

SOME CLIMBS ON THE SOUTH FACE OF MONT BLANC

By L. R. PEPPER

MY attention was first drawn to the possibilities of the South face of Mont Blanc by a friend who suggested that we might perhaps consider the Peuterey ridge. Up to that time I had not set my sights so high. A year or so later when writing to my guide, Felix Julen, I mentioned this to him and found that he was enthusiastic as he had not climbed on this face before. So that in 1951, a year of late snow, when he met us in La Bérarde it seemed a good omen that he should lead my wife and me on the first traverse of the season of the Ecrins, a mountain new to all three of us. Our attempt on the Meije ended at the Promontoire hut in a thunderstorm and we were content to continue to La Grave over the Brèche de la Meije—itself a good expedition in the prevailing weather. We were not pessimistic at this rebuff but we did decide to invite two Swiss to join forces in case conditions on the Peuterey ridge should prove difficult. Whilst we awaited their arrival we had one day on the Charmoz. When they had arrived we sat for two days in the Montenvers where we watched the pouring rain and conversed desperately through the medium of five different languages. Then we climbed the Aiguille du Plan. The snow improving and the weather looking better we left the Requin hut early the following morning, went over the Col du Géant and down by téléphérique, stopping in Entrèves only long enough to replenish our stocks of food and absinthe. Here my wife left us to go off on a climb of her own. A taxi transported us to the track for the Gamba. After we had shared the bottle of white wine which the driver generously provided, we floated up to the hut sustained by a large bag of peaches. We left the next morning at 4.30 a.m. with the intention of traversing if possible the Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey and bivouacking on the Col de Peuterey instead of the then more normal bivouac in the Brèche Nord of the Dames Anglaises. The appearance of the Glacier du Frêne was sufficiently awe-inspiring in the dawn light. Falling $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles in an horizontal distance of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles it looks, and is, one of the most savage in the Alps. Blocks of ice the size of cathedrals are poised precariously everywhere. Only the crevasses, which are proportionate in size to the cathedrals, would appear to prevent the whole crazy series roaring down into the Val Veni.

When we reached the couloir by which the Brèche Nord of the Dames

Anglaïses is gained, the sight of the deep groove worn by the descending debris was a constant reminder to hasten before the sun reached the crests above. But the snow was good and we could ascend rapidly. Some 200 ft. below the Brèche we broke out on our left and made a long slightly downward traverse. After climbing a chimney with an awkward start we were now at last established on the Aiguille Blanche itself. We mounted steadily to reach the very steep arête, crossed it and climbed mainly on the Brenva side. The day was warm and cloudless, the rock was dry and pleasant to climb, with all moving continuously. We jealously collected every trickle of water that we could find for fuel was not too plentiful with us and the bivouac which lay ahead was at nearly 4,000 m. and would be cold. We rose steadily and first the Dames Anglaïses, said to have been so named in the nineteenth century because of their forbidding appearance, fell beneath our feet and then the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey which, seen from the arête of the Aiguille Blanche looks like a square Norman church tower, diminished to insignificance as we traversed the three peaks of the Aiguille Blanche. The tremendous scale of the mountainside is experienced to the full on this ridge where, each in its turn, the main features disappear below one. The Aiguille Blanche is a classic mountain of over 4,000 m. but it is dwarfed by Mont Blanc towering above this 3-mile long ridge.

We now started down to the Col de Peuterey. Here we found ourselves on loose rock of the worst description. I was on the second rope and very conscious of three heads below me. There was a shout and glancing downwards I saw the rock to which the first man was clinging slowly lean out in a stately manner. This block must have been some 8 ft. high by 6 ft. wide and it now no longer formed part of the ridge of the Aiguille Blanche. By an adroit movement reminiscent of a man leaving a rapidly moving bus our friend stepped off, sustaining a badly bruised thigh, whilst with a ponderous grace the rock pursued its outward-curving path seemingly slowly, somersaulted in the air and bounded down the ridge in a series of thunderous shocks followed by a cloud of lesser pieces. Five people crept even more circumspectly downwards and to the right, seeking firmer ground. This we found in the shape of a formidable pitch of ice and rock of 40 m. But at the bottom it was easy going to the Col de Peuterey which we reached at 6 p.m. Here the snow was soft, deep and wet and it was 6.30 p.m. by the time we reached a site which we considered suitable for a bivouac—a crevasse in which it was possible to construct a rough snow platform. As the evening shadows lengthened, the sun went off the Col and suddenly the cold bit into us. We could almost hear the snow crackle as it froze. Distant hills glowed in the sun, we could see into the valleys, some still sunlit, but here was a sudden sense of isolation.

