

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE MASTERS

BY HAMISH MACINNES

FOR the last decade no other climb has had a greater attraction than the Walker Buttress on the N. face of the Grandes Jorasses. Its forbidding countenance, as seen from the Leschaux Glacier, suggests great storms and extreme isolation and a challenge unequalled anywhere in the Alps.

For us in Britain, restricted to so many months of the year to no greater cliff than Clogwyn du'r Arrdu, or the North face of Ben Nevis, this great pillar of rock looks deceptive and one has to reorientate oneself to the scale of these alpine faces.

When Don Whillans joined me in Chamonix this year our hopes were high. The season showed promise, there was little snow, and we had the feeling in our bones that a big climb was on our doorstep. Don was anxious to start on a training climb and as our Continental friends, Walter Phillip and Richard Blach were setting off that evening for the Nant Blanc, Don hurriedly packed his rucksack and, unfed, followed them to the Rognon Bivouac. His reflections on that route, which they did in record time, consisted of strained ankles and aching limbs as the two Austrians, climbing without belays, moved like robots. I was glad I did not go with them.

For some days I had been of the opinion that the Walker was in condition and the news from the rather exhausted Aiguille Verte party that heavy snow lay on the summit somewhat shattered my faith in my predictions. We bided our time in the Montenvers pines, punctuating the monotony with diversions in the fleshpots of Chamonix. On the 21st of July, Don, after spending a couple of days in Chamonix returned to Montenvers with two other friends, John Streetly and Leslie Brown and suggested that we moved to the derelict Leschaux Hut that evening for an attempt on the Walker.

Our lack of equipment was, to me at least, reminiscent of Himalayan days. Leslie Brown, who had unfortunately lost most of his climbing accoutrements on the North ridge of the Peigne a few days previously was distressingly short, and for once I was in the happy and unusual state of looking without envy on the apparel and equipage of a friend.

The mere fact that he was *sans* ice hammer, windproof trousers, crampons and bivouac sack seemed of little measure in our enthusiasm. From a fellow hut dweller he gleaned a great sombrero and a pair of

enormous trousers, so gross at the top that they formed a moat suspended from his braces and indeed they seemed more befitting Gargantua.

John Streetly, who, like a tornado, comes from the depths of South America every few years to do a remarkable climb or two, was on this occasion complaining that he hadn't been on a mountain for three years. However, some men inspire confidence, and I was only too happy to share a rope with him. Don and Leslie were to share the other rope.

This happy quartet, well nurtured with good *vin ordinaire* set foot on the Mer de Glace as the crepuscular stillness settled on the valley and as the long shadows crept from the isolated boulders strewn over the glacier. Fortunately we did not know, as we descended to the ice, that the barometer was dropping ominously.

