

THE SEASON OF PLENTY

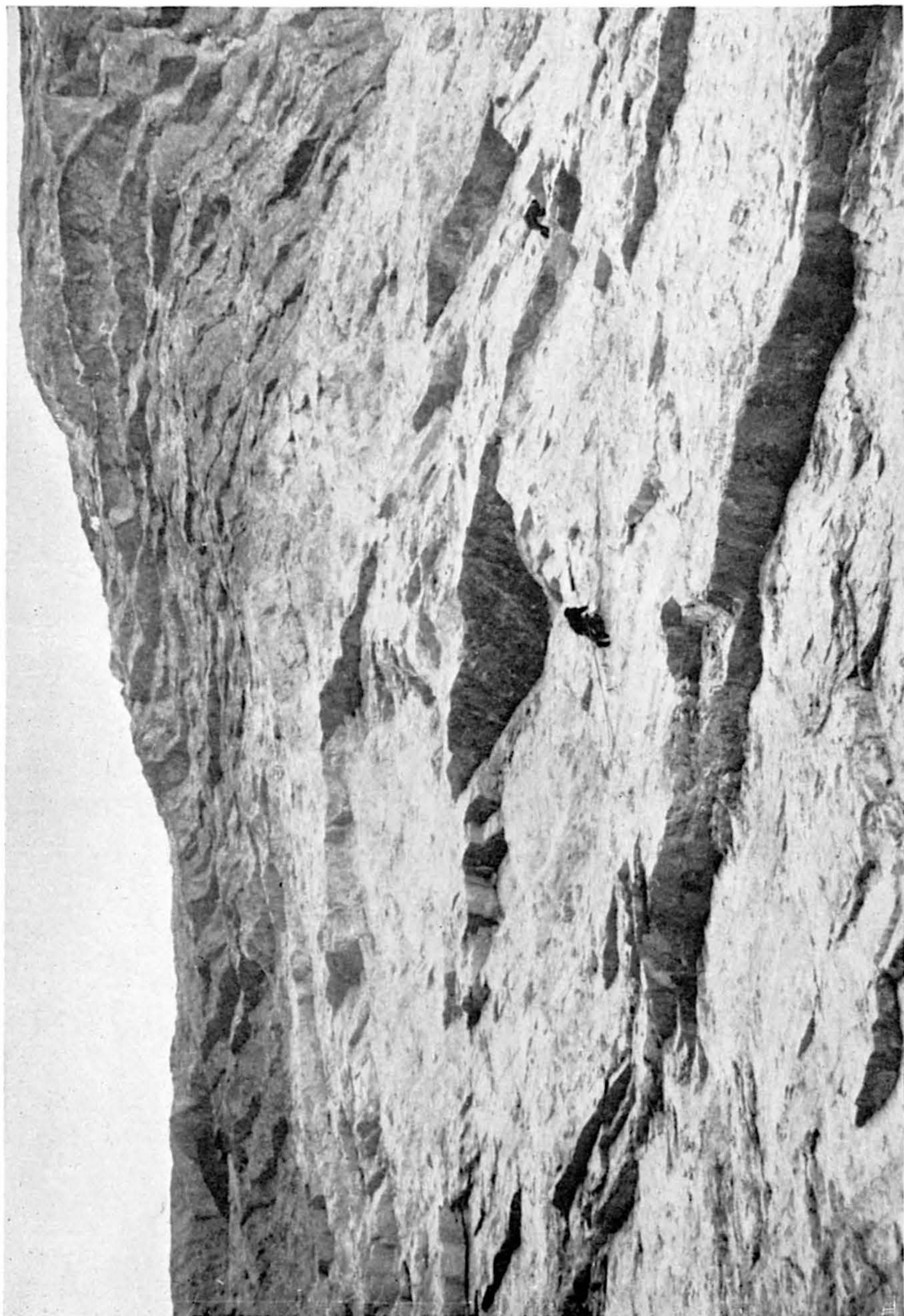
BY I. S. CLOUGH

ALPINE climbing is a game of chance. Our hand, the all-important factors of weather and conditions, usually limits us severely. Occasionally we come up with an ace; with the completion of one or two good routes, a season is usually considered successful. Yet, it is remotely possible to come up trumps at every deal. The year of 1961 gave me one such season—a season of incredible luck. It is remarkable how this happens. After successive years of frustration, something seems to click and one's ambitions are satisfied in one fell swoop. 'It is always the same with these Lords among Mountains; you have to pay court to them for ages before they graciously allow you to enter their domains,' said Hermann Buhl. In my own case, I not only succeeded in putting into practice many of my most ambitious plans but, by sheer chance, found myself involved in an exciting race for a major first ascent. My holiday began in the Dolomites.