Mopping out our sodden boots and changing into dry socks we prepared for the coming night. Already the first stars showed frostily, whilst I clutched in either hand large chunks of frozen butter and meat, both repulsive. Now at 3,948 m. our cooker produced our meagre hot drink very slowly. At 8 o'clock we retired to our crevasse and with the roof dripping slowly above our heads, sought to pass the time singing songs in French, Italian and English.

Presently one of the party discovered a numbed foot, which was restored by the wasteful process of rubbing it with brandy, after which the bottle was passed round for internal application on my plea that prevention was better than cure.

At one o'clock, having donned crampons and roped up in the crevasse, we emerged in bright moonlight and hard frost to continue the climb. Our way lay on the Brenva side of the Grand Pilier d'Angle and then by climbing the rocks and ice slopes to attain a delicately airy snow arête which was nearly horizontal. Slowly we mounted in the strongly contrasting brightness and shadow of moonlight climbing. Later with the rising of the sun came a cold wind. We reached our snow ridge and at its upper end found our way stopped by a great gendarme. A gust of wind removed my hat, one of the many which I have left on mountain ridges, and it vanished down the Frêney face. The break in the ridge at this point held us up for $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours whilst a way to effect a lodgement on the opposite side was found. In the end a staircase was hewn down a gully of hard green ice. Down we climbed one by one under an overhang and then up again to the ridge. This was our most serious obstacle. It called for great care in a very exposed position, but it was possible to protect each person by a rope from above from one side of the breach or the other. Axes cut steadily away and a stream of fragments hissed by as we trod our way up the steep 1,500-ft. ice and snow slope that leads to the cornices of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur and, as we climbed, so in its turn the great Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey disappeared in the gulf below. Breaking through the cornice we emerged on the ridge of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur and by 11 o'clock we were standing on the summit of Mont Blanc itself.

The long descent past the Vallot, down past the Grands Mulets, finished at the end of the glacier. My Swiss friends, who were going to another hut, parted company and I descended to Chamonix into which I trudged wearily with our two guides at 6.45 p.m.

The following year my wife and I were climbing guideless with a friend. But an attempt to climb Mont Blanc by traversing the Aiguille de Bionnassay ended ingloriously at Chamonix, when a violent thunderstorm broke just before we were due to catch the train to Montenvers. Eventually we drove back to our camp at Argentière. Next morning inspection by binocular of the new snow extending down to the Grands

Mulets, and the sight of the wet clouds in the valleys, settled the question of remaining in Chamonix. Even the Forclaz Pass was cut by an avalanche and we had to drive westwards to cross to Lake Geneva and thence on our way to Switzerland. For various reasons it was not until 1959 that we returned once more and not in the best of shape—my wife with a tooth under treatment and I with a twisted knee to which an injection of cortisone had brought no relief. Moreover we had only ten days for climbing. So a sad looking pair drove across France, my wife absorbing antibiotics and drugs at two-hourly intervals and with instructions not to climb high for five days, and I with an elastic bandage. But Mont Blanc glowed superbly in the sky as we descended from the Forclaz and down through Argentière. When our guide, Hans Hari, arrived we tried ourselves out on the N.N.E. arête of the Aiguille de l'M. and things went better than we had dared hope. The weather was good and looked settled so we hurried over the Col du Gd. St. Bernard to arrive three hours later in Courmayeur. Then we parked our car at the foot of the Gamba track and plodded up to the hut. This I find one of the most attractive of alpine huts. It is small, decrepit and remote, magnificently situated below the giant ridges of Mont Blanc, and it enjoys the advantage of not being much visited except by those going to climb. That night it was occupied by three parties only—two for the Peuterey ridge and ourselves for the Innominata. It was a perfect evening and the expectancy before a great climb brooded over us. Hans, particularly, who had not climbed before on the South face was looking forward to this and other South face climbs.