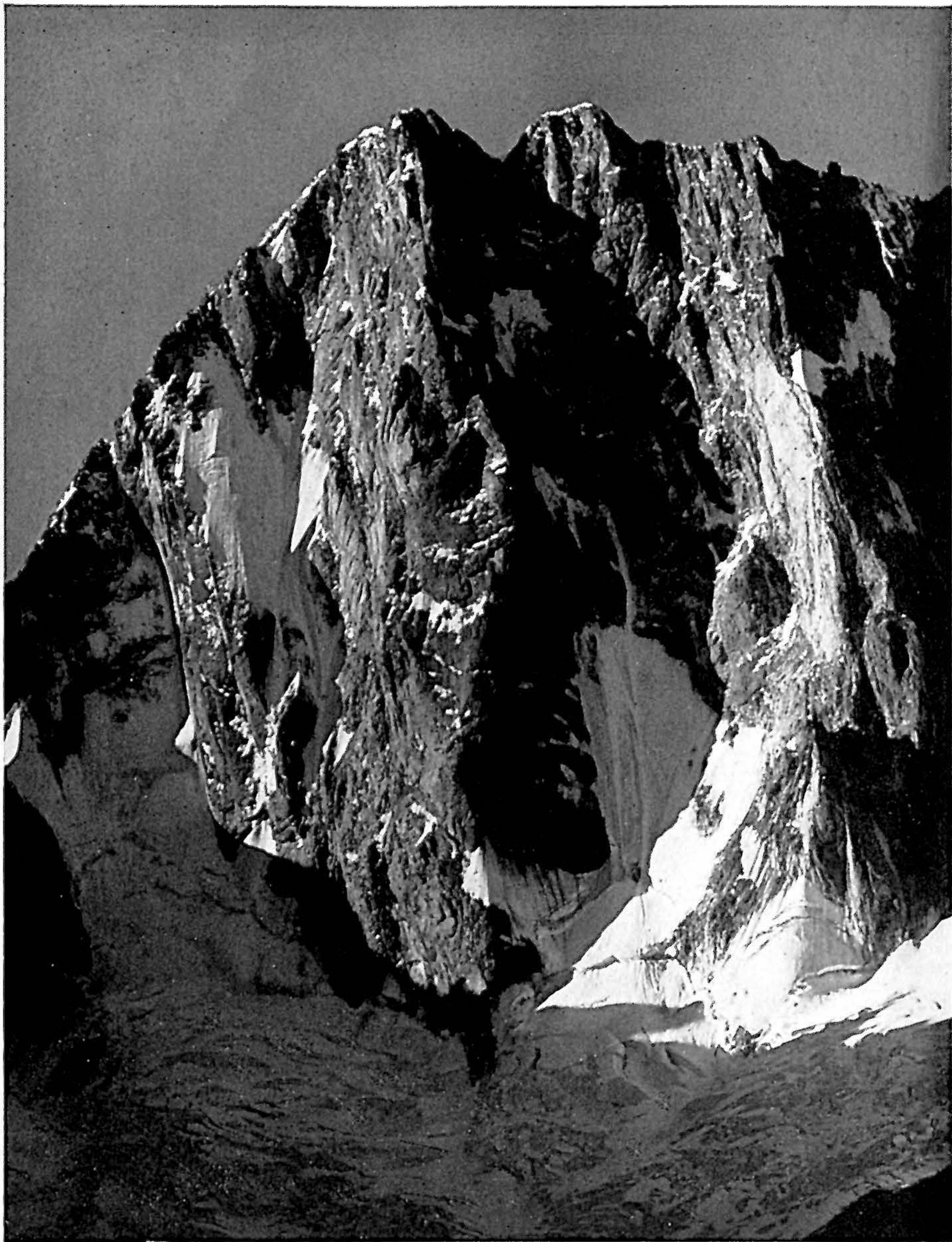
The Leschaux Hut, which was damaged by an avalanche some years ago, provides excellent accommodation to impecunious mountaineers and it is very popular with Aberdonian climbers. When we arrived there a full moon rose above the Col des Hirondelles and bathed the peaks in a ghostly light. The firelight played about the ruins of the hut as we brewed tea and talked. The hut was already tenanted; two Czechs came out to greet us and told us that there had been an accident on the Walker that day and someone had injured a hand. They too were going to attempt the Walker in the morning.

When one is keyed up for a big route, sleep does not come easily. After one has been at grips with the climb the situation is different, weary limbs must be rested and part of the tension has snapped, though the weather is always at the back of one's mind. When we had exhausted our recitations, and when the fire had burned low, we retired to our bivouac sacks, not to sleep, but rather to muster our thoughts and await the hour of 2 a.m.

For the next three hours we saw lights on the Walker, tiny pinpricks of light about a third of the way up; we did not know then that two Scotsmen were sharing a minute ledge on the first British ascent of this great climb.

Our Czech friends left at 1 a.m., mere shadows silently and unobtrusively moving out of the hut. They disappeared down the loose chimney which leads to the ice. For us they provided a good reveille, and by the time we had the fire going and the necessary tea brewed it was after 2 a.m. and zero hour. My pack weighed so much that it was uncomfortable and as we picked our way over the furrows of ice I resolved to lighten it at the first opportunity.

