the face. Up this we climbed for several hundred feet ; first up easy, but steep and very loose rock, then up clear thin ice. Down this ran a groove, worn by falling debris, which we must cross. Not a pleasant business at four o'clock in the afternoon. Moving together, however, we eventually, and with great relief, arrived at the 'terrasses inférieures.'

During our activities in the couloir the weather had been no less active. For here we were brought to a standstill by a sudden and violent storm. Time dragged on as we sat there until at about eight o'clock it stopped raining and slowly the thunder and lightning died away. The ledge we were on was covered with ice, so having decided to bivouac we commenced to clear it with our hammer-axe and piton hammer. We had almost finished when the axe broke, leaving us with only one piton hammer and the axe part of the hammer-axe. After cooking a little food we settled down for the night. The ledge not being big enough to lie on we sat with our legs out straight and in this way we managed to sleep a little.

Early afternoon may seem an odd hour of the day to start such a route. But our intention was to get above the easy rocks so as to be in a good position for an early start the following morning, and at the same time to be in a reasonably good position for retreat.

Next morning the weather was again fine. At about 5.30, after breakfasting on bacon, boiled eggs and a good brew of tea, we set off in high spirits.

Traversing left for a few hundred feet we crossed beneath the great scar and ascending a series of ledges with odd pitches of IV and V, we arrived at the ' terrasses supérieures.' From here we could look down about 100 ft. of shelving terraces and a further 1,000 ft. vertical drop to the glacier below. For the first time we began to appreciate our position on the face, and also our serious predicament should anything go wrong.

The route, from here goes up a corner formed by a flake 1,000 ft. high. Above, the rock rears up to vertical, the stances become fewer and the climbing much more difficult. Four or five pitches and we stood at the foot of the ' Fissure Vignes,' reputed hardest free-climbing on the face.

It being Don's lead, he started and soon disappeared over a bulge, climbing steadily without pause. The sacs having been hauled up, I followed, cautiously at first. But it turned out to be no more than ordinary V.S. Several pitches of V. followed till a great overhang barred the way.

Up a smooth wall to beneath the overhang was a line of pitons. Consulting the description, however, we found we must go out to the right. After traversing across the face a crack led up on to a slab with a few small ledges on it. Above was the 40-metre crack.

The 40-metre crack, A2. Extreme difficulty, wooden wedges, stances in étriers. I was glad it was Don's lead. Neither of us were very anxious to lead though we both wanted to complete the climb. After joining me, Don carried on up the wall above. At 20 ft. however, he found a ledge and brought me up, leaving me with the crack to lead.

The exposure was now superb. The traverse had brought us out from behind the flake on to the vertical, almost unbroken, face. It seemed I need only let go to fall clean through space to the glacier 2,000 ft. below. In such places one must really concentrate on the climbing to forget the empty space behind, from which unseen hands seem to pull you back.

After standing there some time trying to convince myself it wasn't exposed, I started. Most of the crack, I climbed on split wedges from each of which hung a rotten sling. The sight of this array of rotting mechanical aids produced a feeling of insecurity. Not wishing to make a stance hung amid this jungle of dead wood and rotting fibres, I pushed on to the top in one run out. Here I knocked in one of my own wedges for belay and having hauled up the sacs, called for Don to start. Up he came, in a good old gritstone layback, resting occasionally at one of the wedges.

The next pitch brought us back to the big flake and a ledge on which we found orange peel and empty milk tubes. A bivouac, we thought. Off again, this time up a wall and then the moon-shaped crack. This was full of ice with water running down it. Don was leading this and

after inserting a piton he climbed up over a bulge and was out of sight. More ice, this time in a narrow gully with a short vertical wall part of the way up. It was possible to avoid the ice by bridging but to overcome the wall itself, steps had to be cut for about 25 ft.

