

MY FINEST ROUTE IN THE ALPS

*(A description of the third ascent of the whole Peuterey ridge,
including the South ridge of the Aiguille Noire)*

BY KURT DIEMBERGER

(Translated by Hugh Merrick)

THE hours one enjoys most are always the hardest to describe. They come and are gone, leaving one groping for words in which to clothe their shining image. In the end, all we can find to say is how lovely they were and how serene their enjoyment. . .

* * * * *

For me the Peuterey ridge was more than a climb.

How often had I looked up at it, studying its every mood. I had learned to know it when the dark clouds of an approaching storm were closing in; when the soft raiment of newly-fallen snow covered it far down on to the Brenva glacier; and again when its brown rocks, white-crested, leaned sharp against the faultless blue of the heavens. Morning and night, I knew it now; and on many a late return from some climb or other I had come to know it too under the star-studded night sky.

For years I had longed to traverse it in its entirety; it had become for me the grandest and most desirable of all Alpine routes. Nor has familiarity since caused me to change my mind.

It was not only the immense triple upward sweep of the great ridge which continually excited my imagination; there was more to it than that. What face in the Alps can rival the wide prospect opened by this route? What a magical progression it offers. First, the green slopes above Peuterey, then the slabby rocks, followed in tremendous succession by the South ridge of the Noire, flinging its towers to the sky; the ensuing upward sweep to the icy comb of the Blanche; the broad col before the last, steep 3,000 ft.; and, finally, the gentle finish leading to Mont Blanc's lofty dome. Hadn't such a route got everything? And doesn't a climber's progress follow the self-same rhythm all through his life?

What a unique experience such a climb must offer—a climb which in a threefold sweep leads him from the flower-starred meadows at valley level to the summit of the Monarch himself, with its prospect out into illimitable distances and downwards on to all other summits in the Alps!

Even when I had gained actual experience of some of its separate sectors, the ridge as a single entity still fascinated me; but whenever I

made plans to do it, something always seemed to turn up to thwart my overwhelming urge. When, later, a propitious summer had granted me success on the last of the three great North faces of the Alps, a still, small voice came sounding through the retrospective-reflective mood which set in after the successful completion of that climb. 'How lucky you are!' it seemed to say; 'you still have the grandest and finest route in the Alps waiting for you.'

Then I was grateful that my luck had always robbed me of it. Looking across at the mighty surge of the Peuterey ridge, I suddenly felt that this time it must at last come my way.

IN THE VAL VENI

Autumn had come, with its short but brilliant days. The air was clear and the sky was a quiet cloth of blue, drawn taut above Mont Blanc. The Val Veni meadows were gay with meadow-saffron; the grass and ferns of the foothill slopes had turned ochre, brown and red. Here and there grew a few solitary flowers, altogether foreign to this season of the year, doubtless under the impression that it was already spring-time, so long had the weather been fine and warm. And yet, wherever there was shade, there lingered little patches of snow, which had fallen a few days earlier and was only slowly vanishing. The first September days were here.

A wide meadow dotted with a few sparse trees stretches in front of the Peuterey alp; for some years it has served as a camping-site in summer. Now it was empty and silent except for the tinkling of a few cow-bells. A careful scrutiny would have revealed a single small tent nestling under a great pine, and outside it two unshaven and somewhat scruffy figures, sitting on the grass, surrounded by a variety of gaily-coloured objects and delving deeply into the pages of a book.

The tent belonged to me and my friend Franz Lindner from Krems. We were busily discussing a photograph of the Noire and a report in a C.A.F. "Journal," with a view to making adequate preparations for the 1,700 ft. *abseil* down the Northern arête—itself a mere detail in the five miles of ridge we were proposing to cover (weather permitting, of course) in the next few days. The weather didn't really worry us—it is usually good in September—and in any case we were prepared to meet all eventualities; we were pretty optimistic. Of course we remembered that the climb had only been done twice, first in 1953, when Dr. Richard Hechtel and his party did the whole ridge, including the mighty South ridge of the Noire; then not again till 1957, when a Polish team repeated the climb, like their predecessors taking three days over it.

Now, in 1958, we were allowing anything from four days to a week, for the following reasons. Franz and I were both convinced that the climb on which we were embarking would provide an experience never to be

repeated, at any rate not in our Alpine days. And, since not many others were likely to follow in our footsteps on this immense route, we were determined that everyone who loves mountains should be able to share in the wonderful sights and scenes that lay before us. So we had decided to capture at least some part of that great experience for their eyes, as well as for our own permanent record, on 16 mm film. True, the most we could bring back from those long days spent on the ridge would be a film running for three quarters of an hour or so—but it would mean taking much longer over the climb, for all that. To start with, we would be carrying a much heavier load—the camera itself weighed 5 lb. and that was the least of the equipment we would need. We were very fit and our heavy rucksacks wouldn't lower our morale; but our speed would almost certainly be affected. Then again, because of our film project, we intended to reject the outlook of climbers storming upwards over all obstacles at top speed, and to substitute for it, so far as possible, the contemplative mental attitude of a wayfarer, delighting to rest for an hour by the roadside, to watch some particularly lovely cloud effect, to savour, in peace and quiet, every beauty encountered as he travels his long road, equally content to reach journey's end after two or twelve hours on the way. We were ourselves a little surprised that this conscious and almost total elimination of the time-concept could lend a fantastic sense of beauty to our undertaking. But what more attractive adventure could one want than to go as wanderers go in places where wandering is not the normal form?

The traverse of the entire Peuterey ridge without the provision of at least one small depot is, security-wise, of doubtful wisdom; for the savage blizzards which suddenly break over the Mont Blanc range could make it impossible to get off the ridge for a week at a time. Where then to site our depot?