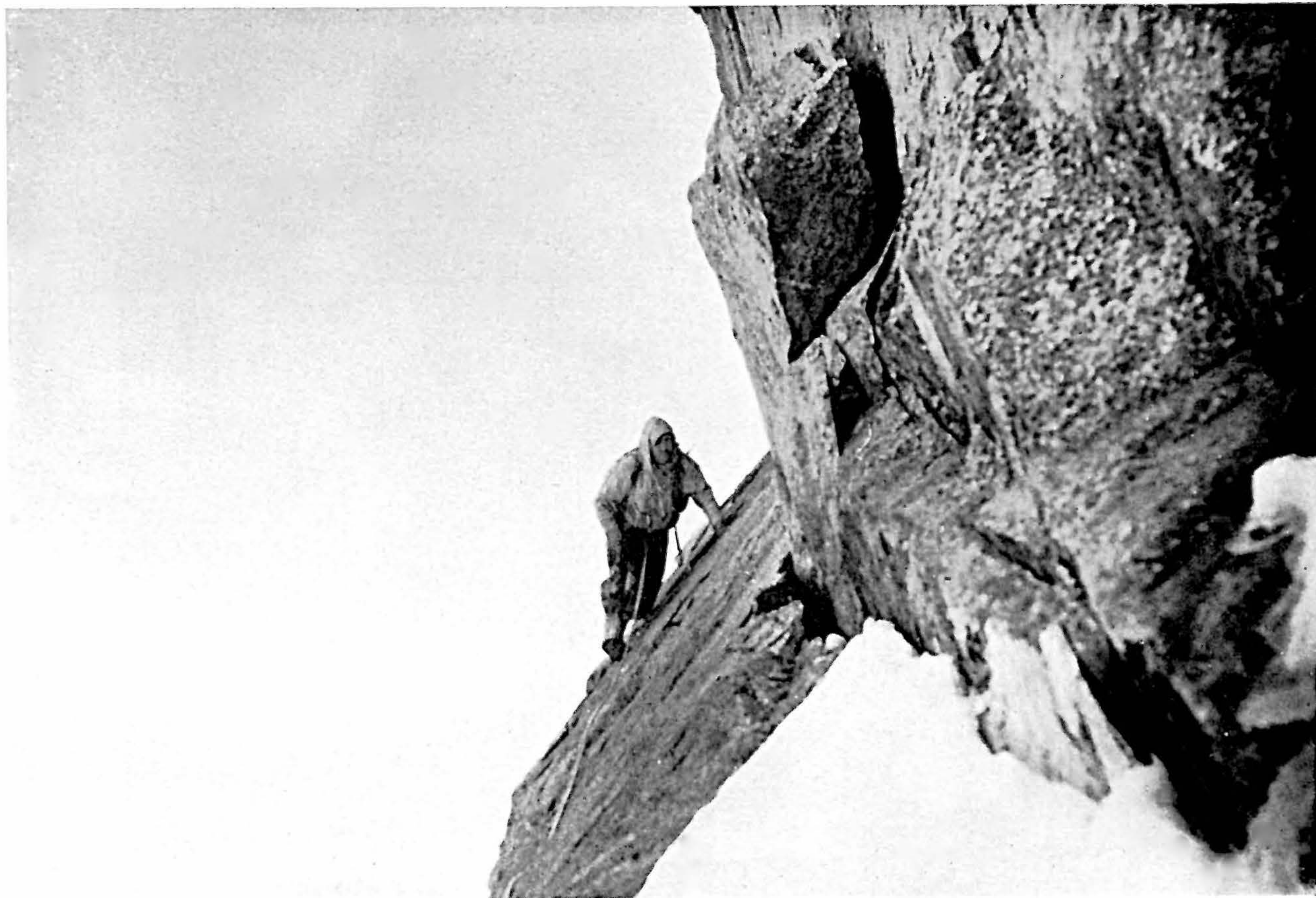
It is advisable for parties who intend to do the Walker to reconnoitre the approaches, for we lost valuable time in negotiating the maze of crevasses and schrunds which guard the foot of the spur. Furthermore,



Photo, B. R. Goodfellow]

GRANDES JORASSES—WALKER BUTTRESS FROM COUVERCLE.

