

## TWO ON THE PEUTEREY

BY S. G. McH. CLARK

THE alarm went at half-past two. Bare toes stubbed on the cold stones of the doorstep, and we looked out at the Punta Gamba and the saw-teeth of the South ridge sharp against a starry sky. The air smelled good and the day would be fine.

Back in the tiny Refuge de la Noire we were alone. It seemed that after a season of disappointments we might have good luck for our last climb. Mike Gravina and I had crossed to Courmayeur the day before, and came up to the little hut in the Fauteuil des Allemands in the evening. Now we packed our things away and wrote our names and climb in the book, and the day, July 26, 1956: the previous entry was by Toni Gobbi, whom we had met on the path, descending after a traverse of the Aiguille Noire.

It was about 3.15 when we left and made our way across the moraine scree towards the centre of the cwm, where we turned to plod uphill to the névé de Combalet. It was difficult in the dark to tell exactly where the start of the East ridge route lay, and we waited for a while at the top of the hard snow. Dawn came quietly, and the long traverse which begins the normal route was just above. Already behind time, we took to the rock. Mike and I had not progressed far up this great chaotic heap before we were in complete agreement with the man who described it as a ruin. Picking a way among the plants and statuary was easy and unutterably tedious; in the hot sun there was no technical interest to offer the smallest distraction from the sweat and toil, and below the crest on the South side even the wonderful view of the Brenva was denied. We were fit, and moving, as we thought, relatively fast, but the top seemed very far away, and we did not reach it until ten o'clock, over six hours after leaving the hut.

On the way up we met two French climbers descending, who introduced themselves as Couzy and, I think, Desmaison. They had just achieved their remarkable first ascent of the North ridge of the Noire, and were interested to hear that we hoped to descend it. After seeing that we had enough equipment for the job they were extremely helpful and encouraging, offering us extra pitons if we needed them and giving us much useful advice about their climb, which had required three bivouacs. Mike and I, thinking of our own state after only one night out, were amazed at their clean-shaven cheerfulness: they seemed quite ready for more, and left us at great speed for the cafés of Courmayeur. We crept on, chastened.

Having hoped to leave the summit by nine o'clock in time to start the longest and hardest lap of the climb—the descent of the North ridge—



AIGUILLE NOIRE DE PEUTEREY, BRENVA FACE.

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it was little consolation to find ourselves there at ten, and in no shape to embark on a rappel descent taking, so the Vallot informed us, seven to fifteen hours. We would have to move fast to reach the refuge-bivouac at the Brèche Nord of the Dames Anglaises by nightfall, but we decided, come what might, to have one hour's rest before starting the descent. We passed the time sitting by the madonna making tea and having lunch. Looking across at the Aiguille Blanche, and the great face of Mt. Blanc beyond, it seemed that the climb had barely begun, and it was easy to remember the view we had seen from the Torino only twenty-four hours ago. It had been remote then, a cut-out silhouette that echoed the photographs we had seen, sweeping gracefully to the first joint, then tumbling in two brutal risers past a small white step to join the clustered spines of the Dames Anglaises, and the curves and thrusts that lead up and over the Aiguille Blanche to Mt. Blanc itself.

At eleven we were ready to leave. Food and hot drink had made a great difference, and we felt quite fit again. It was a business getting ready for this, the first long series of rappels either of us had attempted, trying to have everything to hand to avoid delays at the stances. Mike possessed a descendeur, but I had been unable to buy one in Courmayeur, and had to dress myself up like the Michelin man in duvet, anorak, and sweaters, to protect my shoulders. Nervous, we went north the few possible yards to a bollard which displayed the marks of sculpture. A few more chips from Mike's hammer, and it was passed for a direct abseil. With the feelings of a parachutist on his first jump, festooned with line and slings, bunches of pitons clanking at my waist, I lowered myself down the North ridge.

We had anticipated that this descent would be the crux of the expedition, both because of our inexperience of long-distance abseiling, and because it had been so rarely repeated since the original pre-war success of a German party. We had to expect to find our own way, for until our meeting with Couzy we had come across no detailed description beyond the '7-15 heures . . . se fait entièrement en rappel' of the guide-book. The Vallot did tell us, however, that the ridge is divided into two sections by the snow step which is so prominent from the Torino, and that in the upper half the route keeps close to the arête, while in the lower abandoning it for the Fresnay Face, to reach the couloir of the Brèche Sud of the Dames Anglaises a few hundred feet below the col.