We knew that Dr. Hechtel had dumped some of his equipment and provisions on the summit of the Noire before starting up the South ridge, thus enabling him to move both unencumbered and quickly on the ridge. As neither of these considerations affected us, and because in my view only a depot sited beyond the Noire could ensure the safety and success of our climb, we decided to place it in the Brèche Nord behind the Dames Anglaises, where there is already a bivouac box and where the normal 'short' Peuterey ridge-climb starts.

After careful consideration of the contents of our depot, we packed everything up, including the equipment for the ice-ridge. Down in the village we had managed to borrow two ancient and immensely long 'ancestral' ice-axes for our return journey, promising by all that is holy to bring them back in good condition. With these and our fairly heavy rucksacks we set out, hoping fervently that the lovely weather would last for many more days . . .

THE FIRST MOVE

It was dark when we reached the bivouac box in the Brèche Noire at about 11,500 ft.

Before I fell asleep in that comfortable little shelter, I lay thinking what a long way it was up from the valley. The Fresnay glacier had in the course of the last few years lost none of its reputation for disruption, its tottering séracs none of their hostility; the couloir up to the Brèche was as steep as ever and today the upper part had even been hard, smooth ice.

I had been up here some years before with my friend Wolfgang Stefan, intending to do the Peuterey 'short'. It had come to nothing, for a sudden break in the weather overtook us long before the Aiguille Blanche. The next day we managed to get down with the greatest difficulty, as the first avalanches were pouring down the couloir and new snow building up almost to our knees. We had been heartily glad to get down again in safety that time.

Now, when morning came, we soon found a good site for our depot, in a rocky crack below an overhang. We carefully stowed in it two pairs of crampons, two ice-mallets, some ice-pitons, a litre of petrol, spare batteries and bivouac torches, film equipment and, last but not least, a heavy canister containing food enough for a whole week. Nothing whatever was to be allowed to chase us off the ridge, once we had reached this point—even if it chose to snow us in for several days on end.

Unfortunately one of my crampons had become unserviceable. In the darkness on the previous day I had got a point of one wedged in a crack in the rocks; as I freed myself, off came the point. There was nothing for it but to go down to Courmayeur and fetch a new crampon, a crampon fit for the South ridge.

We were just going to start down when we noticed someone coming up the couloir from the Fresnay glacier; we could hear their voices quite clearly, and every now and then we recognised rope instructions. We were very surprised that anyone should be coming up so late in the year. It turned out that the three Italians who presently put in an appearance had only come to check the condition of the bivouac box. And one of them, who had a long kind of contraption in his hand, was looking—believe it or not—for uranium.

'Luckily he won't find any,' I said to Franz 'and let's hope no one ever will stumble on that kind of hidden treasure among these hills.' He nodded in agreement and gave the uranium hunter a rather dirty look. Shades of the mighty Peuterey ridge! We were glad when, in due course, the party started down again.

We followed close on their heels, for every hour was adding to the danger of bombardment by falling stones in the couloir. Thanks to those reliable old ice-axes, the Fresnay glacier proved amenable without

crampons. Finding a much better route between the crevasses and ice-towers, we soon reached the prominent notch of the Col de l'Innominata and hurried down the slopes of old snow to the scree-chutes and the meadows below. And as we made haste down to the valley, we kept on glancing up at the red towers of the Noire. Up there was our South ridge and now we would soon be on it.

By the afternoon we were back at our tent on the alp, with the first move completed.

A JACOB'S LADDER OF GRANITE

Dusk was falling as we climbed, over slabs and slopes covered with greenery, into the great half-circle of the Fauteuil des Allemands. Soon we could see a tiny hut at the base of a rock-cliff, the Noire Hut. It is an old-fashioned type of refuge, without a guardian and boasting few sleeping places. One has to fetch water from the stream beyond a great patch of boulders, the stove smokes horribly and you get your wood from where you can find it. In brief, it is just what is meant by a 'good old comfortable climber's refuge'.

We got everything ready for the morning, took a last look at the weather and fell asleep, wondering where the next two nights would find us. . . .

It was still dark when I woke up, worrying about the time. There were definite signs of a new day, but my luminous watch showed only two o'clock. The weather was still fine and there was a moon. Franz said it was too early. I agreed that a little more sleep would do no harm and rolled myself up again in my corner.

Next thing, it was four o'clock and high time to get a move on. We were up in a moment and all our surmises about the day to come were shed in an instant. Today had arrived and nothing else counted. We opened the door to let in the keen cold morning air. Soon the rice-crisps were crackling in the oven and the soup was heating up. Not that we were exactly hungry, but we swallowed what we could—at least our backs would be that much lighter.

We went across to the stream in the half-light and, as we slowly mounted the endless slopes of rubble to reach the base of the South ridge, the gentle fingers of the morning sun touched the rocky towers high overhead. They glowed brownish red and we thrilled at the thought of the climbing awaiting us up there.

* * * * *

We were on the South ridge of the Noire, with gorgeously rough rock under our fingers and hand-holds true as steel. Up it went, up and up, slab after slab, cliff upon cliff, tower after tower, all of it steep, and always above the sheer abyss on either side. Mists came drifting up from the

séracs of the Fresnay glacier, to dance around the pinnacles and about us as we climbed on, drinking in the fresh, clean autumn air.

All around us lay sunlight and valley and vast distances; the banks of cloud building slowly in the sky, the turquoise eye of the little Checrouit lake far below and the warm scent of autumn rising from the foothill meadows; the grey rubble-stream of the Miage glacier, snaking deep down into the valley, right into the green of the forests and the fields; the tiny houses along the Dora's banks—all far, far below.