Above us now was a great chock-stone blocking the gully completely and forming a big ceiling. From the stance, I looked up at this black roof jutting out above me and at the back where ice-covered walls streamed with water and appeared dull and opaque in the poor light. Suddenly I thought, ' This is his, and he's welcome to it,' and with this in mind I relaxed a little. Up he came with one eye in front of him and the other above on the overhang. We stood there for some time casting worried looks first at each other and then above. ' Well,' I said, ' this is yours, get on with it.'

Unlike the usual Don, he moved off slowly and very cautiously inching his way up the vertical ice to the back of the roof. The water pouring from his body. Here he managed to find a runner. The moves that followed kept me rigid and my eyes glued on him expecting him any minute to come flying off.

Very gingerly he leaned out on a crooked arm, not daring to straighten it for fear of the ice-hold breaking away. With great care he then reached out across the roof and pushed a wedge up into the crack where it jammed loosely and taking his hammer proceeded to hammer it in. To hammer away so hard while hung from such insecure ice seemed just too much and sweat came to my palms as my grip on the ropes tightened.

' This is where the fun starts,' I thought. He now had to transfer himself from the wall to the étrier hung in space. Either it held or Don would come crashing down.

I felt tense and nervous as I waited. Tentatively a hand reached out and was withdrawn again. He moved, distributing his weight a little better. Again his hand reached out and this time took hold of the étrier. He paused now for a while and thought. Next, he got his foot out to the bottom rung and poised, suspended between rock and étrier, weighed up the chances. Then as gently as possible he let go and swung out from the rock. The wedge moved but held.

Reaching out again he inserted a second wedge and having attached an étrier, moved out and was able to reach over the overhang. The rock still overhung slightly. A piton in the wall above, a pull up and he was over. Then suddenly his foot shot off and quickly he lowered himself back to his étrier. Another try and this time over and up to a stance.

The hammer having being lowered down and the sacs hauled up, I followed removing the wedges. (These were the only aids we removed on the whole climb.)

We were now on top of the great flake. Above us was the 90-metre dièdre as clean cut and twice the height of Cenotaph Corner. After some tea and Don having put on his duvet, we were off again. He led the 70-ft. monolith filling the bottom of the dièdre. The corner itself being mine.

I fixed all the karabiners, pitons, etc., to my waist loop and set off. The first 30 ft. were free-climbing and very strenuous with all the gear hanging from me. The pitons and wedges for the next part were in place but well spaced. At 80 ft. I took a stance in étriers and hauled up the sacs leaving them hanging from a piton. Don joined me and I set off again.

The bulge just above was said to be ' A3, very delicate ' but it seemed no different from the lower part. After 30 ft. I traversed right and up two thin cracks. Here I had to insert my own pitons. The position was magnificent and again I had that feeling of being on the brink of a void.

The rope on which the sacs were fixed ran out. I hauled mine up and fixed it to a piton leaving Don's hanging free on the end of the rope. A few more feet and I was on the slab at the top.

It had started to snow now and we were anxious to get to the next bivouac. As soon as Don reached me he was off again, his feet slipping several times on the wet rock. Reaching the fixed rope he tried to knock in a piton but the edge of the flake kept breaking away so he gave it up and took in my rope.

Down a dark grey slab on the right was a rope fixed across the face in a great sag. A more dismal situation I couldn't imagine. The rock above surged up through the clouds and below disappeared almost immediately. Water streamed down the face streaking it black and grey and then ran in great globules down the rope, at intervals dripping back on to the rock again. About us were the dark mists through which no sight or sound of the outside world came. The snow drifted slowly down and in this small world of ours, all was silent but for the faint trickle of water. Only the thin rope kept us from feeling utterly and completely lost in some nightmare world where no one ever came.

The rope when I took hold of it felt like wool and made me dubious of descending it. It had hung there for two years. I set off down, hanging from it and at the same time trying not to put weight on it. At about 60 ft. I came to a diagonal crack up which I climbed to the bivouac 20 ft. higher. It took only a few minutes for Don to join me.