THREE DAYS ON AN OVERHANG—CIMA OVEST DI LAVAREDO

Very recently one of the 'great problems' of the Dolomites was solved, twice over. The huge, yellow, overhanging face on the north side of the Cima Ovest di Lavaredo was first climbed in the 'thirties by the famous Italian, Riccardo Cassin. His route started at the extreme edge of the wall and only crossed to the central section at about half height. Even so, his climb was considered for many years to be the most difficult in the Dolomites. The overhanging lower section remained, an obvious but intimidating challenge, a direct line. In 1959 two parallel *direttissima* were made, both of which required advanced artificial technique involving the use of countless pitons and a number of expansion bolts. The right-hand route owed its inception to a combined Swiss-Italian group, while the other, the 'Couzy' (named in honour of that outstanding modern French alpinist, the late Jean Couzy), was first climbed by two of his compatriots, René Desmaison and Pierre Mazeaud. The latter climb required five bivouacs on the wall even after several days preparatory work on the first few rope lengths. The wall is not very big by Alpine standards (about 1,500 ft.) so it is easy to appreciate the difficulties involved.

We arrived in the Tre Cime group to hear that two Scots, Robin Smith and Dougal Haston, had made the first British ascent of the Swiss route a few days previously. I was pleased and encouraged by



Photo, G. Grandison]

CIMA OVEST DI LAVAREDO, NORTH FACE: START OF THE COUZY ROUTE.

their success for I already had designs on the face myself, by the 'Couzy' route. As a training climb we followed Comici's classic route up the North-east arête of the Cima Grande. For my companion, Geoff Grandison, this was a first acquaintance with Dolomite rock and, although he would have preferred to do more climbs first, I was now determined to start on the Couzy immediately, while the weather was good.

We reached the foot of the wall early, only to find a party already started on each of the *direttissima*. These climbs seemed to be enjoying great popularity for as we were crossing the screes we had seen, high up, above the overhanging section, two people traversing off the Couzy. We let the other party get well ahead and then started. A steep and strenuous pitch of free climbing on loose rock led up to a narrow scree-covered ledge which was followed to the left. Above us we could see the other pair following a line of cracks, their ropes hanging well clear of the rock. Everything above us jutted out and out. The wall was like a gigantic inverted staircase, roof following roof, and only the ropes gave any indication of the vertical. Geoff confessed later that he had almost decided to abseil off at this point, for above there would be no question of an easy retreat. But we committed ourselves. There is really little to describe on a route such as this, everything is much the same; overhanging cracks and grooves, great yellow roofs, the click of karabiner in piton and the rattle and clank of étrier, the song of a new piton being inserted, the impressive spectacle of the long serpent of spare rope ever swaying out in space, the rasp of breath as another few feet are gained. Almost all the pitons were in place and it was only a matter of reaching upwards for the next one. How easy that sounds! Yet, each move presented a problem in itself. How to get high enough on the ladders without falling over backwards? How to reach across to the right without one's étrier scarting away to the left? Needless to say, even using constant tension on the ropes, a great strain was placed on the hands and arms. That day we came upon only one stance, 'The Shell', a little niche perched above a beetling nose. At all other times we simply had to sit uncomfortably on the rungs of our little ladders at the end of each length of rope. The only outstanding memory I have of this day is of looking down at my fifi (a small hook used for attaching an étrier to the eye of a piton) to see, with horror, that it was gradually uncurling! I hastily removed my weight from the ladder and replaced the offending hook with a karabiner. On a climb of this nature it should be impossible to fall more than a few feet (though pegs have been known to 'zip-fasten') but the threat of death by strangulation is very real as one would finish dangling spider-like beneath the overhangs. Hence a few slings are normally carried for prusik climbing in this eventuality. It became dark while Geoff was



Photo, G. Grandison]

THE FINAL ROOF OF THE COUZY. THE TILT OF THE CAMERA SLIGHTLY REDUCES THE OVERHANG.

still coming up a particularly difficult section. I was quite pleased, as he was now unable to see the pathetic nature of some of the fixtures he was moving up on; rusty expansion bolts and pitons held in the crumbling rock by the very tips of their bent blades. After this we passed the most miserable night in my experience, hanging side by side under a roof. We alternated sitting with standing, for otherwise the blood refused to circulate to our legs. We were very thirsty and so partook of some of our precious water. It tasted good. By morning the bottle was empty.