The rock was beautifully varied. We met slabs whose rounded surfaces were covered with greyish-green lichens; white felspar crystals stuck out here and there, asking to be pocketed. There were ledges, offering firm foothold for a groping boot, wrinkles in the rock inviting one to entrust the whole of one's body weight to them and heave it up with one's arms. We came to a huge overhang and used each other's shoulders to overcome it. Then we were over the second tower and on our way to the next, the massive Pointe Welzenbach. We traversed out on to the right-hand face over ledges and slabs.

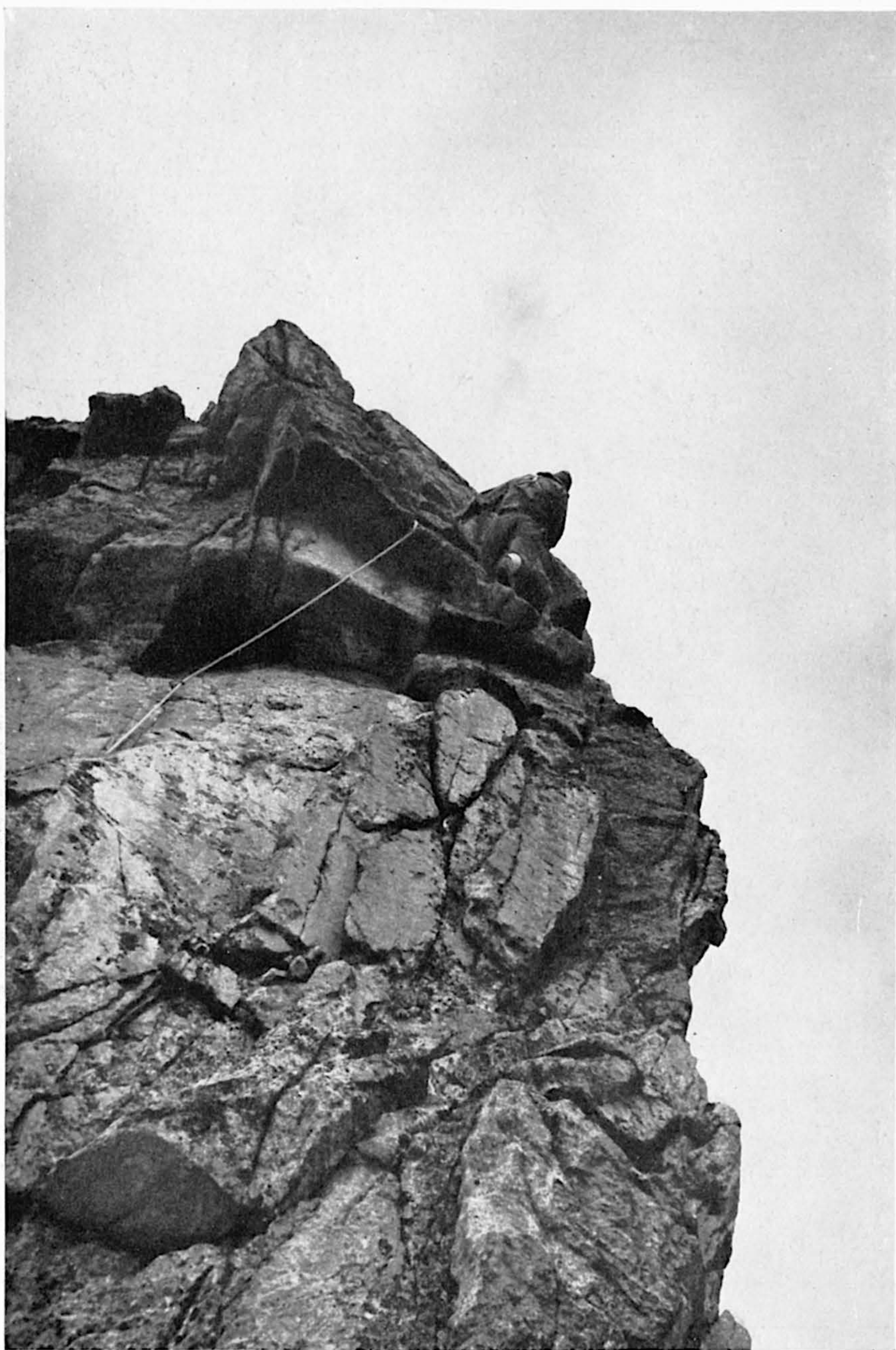
So we went on and up along the granite Jacob's ladder of the South ridge. And while our arms and legs were busy with the mechanics of climbing and our eyes engaged in searching out the way ahead, our thoughts went out over all the depths and distances around and about us. It goes without saying that we were happy beyond measure on our South ridge.

* * * * *

By the afternoon we were on the summit of the Pointe Welzenbach. There we sat down to rest and eat and looked down on the way we had come. The first tower, the Pointe Gamba, looked like a small tooth, the pinnacles of the second lay far below us, and here we were, sitting on the third. Willo Welzenbach once got as far as this; it was some time after that before a way was found to the summit over the Pointe Brendel and the Bich. Looking up at the yellow and rust-coloured walls, we rated them at fully V—perhaps a bit more than that, though there is only one short traverse on the vertical face of the Bich which is supposed to be from V to VI.

We were at a little flat place with a bivouac wall all round it, a reminder that not everyone can do the South ridge in a single day and that we would probably find quite a few more 'parapets' higher up.