We started at a fairly early hour so as to move easily and proceeded in a superb landscape safely above and past the mighty ice-fall which forms part of the Brouillard glacier. All day we moved upwards over snow and difficult ice and so finally up the steep rocks which lead to the bivouac shelter perched crazily on the side of the Pic Eccles. This tin dog kennel is just large enough to hold five human beings lying extended on the floor and four shelves with insufficient room to sit up even to drink! The hot afternoon sunshine enabled us to dry the wet blankets. Having made ourselves comfortable, we rose early to climb the steep rocks as soon as it was sufficiently light. Thus we came to the summit of the Pic Eccles—only 800 m. below the summit of Mont Blanc, with the great ridge of the Innominata before us. And here as so often in the mountains a faulty tooth proved to be a serious matter. My wife's had been troubling her since we rose. With the clear knowledge that once fully committed to the Innominata there could be no turning back she announced that she could go no further, so we turned sadly about in perfect weather and went down again through the superb scenery.

With our holiday drawing to a close Hans and I decided that we should attack one of the Brenva face climbs, preferably the Pear. We laid our plans with elaborate care. We decided to go over the top of Mont Blanc and to descend by the Glacier de Miage. To avoid the long walk back along the Val Veni we arranged to park our car as close to the Miage glacier as the track would permit and to return in a taxi to the téléphérique at Entrèves. A bad weather forecast did nothing to cheer us. As our cabin rose up to the Col du Géant the weather looked ominous. Steadily we made our way from the Torino, round and below the ramparts of the Grand Flambeau and the Tour Ronde to the Col de la Fourche. By now the sky was completely overcast and the summits had disappeared in grey watery cloud. As we ate our lunch below the bergschrund it started to snow, and a rumble of thunder spoke of trouble in store. However, we started up the steep snow, crossed the bergschrund and made our way through the cold woolly snow upwards and steadily upwards. The wet cold bit into our bones. Out of the gloomy mist above us a stone rolled smoothly, silently and with relentless speed and force closely past us and we fervently hoped no more would come. Presently we took to the rocks and, wet and cold, climbed to the crest of the col. There below us at a few feet lay the bivouac hut, a large steel structure capable of holding eight people in comfort. It was cheerless but it afforded shelter, the blankets in the top bunk were dry and we had food for three days. We retired to our blankets until dinner, which we prepared with careful ritual. Beyond the narrow ledge outside was a swirling confusion of cloud and driving snow from which came from time to time the ominous growl of thunder. We were remote from man, yet high above came the distant roar of air liners on passage over the Alps. Night came down and from the comfort of our blankets we heard the repeated thunder, the snow sliding off the roof, and as time went on our hopes receded. One by one we abandoned the routes on the Brenva face as the amount of snow made the risk of avalanche too high. Next morning we descended on a doubled rope in a leisurely and very careful manner, kicking all the snow that we could down in front of us as we went. Our efforts to keep the avalanches before us had nearly filled the bergschrund by the time we reached it.

The year 1960 saw us prepared and determined to climb at least one of these routes. To me it seemed the way to do honour to this noble mountain would be to ascend by either the Innominata or the Pear to the summit and descend by the Old Brenva route. This would make a really worth-while expedition. It had the merit that if we were delayed in the climb we could descend to the Vallot to spend the night and although this would involve us in 1,500 ft. of re-ascent it offered a way of completing the traverse with a margin of safety for bad weather

conditions. Hans agreed that this was a practicable and certainly a worthy effort.