[To face p. 194



Photo, H. MacInnes]

A TRAVERSE ABOVE THE CHIMNEY.

the alternative routes for the start which are mentioned in the guide-book should also be studied, for instead of climbing the foul chimney which marks the start of the climb, we instead continued up the alternative start which lost us valuable time and involved much step-cutting up steep ice.

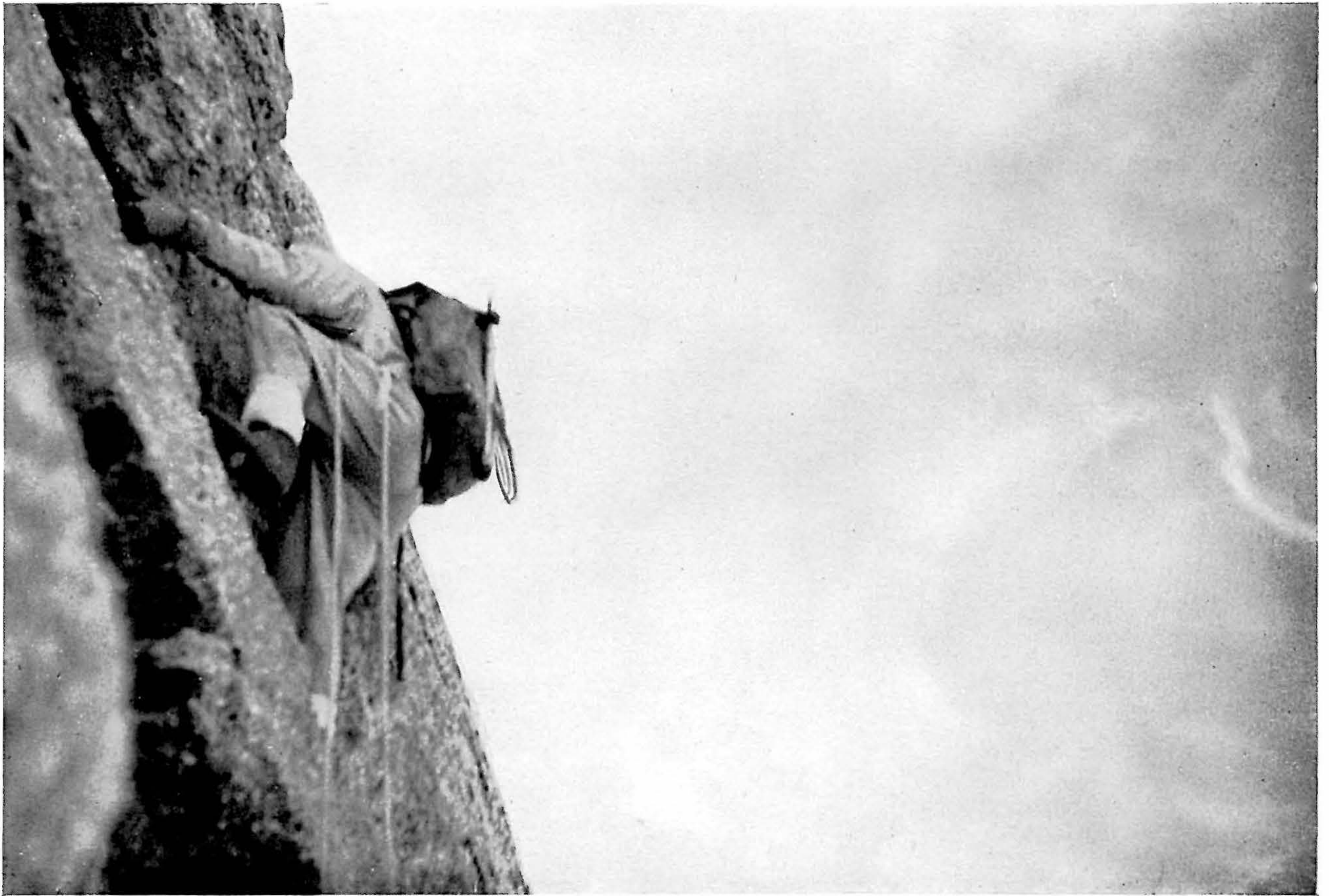
At this point, below the start of the real rock-climbing, we had a glimpse of the Czech party ahead on a steep wall. John and I had ascended ahead of our two friends but now we waited for them to pass us as they had the description of the route.