We wondered whether we could still get to the top of the Pointe Brendel before nightfall. We thought it worth trying, so we started off on the *abseil* which follows. We soon found a suitable block, the rope went whistling down and we followed comfortably enough in our 'Dülfer' seats. There followed a gently sloping step and a traverse to the left before we were at the foot of the Brendel's severe upthrust.



Photo, W. Stefan]

CLIMBING AN OVERHANG ON POINTE BRENDÉL, SOUTH RIDGE OF THE NOIRE.

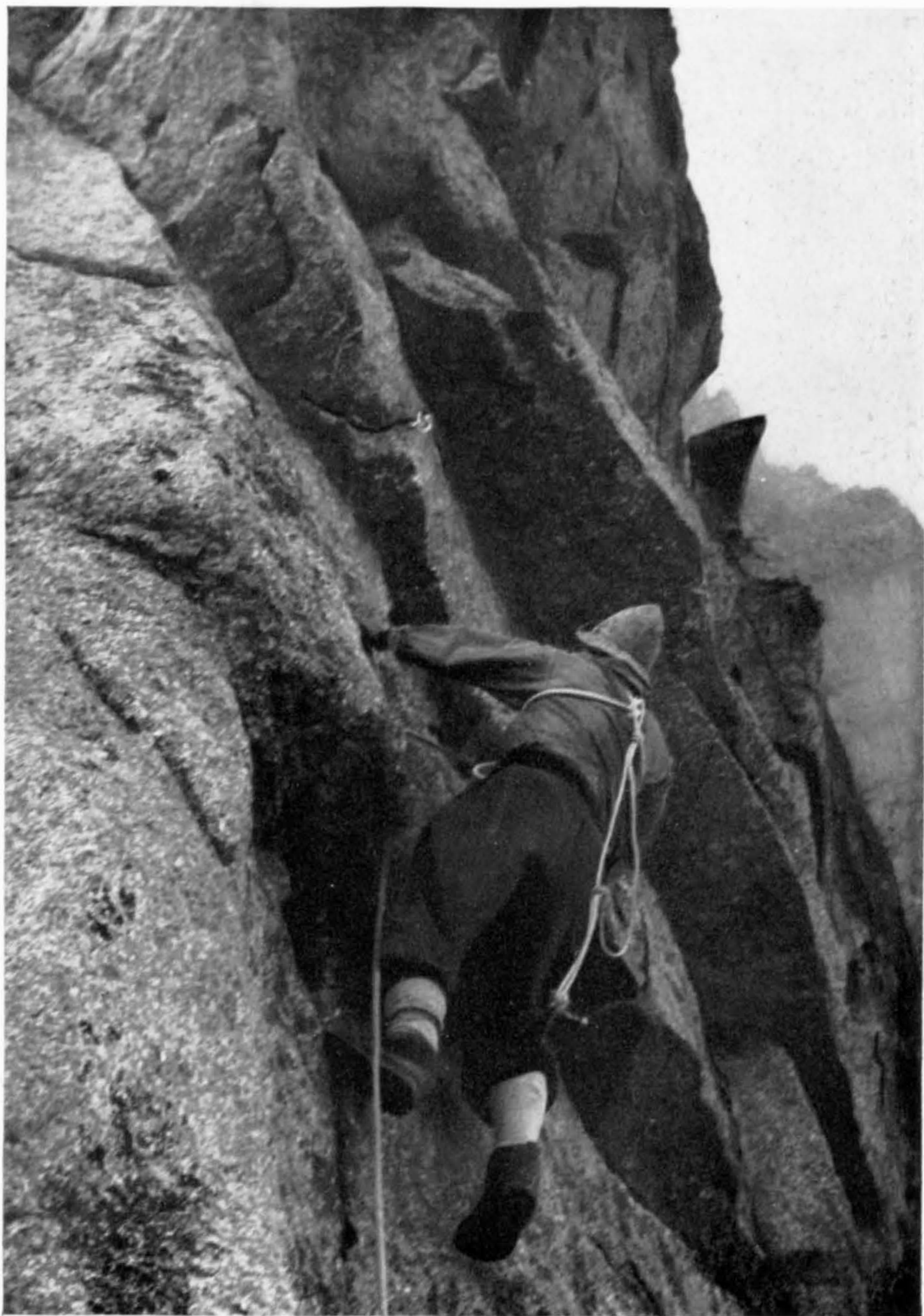
We craned our heads backwards to look up it, and spotted the route up the almost perpendicular slabs to the left, leading to the overhang above. This was another of the many things we wanted to film, but the difficulty was how to look after the rope at the same time? 'Leave it to me,' said Franz, taking the camera, and off I went. After a slightly overhanging start, I reached the first piton and could see the second, ahead of me. Of course the rope had to jam plumb in between the two, just when I was not exactly comfortably placed. 'What's up?' I shouted down to Franz. 'Give me some rope!' 'Lovely shooting,' he replied calmly and put the camera away. 'Now you'll have to wait a bit while I get the knot undone.' It didn't really take very long but, getting my breath back at the second piton, I thought to myself: 'No more safety knots in the rope, thank you. It's better just to rely on climbing carefully!'

Unfortunately the sun chose that moment to disappear behind a big cloud, so I had to wait. Not that it mattered, for we didn't care how far we got that day; but as the blessed light of the sun seemed to have gone for good I decided to get on with the traverse. The moment I was across, of course the sun came out again. Up came Franz's voice; 'Get back again!' I couldn't very well refuse, and in any case, it was a nice traverse; so back I went and did it again. It all took ages, but I had to chuckle at the thought that we didn't mind about time, and what huge fun it was not to have to. Our journey up the great ridge would go on for days—just as many days as it needed—all of them glorious days, as we simply climbed higher and higher up it.