Our arrival in Chamonix was no more propitious than on other occasions. Evil weather glowered over the valley. When we went up to the Requin hut we were denied even a climb on the Requin and sat patiently all day in the hut waiting for the rain to stop so that we might descend dry. So we went to Zinal hoping that there the weather might be better. We ascended to the Arpitetta hut to attempt the Schalligrat-Nordgrat traverse of the Weisshorn. The first night the sky was overcast so we abandoned the climb for that day. But that night although at 11 p.m. the sky was cloudy, after midnight it started to clear. At 1 a.m. we rose to prepare for the start with the sky now bright with stars. We departed at 2.15 a.m. but as we started up the slopes of the Schallijoch the weather began to look less promising. The snow was bad, steps had to be cut all the way and the snow was so glutinous that the axe stuck in instead of cutting cleanly. At 7 a.m. we silently and mutually drew up in the shelter of a large rock overhang. We were still at least an hour below the joch and a cold and vicious wind of storm force was driving the snow over the rock ridges above us. Each had independently concluded that we were two hours behind schedule, the vicious wind would make us slow on the rock ridge and unable to make up the lost time, and inevitably we must be benighted on our way down the Nordgrat in worsening weather. So once more we retreated. As we returned to Zinal we decided on a final attempt on Mont Blanc to try to achieve at least one climb. Just short of Martigny, a big-end failed on our car—at noon on Saturday when all Swiss garages close until Monday. We sent Hans home for the week-end and finally after much telephoning contacted a Jaguar agent and arranged for him to collect the car on Monday. Then we spent Sunday in re-arranging our luggage, watching the hot sun, hoping that snow was being stripped off Mont Blanc and trying to recast our plans. With no car we had to consider new ways of getting to our climb. I finally concluded that we must try for either the Innominata or the Pear and descend by the Old Brenva ridge. On balance in uncertain weather the Pear seemed the better, as by going over the Col du Géant from Chamonix by the téléphérique to Pointe Helbronner we could bivouac on the Pear Buttress one day earlier than we could possibly bivouac on the Innominata. Thus we could wait for improving conditions for a whole day, or even two, in the bivouac refuge on the Col de la Fourche and still do our climb. When we made our attempt it would be necessary to get as high as possible on the Pear to bivouac, so as to leave the next day to climb and descend. Hans concurred on his arrival on Monday. Now we saw the difference in speed of travel in the Alps between car and train. Our car would

have taken us to Chamonix in one hour or to Courmayeur in two. But the train meandered slowly with a long delay at the Customs and reached Chamonix in time for a late lunch.