Awkward at first, and apprehensive, we soon grew used to the exposure and slipped into the routine of change-over that is essential to avoid spending hours enmeshed in cordage on the stances. It was very steep, demanding a sort of advance by bounds as each few yards revealed new delights. The first pitch is a pleasant introduction, and I soon reached a small stance adorned with four rusty pitons. We could

not imagine how the original party of three had foregathered on this tiny ledge, for Mike and I more than filled the available space. Into the drill for the first time : clip on, unwind the rope from the descendeur, one heaving, the other making and tying the loop and threading the nylon through. Soon the black centre-mark was on the loop, and I went on down, crabwise, to see the route without having to stop. Here the rock was rough and perfect, great blocks which led in two or three steps away from the ridge diagonally into a shallow couloir full of loose boulders. One of these went away as I touched it, and the noise of its bounding disturbed a man over on the Pointe Bich. Feet against the wall in the classic pose, I conversed loudly and incomprehensibly with him, until he turned to other tasks, and I resumed progress towards a table of rock, resting for no obvious reason on the steep floor of the couloir. Nestling close by was another rusty piton—so far we were on our predecessors' route.

The third pitch led back in the direction of the arête to an area of slabs criss-crossed with ice-filled cracks. There were no rusty pitons here, and it was thirty minutes or more before I was able to persuade one of my own to hold. The cracks seemed to end close to the surface, and time and again I withdrew my latest bit of metal, its blade bent and twisted. From here the view below was confined to an enormous roof-like slab, curving seductively away to a sharply defined edge which hid all that might lie beyond. Mike and I threw the rope, a doubled 200-ft. length of Nylon Medium, and it too curled over the lip out of sight.

Thinking this must hide the immense overhang which Couzy had told us was such a feature of their climb, I went down to investigate. At about fifteen feet above the edge there was still nothing to be seen, and with visions of my favourite nightmare coming true and finding myself dangling free on the end of a rappel, I found a sketchy stance on the slab and put in a peg.

It turned out to be just as well that I stopped where I did, for when I was eventually poised on the edge the rock cut back below me like the bows of a landing-craft. This free abseil, ten feet from the rock and twirling like a spider suspended, it seemed, above the crumpled fleece of the Fresnay glacier, was quite awe-inspiring. The rope reached a landing at the end, but without a great deal to spare, before the rock dipped over again and I discovered a ring piton on the edge of all things, to which I attached myself.

In a good photograph of this part of the Aiguille Noire, such as that on page 65 of André Roch's *On Rock and Ice*, there appears a prominent niche in the face below the great overhang, with a small snow ledge at its base, and bounded on the right by a dramatically clean-cut wall, projecting at right angles to the plane of the face. The ring piton from which we hung was on the outside edge of this wall, a little below the

top. At the bottom of the flat vertical wall round the corner to our left was the snow-covered ledge, a line of footsteps along it. In the wall we could see two new pitons and a *coin de bois*.

Our judgment of steepness had by now grown considerably distorted, and we were surprised to find that the ledge lay inside the vertical from us ; it was very delicate and trying work to reach it without swinging out under the overhangs beneath the piton, though once there I could put a runner in the corner to protect Mike. The ledge is like an exaggerated version of that on the famous Pinnacle Wall of Craig yr Ysfa, and the combination of snow and the fiendish outward slope gave a nasty little pitch before it was possible to place a peg in a concealed crack in the back wall. This was the hardest bit on the upper section of the climb, because of the risk of the leader swinging out into a hopeless position on the face.

From the end of the ledge two further abseils over more broken and icy rocks brought us at last to the snow step, and the end of the first half of the descent. The eight pitches had taken us three and a half hours, and it was half-past two.

We spent a few moments resting and eating, marvelling at the view from this remarkable eyrie, pleased with our time so far. It was a joy to be able to sit down together, for up till now all the stances had been exceedingly cramped, and in nearly every case required some dependence on pitons. We took a number of photographs, and then descended the snow step to the sharp cut before the first gendarme; from this window, its top closed by jammed stones, we deserted the arête for the vast, featureless Fresnay face.

The Vallot guide mentions a 60-metre chimney as the start of this lower section, and indeed Couzy had given us to understand that we could expect to find all the necessary pitons in place once we were below the step. As it turned out, we encountered no old pitons until the last three pitches, and only one sign—a sweet paper—that others had passed our way. For these reasons, and because it is a nice point whether the shallow depression we followed to begin with can in fact be called a chimney, I rather think that the original line left the step higher up.

However this may be, memory and description alike are lost in the impersonal immensity of this Fresnay face: here it would be a matter of chance only for two parties to follow the same route, where no features stand out to guide, and every decision admits a dozen alternatives.

We made steady progress down. The ground was easier, with ledges between short drops, and from time to time we found good belays and could save our pitons. But the excitement of earlier was gone, and in its place that numb despondency of every long descent. Pressed for time, and slowed by the need for care and certainty at each stance, we were too tired and worried to enjoy the austere magnificence of the scenery.