We climbed the second pitch of the Brendel in the dusk. Presently it was quite dark, as we felt our way over easier rock to the spacious summit. There we found a splendid place for a bivouac overnight, in a hollow, where we could lie down and stretch full length side by side; once again it was equipped with a protecting wall to break the wind. There was only one fly in the ointment; we were dreadfully thirsty. Naturally there isn't any water laid on on the South ridge, and nowhere on the way had we seen so much as a spot of snow. There was nothing to be done about it, and one can't have everything; perhaps we would find some tomorrow, on the summit.

The night was still, with only an occasional feeble stirring of the air about the peak, born only to die away almost at once. We were very happy with the day's work and looked forward to a night in the open worth remembering. It was very clear and a thousand stars shone down on us with a rare brilliance. Soon I was welcoming my old friend Orion, as he came up over the horizon.

Then I suddenly noticed a patch of light shimmering between the rocks. I switched my torch on and there, miraculously, in autumn-time, up here, was some old snow. It must have been the only fragment of



Photo, W. Stefan]

CLIMBING THE POINTE BICH, AIGUILLE NOIRE.



Photo, K. Diemberger]

MONT BLANC FROM THE SOUTH, SHOWING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT THE THREE GREAT RIDGES ; BROUILLARD, INNOMINATA AND PEUTEREY.

snow on the whole South ridge. We took it in turns without more ado to lie on our stomachs sucking in the little trickle of melting water from the old snow, repeating the performance again and again. It was bliss, and now our happiness was complete. The only thing missing had been water.

It was a lovely night. We slept full length on our rocky bed, wrapped warmly in our fleece-bags, covered by the tent-sack. Every now and then I woke up to look up at the stars, to the glittering scarf of the Milky Way, and to watch the leisurely progress of Orion; happy in the knowledge that we would be continuing our journey up this great ridge for many another similar day.

* * * * *

Being autumn, it got a little chilly towards dawn. Slowly the sky lightened, yellow at first then blue to eastwards; then the sun shot up and it was day again. The granite towers of our ridge were swathed in mists, turning our little summit to an island in the monotony of grey, through which the sun glimmered from time to time. At times the wind parted the curtains and we looked up to Mont Blanc, still remote and high above us. Down below, the cloud shadows were chasing across the crevassed surface of the Fresnay glacier. We made breakfast and did some filming, before we realised it was eleven o'clock and time to be on the move.

Ahead of us lay the hardest sector on the whole climb, the precipitous surge up to the Pointe Bich, whose arête and the ensuing traverse had moved even Hermann Buhl to respectful utterance. We wondered a little how we would fare on it with all our baggage. The passage of a few pinnacles in the next col brought us to the foot of the pitch. Baggage and all, it went better than we had expected; admittedly, we were reaping the fruits of an unbroken summer's climbing, and that helped a lot. Once up the steep arête, we tackled the traverse, which goes off to the right along a short airy rock-ledge above an overhang, offering only tiny finger holds and forcing one's body out over nothingness. Short as it is, it made extreme demands on our fingers, while our packs did their best to pull us outwards off the mountain. It was soon over and we stopped for a breather before continuing for quite a time over easier ground. Now it would not be long before we were on the Noire's subsidiary summit. Then came another difficult rope's length, involving slabs and a small overhang. While Franz worked his way up from piton to piton, I filmed him and looked after his rope. Then we decided to put the camera away for a while, for it was time to be getting on to the summit of the Noire. On we went, over easy rock, to the subsidiary summit and looked across to the true summit, on which the metal statue of the Madonna was reflecting the light of the setting sun. Below it blazed the gigantic slabs of the West face; and there, far down behind the Noire,



Photo, K. Diemberger]

THE AIGUILLE BLANCHE AND THE AIGUILLE NOIRE; THE FRESNAY GLACIER BELOW.



Photo, F. Lindner]

TRAVERSE OF THE SUMMITS OF THE AIGUILLE BLANCHE; TWO OF THE THREE HAVE ALREADY BEEN TRAVERSED.

where it was now getting dark, we thought we could make out the bivouac-box, and wondered if we would get there tomorrow. We only stopped long enough to glance at the vast panorama spread about us, then roped down into the next gap. Soon we were climbing over easy boulders, sometimes on the ridge, sometimes on the face, towards the summit.