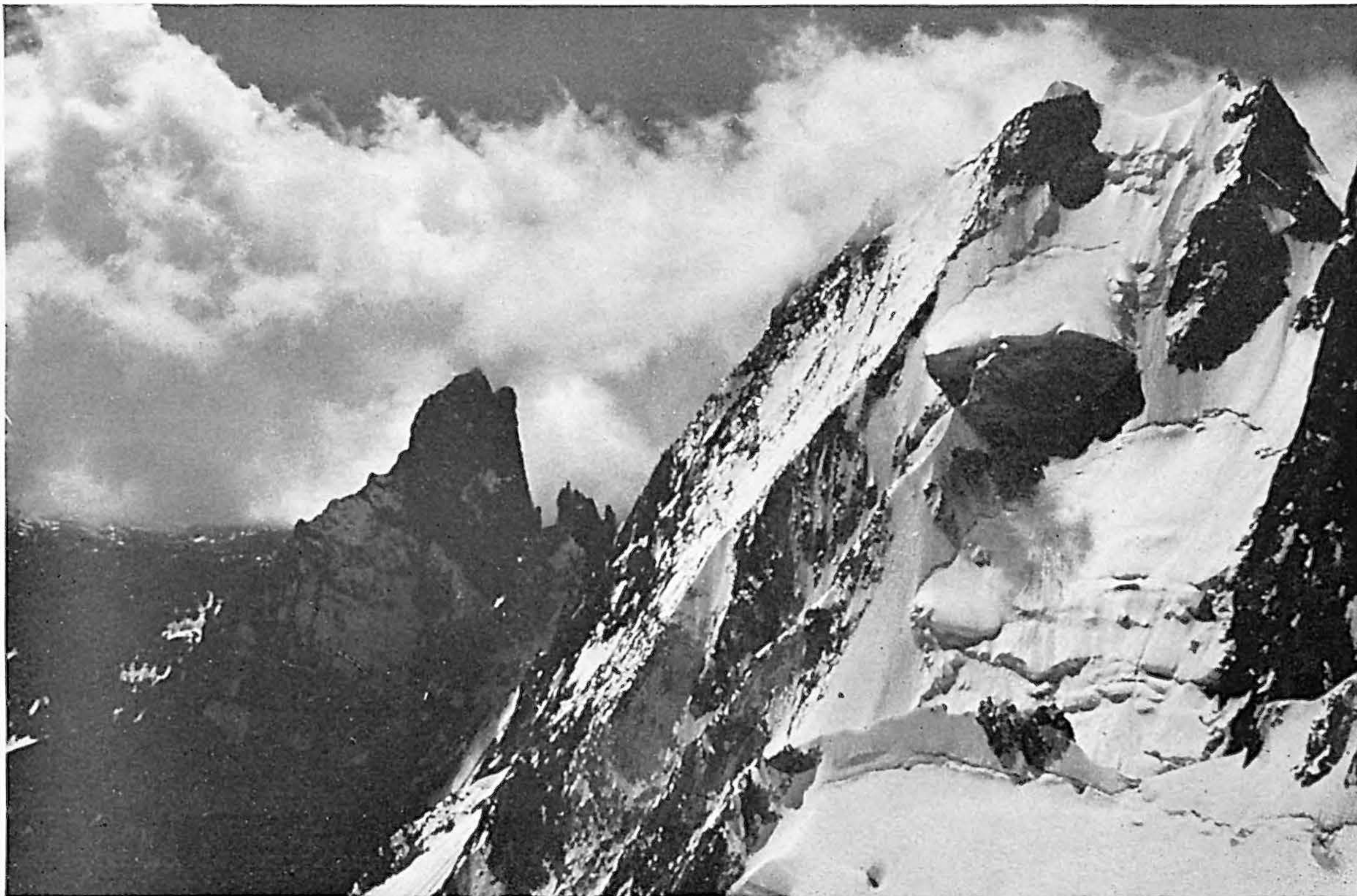
On Tuesday, July 19 at 5.30 a.m. we departed for the first téléphérique up to the Aiguille du Midi. Not advertised in the timetable was the fact that the cabin for the Pointe Helbronner did not leave the Aiguille du Midi till 7.30 a.m. So that it was not until 9.15 a.m. that we left on our long walk round to the Col de la Fourche. The snow was soft, the weather was warm and as we crossed the bergschrund and made our way up the steep snow of the col, once more a stone smoothly and silently cartwheeled past us. We felt quite at home and as though we were being welcomed by the resident gods. At mid-day we paused briefly in the refuge to brew coffee and eat sparingly. We noted that a party of two had bivouacked there for the Pear route in June—none for that climb since. Quickly we descended the rocks to the glacier and made for the Col Moore. The snow was soft and as we slowly surmounted the slope of the Col Moore, occasionally changing places to tread the steps, we realised that conditions were going to be difficult. Over the col we slowed our pace because the snow was nearer to avalanche conditions than we liked and it was necessary to prospect our route carefully to move over rock where possible. The more slowly we went the better would become the snow as the afternoon wore on. Up and down we went to avoid bad slopes and slowly we drew nearer to the steep rock slabs below the Buttress. Up these we pressed and as dusk drew near looked hopefully for a place to bivouac.

On the one hand we had to get as high as possible in order to leave time the next day both to climb the Pear and the rest of the mountain and then to descend the Old Brenva ridge; on the other we could not expect to find a bivouac place on the actual Buttress itself. So up we climbed and repeatedly found that these slabby rocks appeared from below to offer promising places above, always to disappoint with yet another steeply sloping slab. At last in the gloom I halted by a rocky corner and pointed out to Hans that we had better stop here before we had to bivouac eventually in the dark. Hans thought that another place above us looked more promising but after half an hour had been spent in achieving it we found that it was useless. So we had to retreat to my rocky corner. There we found ourselves standing in the gathering darkness on a steep snow slope in which two shelves had to be cut—one for us to sit upon, the other for our feet. Two pitons were driven into a crack to secure our persons to the crag. The light still remained in the sky as we struggled to remove our crampons. Mine defied all attempts and the straps of one were so hard frozen that only strenuous and united efforts with an ice-axe during which one buckle loop was burst (of which more anon) resulted in success. Hans

commented that he never tucked the ends of his straps in the loops provided. The long business of drying out boots with newspaper, changing into dry socks, replacing our boots and then putting our feet in our rucksacks was at last concluded. Whilst Hans lit the stove to prepare our coffee I tied my rucksack, my torch and other essentials to my jacket with spare laces to avoid their possible loss in the night. Thus trussed, we made our evening meal and prepared for our long wait. About every hour or so we made another brew of coffee with plenty of sugar. The night was not very cold. We watched the lights in the valley and also in the refuge of the Col de la Fourche, in which we calculated some dozen or more people had collected. High above the world we quietly sat the long hours through in the only place where one can learn what mountains are. The lights in the valley twinkled distantly, the light in the refuge of the Col de la Fourche glowed steadily and still we sat remotely contemplating where far away men lived their warm communal lives. As night drew on the light in the refuge winked out and we alone kept our vigil.