Four or five pitches brought us gradually towards the ridge, and it became more and more obvious that a way was no longer open to us there and that a move back, to the right as we faced the cliff, was essential. From a large block, the shape and colour of a rust-red crystallised pear, ripe with decay but apparently sound, I pursued a course almost horizontally for about fifty feet before dropping down a steep wall to a convenient niche. At least it looked convenient from above, but on reaching it I found that my distorted sense of the vertical had again deceived me, and so far from affording a stance it only just allowed room to straddle precariously over space while inserting my widest channel into a shattered crack within. Our antics changing over in this uncomfortable place would have caused a riot in a circus.

The desire to leave this niche was so strong that it was with relief rather than apprehension that I began the most unpleasant pitch on the whole climb. We were now close to the edge of a prominent overlap, bounding a large rock couloir which becomes pronounced in the lower part of the face, and clearly affords the best way down. The problem was to reach it, and after a diagonal abseil of about twenty feet I found myself on a little tongue of rock on the edge of the overlap and some way above the floor of the couloir. The rope hung free for thirty feet, the wall cutting back sharply like the great overhang of the first section; however, it was no place to linger, and no turning back. I abandoned my perch.

For a moment the rope stayed over the tongue as I slid down, then jerked off and slipped in great twanging jumps down the edge of the overlap. I could feel the surge of it burn into my shoulder as I wheeled like a chair-o-plane at a fair, a blur of rock and sky and snow panning before my eyes. I scrabbled to a halt in a pile of boulders, and the stretch of the rope took me up so that I could hardly breathe. Clambering up to ease the pressure, I found that the ends of the rope were jammed higher above. Unable to use it for assistance, the ascent of the crumbling slab was exhausting and most unpleasant, and it was a relief to free it and descend to a stance. Mike took a lower line, but even so we agreed that it would be better to continue for a further length down the overlap to a stance on its edge, and thus reach the couloir where the retaining wall no longer overhung.

We were nearly down, and a few more pitches, where we found our old friends the rusty pitons once again, brought us to the ice of the couloir issuing from the Brèche Sud of the Dames Anglaises. It was just after 6.30, and the descent of the second section had involved twelve pitches. In all, the twenty rappels of the entire route had taken us something over seven hours. We placed nine pitons of our own, used some already in place, and employed several slings on belays in the lower half, the original route of which, we reckon, must have followed the general line of the couloir throughout, involving a higher departure

from the snow step. However, our route is equipped, and relatively easy, and compares favourably in the time spent on it, the more so because we lost precious minutes through the disappearance of the band marking the centre of our rope. This is vital for establishing the next rappel swiftly, and we longed for a dual-tone nylon.

There might still have been a possibility of reaching the Brèche Nord that evening, but misunderstanding Couzy's advice we ruled it out almost immediately by trying to circumvent the mass of the Dames Anglaises by traversing straight away at our present level. Discomfited, we climbed steep ice followed by a spine of shattered rock for 150 ft. up the couloir, and traversed out to the foot of the Dames themselves, where their clean forms thrust clear of the supporting rubbish. We reached the bottom of the most westerly pinnacle at eight, to find a good bivouac site waiting for us, where we determined to stay.

While Mike was getting supper I wrestled with the tangled rope, a worn-out Laocoon without his sons. Our own tension at the end of a trying, though immensely satisfying day, was nothing to the torture the rope had apparently endured, and I could make little headway in coiling it. In fact it took weeks to recover fully, convalescing Bristol fashion on my floor back in Lüneburg. As if this was not enough to contend with, Mike proceeded to break the news about the stove. It had been a trifle asthmatic on the top of the Noire, but now nothing we did would make it work. We ended up by having to construct a desert rose with a tin and a handful of grit: it made a cup of tea and a cup of soup. It also consumed all the petrol, and so permeated our meal, already unappetising, with nauseating fumes, that in the hut later the mere sight and smell of our caked and blackened pan made us throw it away in disgust.

The bivouac itself had little to commend it, apart from the magnificence of the situation, moonlit in a moon landscape. The Brèche Sud hung below us gleaming like a silver bridge across to the dark mysteries of the Aiguille Noire. The wind was light, but disquieting by its fitfulness. At different times it blew from almost every point of the compass, occasionally bringing with it a thin vaporous cloud that hid the massive body of Mt. Blanc and the Blanche as it wisped idly round the Dames Anglaises. We huddled shivering in their skirts and longed for dawn.

When it came it brought little cheer, and a clear sky rimmed on the horizon with an unpleasant magenta ribbon. At five we were sufficiently warm to make a move down crumbly rocks to a subsidiary snow couloir that led us to the narrow main couloir of the Brèche Nord. Moving up this in crampons, we took to the rocks on the left to reach the col and then the refuge, which is a baby Nissen dog-kennel on the Brenva side. As we left at 8.15 on the ascent of the Dames Anglaises ridge of the Aiguille Blanche, we passed a guide from St. Gervais with his lady client.