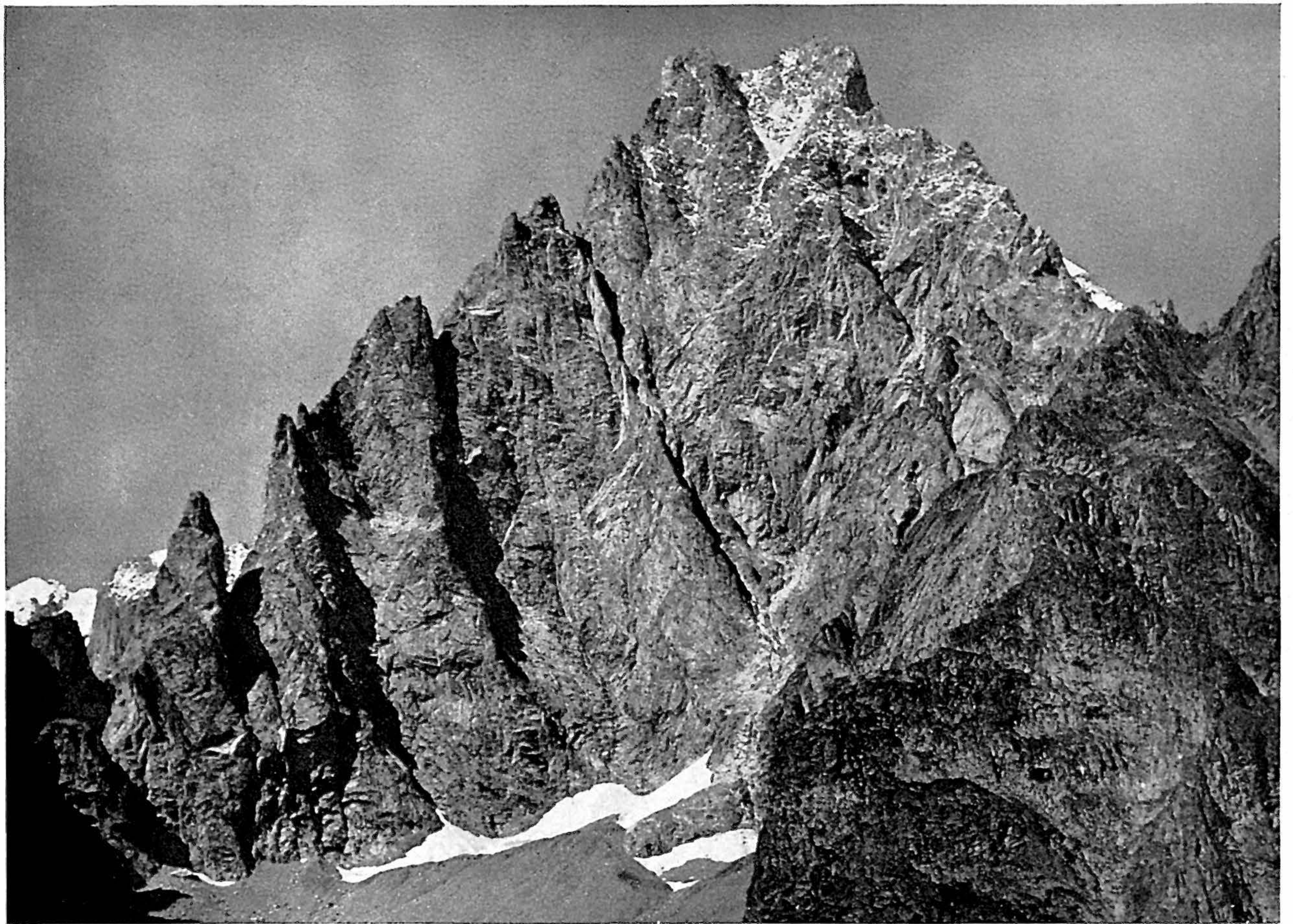
A red sunset was flushing the sky as we reached the Madonna. There were isolated clouds floating above the mountain-tops, shaped like big fishes, raising sudden misgivings in our minds. What would we do if the weather chose this moment to turn sour on us? Ahead lay the tremendous *abseil* down the Northern arête of the Noire, an undertaking to be treated with the greatest respect. It would be a serious blow if the weather broke here and now. We could only hope it would hold till the day after tomorrow and that we would be able to reach our provisions at the bivouac box first. We found a sheltered place just below the summit, with plenty of room to lie full-length, and made everything snug for our second night out. The lights of Courmayeur twinkled up from the valley as the night passed slowly by.

A BREAK IN THE WEATHER

The summit of the Noire put on a halo of gold. A sky of unusual beauty, shot with every imaginable colour heralded the rising of the sun. And the weather was still good.

We breakfasted on porridge and packed up. We knew that very few parties had roped down the North arête, so we had brought plenty of pitons in case we went wrong. The *abseil* facilities at the summit did not look very safe to us, so we banged a heavy ring-piton into the rock just below it on the northern side; as it went in more firmly at every stroke, my grateful thoughts went out to Wolfgang Stefan, my companion through years of climbing, who had given it to me for this very purpose. We had climbed the South ridge several years earlier up to this point, but no further, thinking ourselves not yet ripe for the whole Peuterey ridge. . . .

The piton was home, down went our two 130-ft. ropes, and I was soon on my way down over sloping slabs, and straight into thick fog, a not very helpful feature, which would make route-finding very much harder. However, the weather was still fine, even if things seemed to counsel greater speed than before. At the bottom of the rope I found some more pitons in the rock, and made myself fast, leaving the rope free for Franz's descent. We were soon heaving the ropes out into a white emptiness again and listening for them to 'slap' down below. For a few moments we caught a glimpse of the inclined slabs which would be our next landing ground; then we tested the pitons and followed one another down through thin air. We were delighted to find the next launching platform, after



Photo, K. Diemberger]

THE AIGUILLE NOIRE. THE SOUTH RIDGE RUNS UP FROM THE LEFT. THE SUCCESSIVE TOWERS ARE PIC GAMBA, SECOND TOWER, POINTE WELZENBACH, POINTE BRENDDEL, POINTE BICH, ANTICIME AND SUMMIT.

swinging to and fro a little in our chairs; there were three differently-coloured loops of rope hanging there. All we had to do was to retrieve our own rope, thread it and go on down.

We could have done without the fog, though. Finding the right place for the next stage in the descent at the end of each rope's length was becoming quite a problem.

After another 'air-lift' we found ourselves jammed together on an exiguous stance on the crest of the arête. We could see a shelf 30 ft. below us, with pitons and wooden pegs coming up to us, new ones; so we must be bang on Jean Couzy's direct route. We heaved the ropes over the edge; they disappeared silently, drew taut, without so much as a 'slap'. All the indications were that we would be sitting suspended over the void at the end of our 130 ft. We dropped a stone and—after a longish time—could barely hear the sound of its impact; so there must be 200 to 250 ft. of vertical and partly undercut rock beneath us. We had better go down the 30 ft. to the shelf. We reached it soon enough and when I pushed myself along it, still in my sling, at last I came upon an *abseil*-piton, from which our ropes would touch bottom.