Far, far away to the south over the plains of Italy we saw a faint flash, presently repeated, and we realised that we were watching a distant thunderstorm. It increased in grandeur until it became a superb spectacle—so far away that we heard no sound save the dry rustle of the occasional night breeze. And suddenly there was the steady glow of light again from the Col de la Fourche. Our fellow mountaineers were preparing for the coming day. The storm still lit the distant skies, the chill breeze rustled and we wrestled with our stove to brew coffee again and lo! there below our feet far, far away on Col Moore were lights flashing—two, three, then five and six and again yet more until ten lights flickered, rose, fell and glided steadily over the intricate way below Brenva. Glumly we watched as our fellows followed briskly in the hardwon steps now crisply frozen that we had made so wearily. Perversely we grudged the service we had done in making easy the path of those who followed—an uncharitable attitude even at 2.30 a.m. How malevolently we exchanged mordant and gleeful comments when the lights gathered in confusion—then retreated and finally started directly up towards Route Major or the Sentinelle. We could savour the way in which our firmly made steps had led our followers far past their correct route before they realised their mistake. And we were glad to have our Pear Buttress to ourselves.

And now the breeze became a wind, nagging with insistence, penetrating our flapping capes and chilling our bones. More coffee was brewed but our bivouac had become a place of cold discomfort. Yet no move could we make until there was light, although the eastward aspect of this face makes a bivouac here better than some. A faint light crept into the eastern sky and slowly grew. It continued to



Photo, L. R. Pepper]

AIG. NOIRE AND AIG. BLANCHE DE PEUTEREY FROM COL DE LA FOURCHE SHOWING SNOW CONDITIONS ON FIRST DAY OF PEAR BUTTRESS ASCENT—JULY 1960.

increase, and isolated and unsavoury-looking clouds appeared. My view of the weather was pessimistic—Hans declared that it would be good weather today but that it was not settled fair. From far away we heard distant shoutings as the various parties talked among themselves.

Three evil black clouds, inverted triangles, hung level with us in the south-east, slowly growing larger as they neared us. The light grew stronger and we prepared ourselves for the day. We laced our boots and adjusted our snow gaiters never for one moment forgetting that a careless movement could send some valuable piece of our equipment clattering over the edge to finish on the glacier 3,000 ft. beneath. The first rays of the sun appeared above the distant peaks but shadow still hung over our bivouac and it would be long before the rays of the sun crept down to our cold cliff. All around and from far above us the steep rock slabs sloped relentlessly down and disappeared beneath our feet. The next place on which the eye rested was the dim Brenva glacier below. Far away the mountains of the Gran Paradiso group—to our right the mighty and dramatic Peuterey ridge—to our left the whole of the Brenva face, a scene of savage grandeur, pitiless and inhospitable. Above our heads, as yet unseen, rose the Pear Buttress, the hardest part of our climb.

We moved along our ledge and then upwards slowly, our muscles stiffened with the cold. Yet as we rose, climbing carefully, our bodies warmed and rhythm came back into our movements. Without our crampons the icy holds needed care but the steepening rocks heralding the Buttress itself were not for crampons. And then, unmistakably, we were on the Buttress. It rose high over us, a forbidding tower with steep rocks vanishing above our heads. Now came the sun to light our way and cheer us.