The ridge was easy, and we left it at the highest gendarme, traversing several couloirs on the Brenva face, to reach an arête leading to the summit ridge. Any belief that the wreckage up which we had to climb was supported by solid rock was emphatically disproved by experiment, and the constant mistrust was most wearisome.

After a short rock step we reached the final part of the ridge, where the snow begins. Here we found our view of the summit obscured by cloud, but it was not until we had reached the last top, ready for the descent to the Col de Peuterey, that the significance of the cloud was brought home by a sudden flurry of snow. Across from us Mt. Blanc looked sullen, misted over as low as the Grand Pilier d'Angle, and with the blank, hushed appearance of falling snow. Down on the Pilier's lower slopes we could see two specks beginning the descent. With no stove to make a second bivouac practicable in bad weather, and no prospect of the moonlight we should need to finish out the climb, we decided to go back. The snow on the Blanche was in very dangerous condition, and the descent to the Fresnay Glacier via the Col de Peuterey was out of the question in the time that remained. At one o'clock we turned: even retracing our steps we should be lucky to make the Gamba Hut by nightfall.

Plodding back over the mushy snow, we met the guide and his lady on the ridge. The weather now showed signs of clearing, and the guide said that it would pass off, and that he would continue to his bivouac on the Col de Peuterey as he had planned. It was hard to know which decision was right at the time, but ours had been made and there was no time for delay. Wishing them luck, and regretfully looking at the brightening sky, we headed as fast as we could for the Brèche Nord couloir, which we joined a little below the col on a level with the abseil peg in the left wall.

The descent of the couloir was long, but not hard. After one rappel we found that we could make good progress moving together, the first man facing in and kicking steps, the second facing out and guiding. We had gone a little way when the first hailstones fell. The blue sky had disappeared, and all the way down there were light showers of snow or hail. It did not look as though the weather would clear for a second time, and we felt extremely thankful to have got off the Aiguille Blanche, now enveloped in cloud, when we did. Passing down the debris trough to the rimaye we reached the glacier with a short jump.

We thought that if we tried the Col de l'Innominata route to the Gamba we should get stranded on the rocks in the dark, and therefore determined to descend the Fresnay Glacier, in spite of its ugly appearance, to the shelf lower down where its level coincides with that of its right bank in a curious sort of landing-place. Following some very ancient tracks until they disappeared over an appalling cliff, we skirted

the Aiguille Noire for a short distance. High up on the gaunt battlements we could hear the shouts of several parties, getting organised for what promised to be a foul night out. We tried hard to catch a sight of them, but it was already getting murky, and the mountain was swept by ragged cloud. Soon we moved across the tumbled chaos, making for the very broken area of ice blocks on the other side of the glacier. After some thrilling long jumps we got across, and made good progress until we were barred by a large crevasse. An ice leaf in the middle of this led down to the far side, but in jumping onto it I caught a crampon in my trouser leg. Balancing briefly on the leaf, I continued into the crevasse beyond, where I brought up gyrating on the rope. Reaching out with the pick, I was able to draw myself gently to safety, and thank Mike for fielding me so well.

We were now in a large bay in the centre of the glacier, and after descending its almost level floor for a short way were in sight of the landing-place. Traversing across in the last minutes of daylight, we encountered our final obstacle only thirty yards from dry land. The far edge of this gap was at chest height, and the only take-off was from a small ice blade in the last stages of decay. With no hesitation Mike edged out along this and made a fantastic stride to the far edge. Reaching out at full stretch he drove the pick of his axe as deep as he could, and made the move; slowly and agonisingly at first, then all in a rush, he drew himself across on the shaft. Darkness came suddenly as he pulled me after him, full of relief and admiration for a remarkable lead.

As we stepped off the glacier the thunderstorm that had been playing across the Val Veni moved over to greet us, bursting down in torrents of rain, its noise resounding in the Fresnay bowl. Thoughts turned to the people stranded on the Aiguille Noire, whose voices we had heard. Not knowing where the hut was, we blundered down in the darkness, soaked to the skin in the driving rain, sometimes catching a glimpse of dripping walls of rock in the magnesium glare of the lightning. We kept on more for lack of any alternative occupation than anything else, but eventually the storm eased a little and we were able to get the glacier lantern going. At ten o'clock we reached the broad spur, along which we thought the hut was situated, and by the candle-light discovered a path; in twenty yards it led us to the Refuge Gamba.

Next day our hands puffed up, the finger-pads splitting and blistering as a result of all the abseiling we had been doing; I had a deep burn on my shoulder, scorched by the rope even through duvet and anorak. We decided on the way over to Chamonix that when we do the climb again the first essential will be leather gloves, and for me a descendeur.

We lingered on the Col du Géant, just below the cloud, and watched the grey scud that masked the Peuterey, hiding it for other men and other days. It had not disappointed us.