Despite the miseries and torments of the night our spirits rose with the sun. We hoped to be above the overhanging section by nightfall and so sang joyfully as we traversed along the line of pegs. How naïve! That night we were still two rope lengths below the great final roof, the point where the colour of the rock changes from yellow to grey, where the angle relents to the merely vertical. A hard thirsty day was behind us. At one point we had been tormented by the sight of some of our friends bathing in the lovely little tarns out on the green alp below the screes. How we envied them; their shouting and splashing only aggravated our need. Perhaps it was our dehydration which made us climb so slowly. The climb had continued much as before except for a long, steep, dusty groove which has to be climbed free, as usual on bad rock, and with considerable difficulty. This time the bivouac site (one hesitates to call it that) was a little better, for there were footholds under a bulge and, by making a rope cradle, we were able to rest in an oblique position, leaning out over the abyss.

At last the dawn of our third day arrived. As on the previous night we had found sleep impossible. In retrospect, this day's climbing was quite amusing. We were now both obsessed by a craving for liquid, moisture even. Our mouths were long since dry of saliva and our tongues were badly swollen. When we tried to converse we sounded like a pair of ravens croaking! It was perfect weather again and the sun beat down on us. At the end of the first length I came upon a minute muddy pool of water inside a horizontal crack. By dabbing my finger into the puddle I could transport the water, drop by drop, to my mouth. How long I spent doing this (and at the same time pretending to be arranging my stance) I do not know, but eventually Geoff got wise to what was going on and insisted on being brought up. The next rope length brought me right under the final roof and here I found an even more satisfying source of liquid, damp patches of moss in the cracks of the ceiling. We were both content now, each pretending to prepare for action, each determined to delay as long as possible; chewing the gritty moisture from the moss and licking the cool black streaks of dampness on the rock! We wasted a lot of time like this but, eventually, Geoff came across beneath the roof to hang his *étrier* beside mine.

Traversing horizontally, I reached a crack in the great ceiling and climbed backwards like a sloth across it. At this point the overhang was at its smallest but even so it projected at least 15 ft. It was very strenuous and the final moves over the lip were free, but it had to be climbed. As he followed along the traverse, Geoff dropped one of his precious *étriers*; serious enough here, it would have been disastrous lower down. It was only by a tremendous concerted effort that we were reunited, both utterly spent. The overhangs were vanquished and now we only had free climbing above us. After a few more pitches we reached a large terrace which ran across to the left-hand arête. We had had enough by now and here was a way of escape. Perhaps with enough water we would have continued to the summit, for the difficulties were over, but we had no description and our only thought now was to get off the mountain, slake our terrible thirst and to rest, to rest our aching bodies and our swollen, cramping fingers.

Some hours later we arrived at the little Lavaredo Hut where a bottle of beer and a few glasses of wine soon erased the memory of the uncomfortable bivouacs on our iron pathway to hell. This masochist's paradise was transformed into a blurr of pleasant adventure, a joyful excursion beyond the vertical. Such is the power of alcohol!

MARMOLADA AND CIVETTA

We had had our fill of severities for a little while and so our plans were now more modest. Our next stop was Alba, a delightful village under the Marmolada, as yet unspoiled by tourism. We plodded up to the Contrin Hut where we bought our route descriptions for the highest mountain in the Dolomites—dotted lines on picture postcards! Discovering that there were bivouac sites on the Ombretta Pass, right at the foot of our objective, we continued upwards in the dusk, the great vertical sweep of the South Pillar silhouetted above us. We found a large dry cave, furnished it with a plank floor and lit a camp fire. The stars sparkled brightly outside, the firelight flitted from one laughing face to another and dark shadows danced across the walls of the cave. There was an air of unreality about that night. Here, though we were a large group, one felt to be alone, isolated from civilisation and its all-absorbing practical considerations. At last I was able to appreciate the oft-sung praises of a mountain bivouac. In the morning we all climbed the ordinary route up the South wall; the classic course up a stupendous face which at first sight appears impregnable. The rock was superb and the climb boasted few pitons. It was a joy to be climbing free again.

My companions now went across to the Sella group where they achieved little, owing to bad weather. But the Gods were still smiling on me, allowing me one grand day in the Civetta group when, accom-

panied by a French friend, I climbed the Tissi Route on the steep South face of the Torre Venezia. We had now spent long enough in the Dolomites and, although reports from Chamonix were far from encouraging, we decided to move westwards.