That airy descent landed us on the great shoulder of the Noire's North arête. From there we were left with the same distance down a chimney in the West face as we had already come from the summit. The first thing to do was to retrieve the rope. We tugged with all our strength; it wouldn't budge. It had stuck somewhere up there.

Stupid! We changed position and tugged some more. Both of us, with might and main. All in vain, the rope just hung there, hopelessly stuck up above—130 ft. up above, right at the top, of course. A nice kettle of fish, to be sure. The only solution was to climb all the way up in Prusik-slings and straighten things out.

Franz volunteered for that thankless job, saying he had been practising the technique only a little while ago. To some purpose, I had to admit, when I saw him get up in under a quarter of an hour. Meanwhile, it had started to snow. The weather had broken. Franz arranged the ropes in a different direction, tested their mobility and came down again. We both hauled anxiously on the rope, this time with better results than before. Cheers—the thing was moving!

The gigantic chimney, with its thousand feet of roping-down, was barely discernible in the mist but when, at the end of our first *abseil*, we came upon a chock-stone with a rope-ring, we knew we were on the right road. Rope after rope, down and down we went. At times stones whistled past, dangerously near. After a time it stopped snowing again. The chimney became a steep groove which we only left almost at its bottom, traversing out to the right between *abseil* stages every now and then, so as to lose height as quickly as possible and at the same time land up in the rift which falls from the Brèche Sud to the Fresnay glacier.

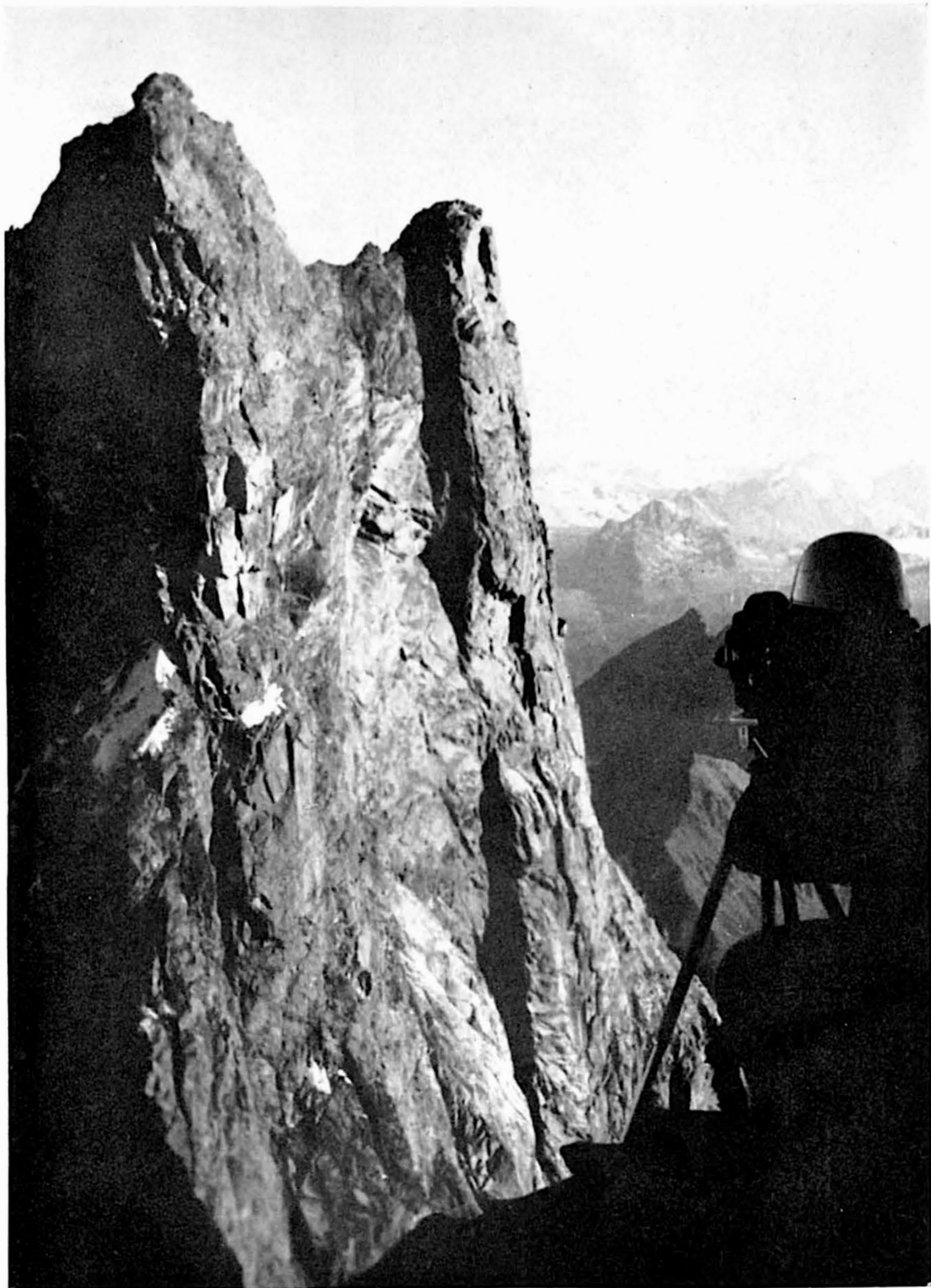
It was halfway through the afternoon before we finally got into the rift. There was no time to waste if we were still to get to the bivouac box in the Brèche Nord. We packed up the ropes and climbed up over slabby debris to the Brèche Sud. There we had to turn the pinnacles of the Dames Anglaises, rising in an irregular cluster ahead of us, on their left flank. We climbed a little way, then traversed slightly downwards, with frequent changes of direction, dictated by the nature of the ground. We had to go very carefully, for the rock, while not difficult, was unreliable, and there were snow patches in between. After much up and down and to and fro on the unstable stuff, we were very glad to reach the couloir leading up to the Brèche Nord. All that lay between us and the bivouac box now was the upper arm of the couloir consisting, unfortunately, of sheer, smooth ice.