The way led up the middle of the Buttress and we had no reason to stray because the middle appeared always the less difficult route. But our hopes of easier climbing because of the steeper rocks were ill-founded. Ice and frozen snow were liberally plastered on the holds and filled the cracks. Long and patient axe work was needed to clear the holds and perforce I stood on exiguous footholds whilst the next move was made, for stances were rare. Where the going was really difficult there was neither opportunity nor time to engineer a belay. So hour went by hour whilst we worked our way slowly up the face—on pitches graded 3 and 4 in the Vallot Guide, but now ice-covered. Tension rose on these continuous pitches where no slip must occur. Still the axe chipped steadily on the armoured rocks. And rarely I found a hitch round which I could slip a bight of rope. To our left was a hanging glacier notorious for shedding ice-falls; to our right another hanging glacier. We came up a very steep rock and ice couloir, almost a gully. I climbed to the top and found myself standing

on a sharp arête of hard snow. In front a vertical wall perhaps 15 ft. perhaps 20 ft. high ran right across the Buttress. We had come to the crux. To my left the arête of snow continued as a steeply outward sloping band dropping down to the left to reach the couloir below the hanging glacier. The wall, too, dropped to the left with the snow. To my right the wall looked impossible. Some 12 or 14 ft. up the wall a piton had been driven and a few small holds from an awkward start led upwards. To the left and below us the rock and ice couloir vanished steeply into space. Here was exposure indeed. Hans started up the wall. There was no adequate protection here, so I prepared if Hans came off to jump down the couloir up which we had come. Below the piton Hans found a large lump of loose rock, so he retreated to the start. We discussed this move and agreed that it might be safer to work more to the left. Hans tried again 20 ft. to the left and from my vantage point on the snow arête I could tell him that the finishing holds on top of the wall were rounded and unpromising. Neither of us liked our present position—below the great hanging ice-cliff in a place notorious for ice-falls—but the only alternative was to go further to the left and try and work over the wall by cutting off the ice that shrouded it. Hans disappeared for an age and at last appeared above the wall working above my head to the right on a steeply sloping glacis of rock. Finally he ran out nearly the whole length of our 40 m. rope and found a good stance. This pitch had taken an hour. Now it was my turn and I decided that with a rope above I should climb the wall straight up past the piton. I made sure of this, managed to avoid touching the loose rock and having climbed on to the glacis lay on my face and panted. Then I climbed the rest, all difficult stuff at an altitude of nearly 14,000 ft. And here we were at last safe and clear of danger from falling ice and stone. A narrow chimney in two sections up which we had to haul the rucksacks brought us to the top of the Buttress. At this point (below the chimney) for the first time I had the opportunity and inclination to take three photographs. Even here the Buttress did not relent. We were separated from the main bulk of the mountain by a narrow arête of snow curving in a graceful S-shape—so sharp that Hans had to flog down the crest with his axe to walk along it. The situation here was awe-inspiring. As one balanced along the crest one looked to the left down the whole of the couloir to the glacier 4,000 ft. below. To the right descended a similar couloir. This passage of some 1,100 ft. had occupied about $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours, during which we had been climbing continuously.

In the warm sunshine we stopped to strap on our crampons and thought casually of the walk up to the ridge of Mont Blanc and the climb up the ice-wall. Half an hour later we entered thin cloud, and wet snow began to fall. Already we had abandoned our plan for the

descent by the Old Brenva ridge, because we found conditions so very much worse than we had thought. We could not believe that this Buttress would turn out to be a climb in winter conditions, yet such it had proved. Through the wet falling snow we rocked rhythmically up and came to the band of rocks above the Buttress and still we went up and up. The sun dimly showed through the cloud from time to time. We passed through the rocks and came to the steep hard snow slopes below the ice-cliff. Small snow avalanches came down on us, causing us to belay our axes deeply in the snow whilst they went by and to speculate as to the possibility of further and more serious avalanches. And now my crampon strap failed. A tinkle and I looked round in horror to see my right crampon slowly sliding down the slope. Hans and I both watched it disappear out of sight over an ice bulge and dismissed any thought of recovering it on such a mountainside. The long passage up the rocks and occasional tweaks of crampon points in cracks had probably loosened off the strap with the faulty loop. Lulled into false security by Hans's statement the previous night that he never tucked his straps into the locking loops I had this morning done the same thing. There was no point in repining, we were still a long way below the summit, the weather was not good and we must press on. I quickly adjusted myself to a new practice—left foot with usual crampon technique, a different and careful placing of the right foot with a supporting prod with my axe and soon I was progressing nearly as quickly as if I were on two crampons. The ice-cliff loomed in front of us—a series of towering séracs up which, bearing to the right to avoid difficulty, we slowly worked our way. At last we were through and now we only had long steep snow slopes between us and the summit ridge.