From dangerous snow-covered scree we abruptly started on steep difficult rock; a steep wall with various routes led to a series of platforms. Above this a rising traverse to the right ended in a wall where a few difficult moves led on to steep awkward rock. Above, to the right, I could see Don starting a steep chimney with effortless ease; he used no *étrier* and ascended with the celerity of one climbing stairs. This was the famous hundred-foot pitch. As the rucksacks of our friends arose, John joined me at the ledge.

Already I was beginning to feel a strange lethargy, possibly a legacy from the stone fall on the Bonatti the previous year, or perhaps it was the aftermath of faulty food, anyhow I felt rather weak. John led this pitch with little effort and it seemed a long time before I joined him on the ledge above, feeling very tired indeed. By this time the others had gone ahead and John was not sure where the route lay. Don had said something about a traverse to the right for two rope-lengths, so off he went running out 150 ft. of rope across steep slabs where one's passage was endangered by falling stones. It was an orchestra of whines and thuds. Some high-pitched like small children, others petulant and aggressive, determined on destruction. Luckily, throughout the climb, neither Don nor myself, who were wearing the new type of crash hat, were hit, but both John and Leslie received several direct and indirect hits, fortunately without serious consequences. One of the two Scotsmen ahead, we learned later, received no less than seven stones on the head.

The traverse was problematical, here and there we had to ascend and descend as the terrain dictated. Sometimes over iced rock and sometimes over snow patches. When I reached the indefinite crest of the ridge I saw the others above and they shouted down to say that the route lay directly above. John led through and ascended the edge and I knew from the periodic slowing of the rope that there were a few awkward moves above. Presently I joined him at the base of a long sloping chimney, described in the guide book as the 'long dièdre'.

It was not a Dru dièdre, it lay back at a generous angle, yet with few pitons in place it provided a difficult obstacle. We sack-hauled and, as on the strenuous crack, I found myself extremely tired. At the top of



Photo, H. MacInnes]

THE 100-FT. CRACK.

this chimney, which was some three rope-lengths long we could see the others above on the steep flanks of the ridge, and ahead of them, to the right, another party which we guessed were the Czechs. Above that again was another party with white crash-helmets. This was surely a great day for the Walker.

We were informed that our line lay up rather insecure snow to a small chimney where a traverse to the right led to a rappel which gives one the key to the Grey Tower. I led to the top of the snow after John had worked his way over steep slabs. John then took over and climbed a short chimney and unwittingly passed the traverse to the fixed rope rappel which is none too obvious, especially when pegs continue up the chimney after the point of traverse. This is apparently a common *faux pas*.

Luckily I had seen the others on this section and I traversed across and after some complicated manoeuvres we were both established on the steep wall near the rappel. Here we had to do a tension traverse to the fixed rope and John disappeared into the depths, where after some time he reappeared climbing horribly steep rock some 40 ft. away on the right. This rappel is some 30 ft. and it enables one to do a delicate traverse to the right to gain the steep bulging section of rock which is very often iced. At the top of this steep section is the bivouac ledge, where on the previous night we had seen the lights of the British party. I had my first suspicion of Scots or Anglo-Saxons here for I discovered an empty packet of 'Smarties', which I knew had not belonged to Don or Leslie.