It was nearly dark by now. The water from melting snow poured down the rocks soaking us through. Covering the bivouac were several inches of snow, some of which we cleared. We made a little tea and then settled down for the night. Sleep was impossible. The ledge was a jumble of small rocks with a large block which prevented us from lying down. In the wall behind was a recess too small to get into, so that we sat with our heads resting on the rock just above the small overhang, our backs unsupported. The snow fell incessantly throughout the long night. Gradually the water seeped through my clothing, my body became more cramped and a pain in my neck grew as the hours dragged.

Occasionally I lifted my head to look at Don. Only his head and the ridges of his black Pacamac stuck out of the snow. We sat there hour after hour, motionless and silent. Again the feeling of loneliness crept over me.

At last the dawn came and with it the sun dissolving the grey mists till we could look out once more on a sunlit world, although we were still in shadow. Sorting the gear from the snow was a cold task. After a breakfast of bacon and boiled eggs, we made the inevitable start.

Keeping our duvets on, and leading through, we ascended the steep wall behind the stance. At the top we moved round to the right and up a series of overhanging chimneys. Hands soon became numb as the cold water ran over them and down our arms. Absolutely soaked and shivering, we arrived at the great overhangs extending across the face. Don led and was soon above and out of sight. Then the rope stopped and great quantities of snow came hurtling down on me. A long pause in which nothing seemed to be happening, then slowly the rope began to run again. Joining him I found we were in a large corner, one wall being vertical, the other a 50° slab.

I moved up and for a few moments lost the route. Then I saw pitons in the right wall. The rope began to drag, so I took a stance big enough to accommodate only the heels. A few more pitches of the same climbing followed. Then suddenly we came to the foot of a long wire ladder up which we climbed to the edge of the north face. The time I judged to be about ten or eleven. We coiled the rope used for hauling the sacs, Don taking it, and then set off up the north face.

After 300 ft. or so we came to a large terrace and lost the route. Every ledge was banked steep with ice so that it was necessary to cut steps up each one. After a time, we traversed back right, to the ridge. On the way, Don led a pitch more difficult than anything on the west face.

Eventually we traversed on to the south face and arrived at the col between the Petit and Grand Dru. At about four o'clock, we stood at long last on the summit of the Petit Dru. We stood there in quiet elation.

The need to get down, however, soon drove away our feeling of triumph and with Don's remark, ' That's the lot ! ' we turned and fled.

Eight rappels and we were on the Charpoua Glacier. By this time it was dark and the need to go slow was great. At an angle of about 45° the glacier shot down into the darkness. Moving together, myself at the back, we began to descend. We hadn't been going long before Don came on to clear ice, slipped, and swung across the slope. I just managed to hold him. After this we moved slowly and carefully for a long time.

I was beginning to get tired when suddenly the still night was shattered by the roar of an avalanche crashing down the rocks above. Instinctively dropping and covering our heads, we waited. A short silence followed. Slowly out of the darkness, like escaping steam, came a hissing which grew louder and louder. Fragments of ice came flying through the air making us duck lower. Then as suddenly as it had started, it was over. The hissing died away and all was again still and quiet. The main mass must have fallen into the rimaye and the rest just to one side of us.

We were now amongst the crevasses and in the dark we could only guess the depth of each drop before us. We decided to bivouac. The night was clear and cold and our wet clothing froze on us as we shivered the night out. We had no food left but we cared little about this. Success was ours and we were nearly down.

Next morning the hut appeared about 300 yds. away. Fifteen minutes and we had reached it and were on our way down to Chamonix.

Equipment taken :—

24 pitons.
6 wooden wedges.
16 karabiners.
4 étriers.
1 large hammer-axe.
1 ordinary piton hammer.
300 ft. medium nylon rope.
150 ft. full-weight nylon.
Duvet and sleeping bag each.
Pacamac and a cagoule.