But through the gloomy mists above we could see twisted streamers of snow writhing over the ridge and as we climbed higher we could hear the roar of the wind. A storm had driven out of the north. A pallid shape showed where the sun strove to break through. Up we wearily struggled backwards and forwards on the rapidly steepening slopes below the ridge. And here the wind smote us with a savage suddenness and a stinging blast of hard snow. We stopped to put on more clothing. My wet snow gloves had frozen hard instantly and as I untied my rucksack it was filled immediately with snow. But at last fresh gloves and additional clothes armoured us against the blast. We reached the ridge with legs wearied by weather and steepness.

The wind blew relentlessly from the north with a steady organ note and a thick blast of hard snow particles driving horizontally into our faces with painful force. For the next four or five hours the note was not to change at all. We turned right along the ridge to attain the summit of Mont Blanc and slowly fought our way up the deceptively

gentle slope whilst all the time the roar of the wind smote us. A figure loomed in front of us and then another. We had found two young French climbers who had come up by the Old Brenva route. They told us that they had been looking for the way down to the Vallot for three hours. They joined forces with us. We reached the smoothly rounded dome of the summit, strangely small in this eerie light. Both Hans and I knew the way down to the Vallot, but twenty minutes later we climbed back to the top having missed the narrow ridge that leads down to the refuge. This time the course was laid off very carefully with compass and map, we moved off and then unmistakably we hit the thin well-defined ridge and we were on our route. Our goggles were filled with ice from snow driven through the ventilation holes and we removed them as useless. I attempted to use my spare pair, but no efforts that I could make would remove the thin ice with which they were coated.

The sand-blast effect of the snow had expunged the traces of the route but very occasionally we found a trace in some place miraculously protected by an eddy. Down and down we went. Once we tried to check our course with the compass but it was encrusted with hard frozen snow. Mont Blanc in a blizzard, I knew what it was like now, terrifying but grand; the wind still blew at a constant intensity with the same steady organ note. Visibility was about 30 yards even without goggles which we should not wear again all the way to the Vallot. But we were a well-found party with a lot of reserve and food for two or three days. We had reached the top of Mont Blanc at about 3.30 p.m. and it took about four hours for us to battle our way down to the refuge. Presently I was convinced that we must be past the Vallot—Hans and I argued, if two people can be said to argue who can only converse each in turn by shouting with cupped hands close against the face of the other. I said that it would soon be dark and that we had better consider digging a snow hole. Hans said that he was sure that we were close to the Vallot. The cloud lifted a little and there was Hans pointing to a Vallot refuge looming mysteriously across the ridge. I looked at my companions. All had faces coloured dark mahogany purple by the constant impact of the stinging snow. We set our course across to the rocks of the refuge. By this time we were both a little bemused—Hans insisted that the Observatory was the refuge so we entered. It was full of people, warm and comfortable. After the noise which had been in our ears for so long all sounds were strange. Somebody asked me in English where we had come from. Then a voice said that at least they should offer us a drink if we had come up the Pear route in this weather. I apologised for dripping on their floor and accepted the offer. It transpired that this was a physiological research team from Middlesex Hospital.

Several people tried to fit a spare crampon of a different type to my right foot whilst I stood immovable like a horse being shod. When it fell off as we moved I pointed out that as I had traversed Mont Blanc on one crampon I thought that I could manage to get from the Observatory to the refuge. Our new friends brought dry blankets and a large thermos full of coffee up to us and more coffee for the two French climbers.

Outside the hurricane roared and rocked the hut with its blows, but we were at peace stretched out in comparative comfort after 36 hours on the mountain. That night the maximum and minimum thermometer at the Observatory registered minus $30\cdot5^{\circ}\text{C}$. After parting with our friends from the Middlesex Hospital, the long way down to Chamonix was slowed by the addition of a mixed party of four French who appeared unroped mysteriously at the Observatory during the night. It was agreed by all that it would be better if we took them off the mountain. Thus ended our three-day traverse of Mont Blanc.

From the few climbs that we have successfully made on Mont Blanc as against the many failures I have slowly learnt that we must be prepared to climb on this mountain in bad or doubtful weather to a degree unusual on other Alpine peaks if we are to get up anything at all.