It was about seven in the evening when we arrived at the ledge. On the right was the great couloir which had been the playground of so many pre-war climbers. Above us the summit seemed as far away as ever and the banks of cloud, finishing in a dead straight line, filled the valleys. Here we had a bite to eat, and a heavy tin of meat which I had carried all day was opened. We also melted some snow on the stove and had a quick brew of Horlicks which we had found on the ledge.

Tenacious fingers of mist clung to the rock and the temperature dropped. We were worried about the weather, and I felt so ill that we almost agreed to return, but we left the ledge to a pegged traverse which took us to the edge of the ridge again. Above here the route was rather indefinite and John, who was leading, did some difficult variations which were more awkward than the proper route. On one hard section he had to put in a piton using a carabiner for a hammer, then roping off. This incidentally, was one of the only two pegs which we inserted on the climb.

Darkness enveloped us when we were still on difficult rock. It was now imperative to find a ledge on which to spend the night. With great speed John climbed here and there looking for a bivouac site.



Photo, H. MacInnes]

ABOVE THE GREY TOWER.

At last there was a shout of success and I gained the scree-strewn patch as the last light filtered from the west. A whine of a stone was disconcerting, but it had no followers.

Our friends were somewhere above us, but we could not contact them and our calls were mocked by the surrounding crags. We were, we thought, in a more fortunate position than they, for we had the communal stove and we had a comfortable ledge for the night, that is to say relatively comfortable, some five feet by two and a half, and slings from nearby rocks as belays.

We relaxed and drank an insipid brew from my meat tin. I had the sensation that I was on a ship, ploughing through the frothy cloud on the valley floor, following the twinkling stars to the north. Above us on the other bivouac, we learned later, our friends had not fared so well. A cramped ledge where an upright position had to be preserved for security—and they had no hot drink.

Once ensconced in my plastic bag which is liable to heavy condensation and to asphyxiating the interned, I dropped off to a deep sleep. I dreamt that I was astral-projecting and that I had to leave an important brew of buttered tea in a gumpa to return to my physical self in the morning. Leslie, I learned later, was also very tired and he exhausted himself further by fighting with imaginary climbers all night who were wanting his ledge.

My physical self in the morning was much refreshed and indeed I felt a new being. Breakfast consisted of some soup and pulverised bread and we soon discovered that the ledge above our bivouac site was the belay stance for the last section to the top of the Grey Tower. It was bitterly cold and we waited until we restored circulation before starting the rock pitch above, noting with comfort the pitons like signposts.

The two pitches which took us to the top of the Tower were not too difficult and a jammed sling, so uncontinental, struck, at least our subconscious, as rather strange. The ridge which snakes upwards from the top of the great pillar of the Grey Tower is airy and enjoyable. The climbing was not above severe standard and the route was obvious. When I gained the ridge at one point after a slight traverse to the right I caught sight of the others above. At least I could distinguish two figures on a steep iced chimney. Quickly, though somewhat out of breath, we led through and on a steep slope of unstable rock we caught up with our two companions. They were held up by the Czech and Austrian parties ahead and as we had nothing better to do we put on the ritual brew of tea. This was rather difficult as we had very little security on our unstable boulders.

When an hour had passed Don continued up, negotiating a difficult traverse to gain a steep chimney which is graded V and which is loose.

John followed in the wake of Leslie. To avoid the danger of falling stones Leslie took one of our ropes and when he reached the belay above he clipped this on, giving us a direct rope for this dangerous pitch.

A rising traverse to the right at the top of the chimney took us back to the edge of the spur, then another traverse, this time a short horizontal one, let us gain a short iced chimney where we reached easier ground.

Stones kept hurtling down from the parties above and I was concerned by gathering storm clouds. In the distance was the boom of thunder and the south-west wind was a bad sign.