So near and yet so far! We were dog-tired, hungry and it was getting dark. Otherwise we were perfectly happy. In spite of a day of bad weather we had managed to traverse the Noire and reach our objective. The rest of the ridge was practically in the bag, for with enough provisions up there in the bivouac box to enable us to face even a prolonged spell of bad weather, what could now prevent our going on, to the top of Mont Blanc?

I led, using the only crampon we had with us, while Franz belayed me with due care. While I was beating step on step in the smooth surface with my ice-hammer, it was suddenly pitch-dark. At long last we got off the ice and reached the shabby saddle of the Brèche Nord, with the bivouac box close at hand. Outside, the snow-flakes were whirling down, as we lay down there and then to sleep. How long, we wondered drowsily, before it turns fine again?

* * * * *

Our fourth day on the ridge dawned. We snuggled closer in our blankets with only one resolution in our minds—to have an off-day. All the same, we took a look at the weather through the door of the box; fresh snow was lying outside, but the sun was shining, newly-risen. The fine weather was back again after the break. We would certainly have to wait a day for the layer of snow to settle. So we fetched everything out of the depot and had a good tuck-in after our days of scanty fare. We reconnoitred the next day's route for a short way and took a few feet of film. Our load for the following day was hugely inflated by provisions, ice equipment, extra film gear, a tripod and all the rest, but we felt very fit. Still, if we were going to climb from 11,500 ft. where we stood, over the Aiguille Blanche and on to Mont Blanc's 15,782 ft. summit, we should have to make an early start. A fine day gave way to a clear evening. We knew then that we could be sure of fine weather for the last stage of our long trek.



Photo, F. Lindner]

THE AIGUILLE NOIRE FROM BELOW PUNTA GUGLIERMINA ON THE AIGUILLE BLANCHE.
THE LINE OF THE 500 M. ABSEIL DIVIDES SUN FROM SHADOW IN THE PHOTOGRAPH.

THE FINAL DAY

Autumn, in tune with our most secret desires, gave us, for our last day, her most perfect of all perfect days. As we climbed the Aiguille Blanche, our eyes ranged far and wide over innumerable peaks, in the warmth of the morning sun, under an immaculate blue sky. Down in the green valleys the houses of Entrèves and Courmayeur were small beyond belief. It was sheer bliss to be alive.

Behind us the Noire diminished rapidly. We kept on thinking about its South ridge, the nights we had spent out on it, the exciting endless *abseil* down its Northern arête, till at last the traverse of the triple-headed Blanche began to demand all our care and attention. From the summit we looked down on the huge saddle of the Col de Peuterey, lying nearly 1,000 ft. below us—another long *abseil*. Once down, we jumped the bergschrund and tramped across the broad, smooth saddle; up over the opposing schrund, and then a short rest. The sun was already slanting down, so short are these September days. On we went, up the long, long 3,000 ft. which separate the col from Mont Blanc's summit. Once on the ridge again, we were met by an icy blast, though the view and the sky remained clear. We made slow progress, taking care that the bitter gusts didn't unbalance us on that narrow white edge. Suddenly the great white mountains about us glowed red and Mont Blanc's monstrous shadow streamed out across the world. It was an overwhelming sight, even if the gale called for all our attention and our fingers had grown numb.

Presently there was nothing except a livid twilight. Moving together, we worked our way up without a pause. We did not belay, but each of us was on the alert, knowing that a slip on that narrow ladder to the sky could hardly be held. Then it was night. The abyss fell away beneath us, impalpable, illimitable, invisible. We only knew it was there below us. Neither of us could see the other, obliterated by the uncanny darkness. And so we climbed, endlessly, onwards. Endlessly, straight up—up into the vague, dark nothingness overhead; but now we were belaying one another, rope after rope. The ridge gave way to a rounded slope, a kind of broad rib, getting steeper and steeper. The gigantic cornice of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur never seemed to want to put in an appearance.

* * * * *

We could see a sharp silhouette against the stars. It was the cornice and soon we had found a way through a breach in it. We sat down thankfully in the snow. We had done it. We were up. What was left to do would be nothing by contrast with the last few hours.

We moved on again, through the marvellous night. This was the

last stage on the long journey from the valley to Mont Blanc's summit; and as we went, our thoughts were centred on the days behind us.

The rest of the route, to Mont Blanc's own slightly higher summit, is easy; all we had to do was to check our direction occasionally. It was 10.0 p.m. when we sat down to rest on the highest point of the Monarch's snowy dome. The icy wind had almost died away, but it was still very cold. We didn't intend to stay long before making downhill for the Vallot Refuge. We shook hands—there was no need for words. We were utterly weary and utterly content.

This much we knew, that the days we had spent on Mont Blanc's great and glorious ridge to say nothing of the precious minutes on his summit under the immense star-encrusted vault of the heavens, would never pass away from our memories.