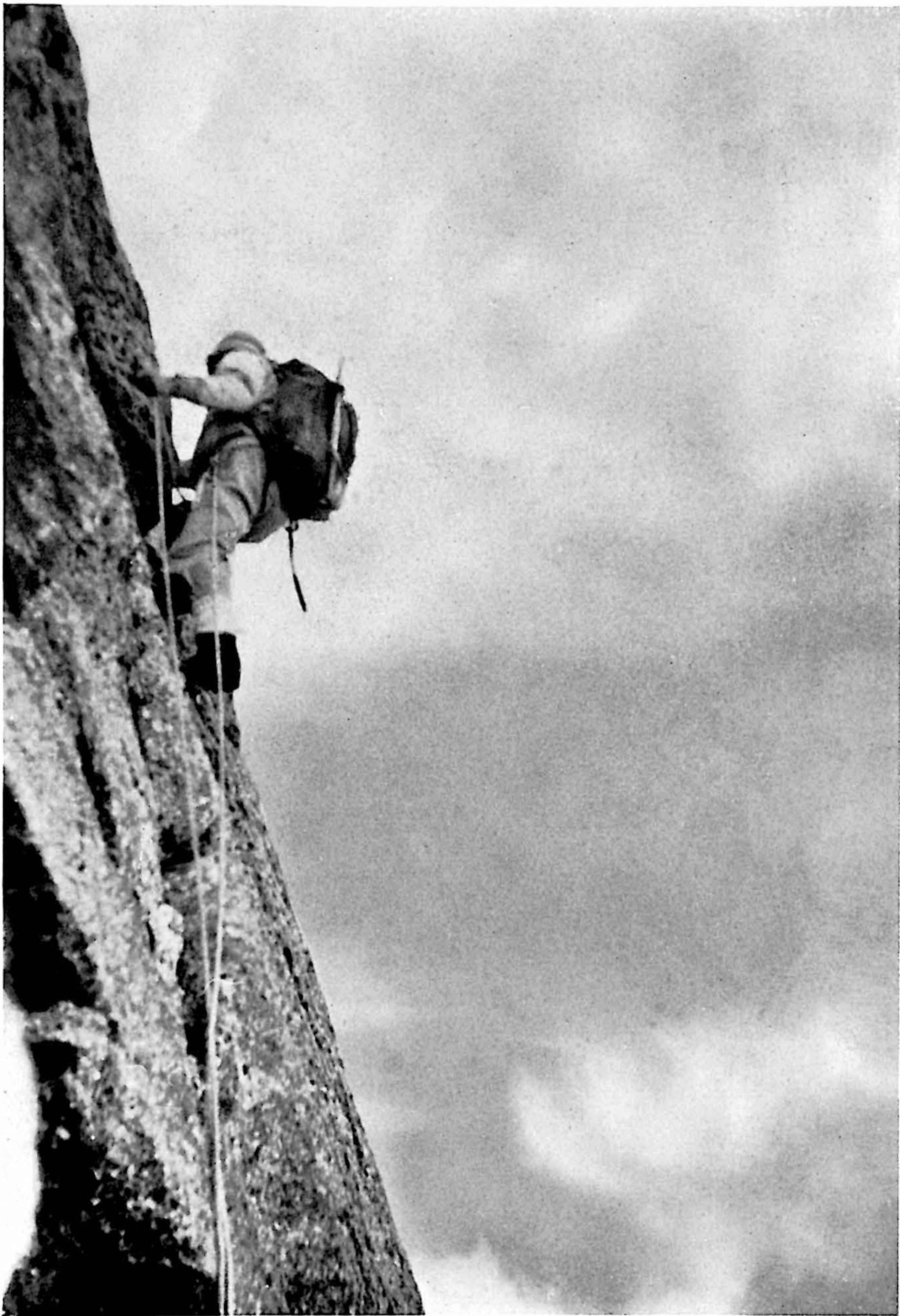
Soon we were climbing together on the narrow summit ridge and the parties ahead were climbing the iced summit block. Here the bombardment of stones was so persistent that, despite the weather, we decided a halt was the lesser of two evils, so the stove came out and whilst the snow fell we drank soup. Soon the thunder which seemed to encircle the Jorasses moved nearer and we realized that we would have to hurry to get to the Jorasses Hut that night. When our rather slow Continental vanguard had reached the summit we quickly ascended the treacherous snow-covered rock and in dense cloud arrived on the summit. We did not feel any great sense of achievement, we just felt the urgency to get down. There were tracks leading off into the mist, so taking out our hammer-axes we moved down, peering anxiously.

Along the precipitous summit ridge the footsteps divided and thinking that the spoor to the left would take us onto the quickest means of descent we followed them. The steps suddenly stopped at the edge of a yawning crevasse and shot off at a tangent to the right only to ascend and join the other set of tracks along the summit ridge.

The trail took us dangerously near the large cornice, still we followed it and eventually reached the Pointe Whymper. The summit, a mound of loose scree, protruded from the new soft snow and we decided to stop and consult the guide-book. The mist which enveloped us was dense and cold. Large snowflakes continued to fall silently.

At right angles we descended from the summit down loose rock intermingled with snow and ice. The rope was a nuisance, but the terrain was treacherous. After making several abortive attempts at descending the wide couloir we decided that a bivouac would be the safest and most effective way of dealing with the storm.

The thunder continued to roll and lightning stabbed at the rocks. A ledge of comparative comfort was chosen for our vigil, but we found that Don's bivouac sack was not quite commodious enough for all of us, so I had to vacate the comparative luxury of the communal ledge for an adjacent site below. A journey over plastered rock for water nearly resulted in frost-bite and it took over an hour to restore circulation to my hands, though once established in my plastic bag I soon fell asleep.



Photo, H. MacInnes]

NEARING THE TOP, THE TRAVERSE TO THE GRADE V CHIMNEY.

As we had bivouacked at 6 p.m. the night was a long one, interminable would be a better word. We had profuse condensation in our sacks and when we awoke in the morning we were soaking. My three colleagues above had a night of fitful slumber. Both Don and Leslie had cold feet, actually slight frost-bite, though Don's was probably a result of cramponing on the Nant Blanc. I remember looking out of my sack that memorable morning at the cold wet blanket of cloud. It was a bitter penetrating cold. Like a snail I hurriedly pulled my head back into my damp sack and again dozed, hoping for a break in the weather. Above me my friends were enclosed in a cocoon of snow. For that matter, so was I, and Don expected to find me asphyxiated in the morning. The secret of my survival can perhaps be attributed to a crampon which ripped a small section of my sack the previous day.

Our descent from that bivouac in deep snow at 9 a.m. that morning could not be compared with the descent from the summit of the Dru the previous year ; there we had to fight, here we worked our way down at our leisure over not too difficult ground.

Soon the sun emerged from the veil, scattering the clouds as one sweeps the floor. The Géant revealed itself and Mont Blanc stood stately and serene, the citadel of Europe.

The lack of an ice axe made the descent rather awkward for Leslie, especially as it was his first real alpine climb and on a rather soft snow slope his left leg stuck and remained stuck. As he had to descend behind Don who was route-finding I volunteered to climb with Don and when we extricated Leslie he roped up with John Streetly.

The descent down the glacier was like an obstacle course, snow bridges, crevasses and séracs. In pouring rain we arrived at the *rognon* on which the hut is located and lightning hissed to and fro. The 'Message', my old and much worn ice-hammer which was on my rucksack, hummed and sparked and for a moment I thought that there was an aeroplane about. I rushed down from the exposed rocks on which we were standing and my lightning conductor ceased to function.

By evening we were in Courmayeur where we met Robin Smith and Gunn Clark who had made the first British ascent of the Walker one bivouac ahead of us. They showed us to the cheapest accommodation in town.