A STORM ON THE BADILE

Geoff and I were at the tail end of our party of three pairs. Cassin's famous route on the North-east face of the Piz Badile was almost ours but it was getting late and the weather looked ominous. A few flakes of snow fell as Geoff rounded the arête and set out on the traverse. The others had disappeared into the mist. Then, as if someone had torn open a thousand pillow-cases, the snow began to pour down. All was whiteness. I shouted, urging Geoff to hurry on to the next stance where the first of the two abseils into the easy final couloir began. After agonising minutes he gave the order to 'Come on'. I saw then the position my companion had been in; the holds on the smooth slab were completely masked by the deathly white coverlet and the protecting pitons had vanished. It was impossible for me to continue by normal means but, by dint of patient scratching and scraping, I discovered pitons enough to tension traverse to the stance, using both ropes and leaving several karabiners and slings in my wake. The distant rumblings had grown steadily nearer and it was now obvious that we were about to experience an electric storm. Also, due to the heavy cloud, it was becoming prematurely dark. We were compelled to bivouac where we were, on a small ledge below a big flake belay. But what of the others? A rope was fixed to the flake, indicating that they had already completed the first abseil. A difficult conversation was carried out above the booming of the thunder and the constant hiss of the snow as it swept its way downwards in countless little avalanches. Sid had been caught alone at the top of the second abseil and Nev, who had followed the others down this 70-ft. pitch, was still holding onto the end of the ropes, unable to join the leading pair on their cramped stance. His position was extremely precarious as the block on which he was standing had already moved almost a foot under his weight, and the ice-axe point, sticking up above his rucksack like a lightning conductor, was a mass of blue-green fire! In desperation he swarmed back up the rope, hand-over-hand and unprotected. With great difficulty we pulled these two up to our stance which, though small, offered more protection than the snow-swept couloir below. All the while lightning cracked and spat about us. We were in the very centre of the inferno. The peaks of our caps were lit by St. Elmo's fire, the hair rose on the back of our necks and even the flecks in the perlon ropes began to glow with an eerie phosphorescence. It was now too dark and the others were too far away for us to do anything to help them. They

would have to sit it out on their own. We put on all our bivouac equipment and sat huddled together for warmth. The snow eased and finally stopped, but everything was well plastered by now. After about two hours the storm moved on and the mists thinned and occasionally blew clear. Without the prospect of sudden incineration hanging over us our morale improved and, to pass the cold weary hours until dawn, we began to sing. It was significant perhaps that hymns enjoyed great popularity! Our previously gay little party would be engaged in a grim struggle in the morning.

It had started well. After leaving the Dolomites we had driven through Italy into eastern Switzerland, past St. Moritz and down into the deep pine-clad valley dominated by the jagged rock spires of the Bregaglia. From the little village of Promontogno we had made our way up to the Sciora Hut which is surrounded by fine granite peaks. As we were five (Mike James, Nev Crowther, Sid Clarke, Geoff and myself) we had added a sixth member to our team to enable us to climb in pairs; an Italian guide who had asked to join us. In conversation with him, we had discovered that he was none other than Claudio Corti, the only survivor of the Eigerwand tragedy of 1957. As a result of Harrer's book, *The White Spider*, Corti had a notorious reputation; we considered him sane enough, however. As he had already completed the Cassin route once, and had added a new route on the face with the unfortunate Longhi, we thought he would be a valuable asset. We had started from the hut very early and, after a long, monotonous tramp across scree, had reached the foot of the wall by dawn. The day promised to be fine as we climbed steadily upwards by delightful pitches of slabs and grooves. There was never any pitch which could be classed as really hard but the climb maintained a constant level of difficulty, between Severe and mild Very Severe by British standards. But our progress was not as rapid as we would have wished. Corti and Mike were at the head of our caravan and Claudio insisted on taking tension on every peg, even inserting some of his own though the existing ones gave adequate protection. The incessant cries of 'Tirra la bianca' became monotonously irritating. Despite this however we made fairly steady progress and before noon we were all reassembled at a large snow patch half way up the 3,000-ft. face, at the foot of the major difficulties. Here we sat down to wait. Above us was a party of three Italians, moving very slowly, who told us they had already spent one day and night on the wall. They had bivouacked near the snow patch and the third man was still only one pitch above us! It was some time before we were able to move off and although our speed was now determined by the slow threesome ahead, we still hoped to reach the summit by nightfall. However, this was not to be. The weather had slowly deteriorated until finally the storm had brought us to a



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Photo, G. Grandison]

CLAUDIO CORTI LEADING ON THE CRUCIAL PITCHES OF THE NORTH-EAST FACE, PIZ BADILE.



Photo, G. Grandison]

M. JAMES ON ONE OF THE FINAL PITCHES OF THE NORTH-EAST FACE, PIZ BADILE.

sudden stop. The Italians were bivouacked in the final couloir, a few yards from Corti and James.

The morning dawned fair, although a few dark clouds over the snow caps of the Bernina added an element of uncertainty. We were soon on the move. The great grey slabs of yesterday were now transformed into a sweep of sparkling whiteness as the thin sprinkling of snow which had adhered to them shone in the early morning sunshine. The ropes were frozen as stiff as steel cables and, before we had made them flexible enough to abseil down, Corti was climbing. The mood this morning was one of grim determination. Corti proceeded slowly up the bed of the gully, a formidable looking ice pitch. While waiting below, Mike told us of their ordeal. They had spent a miserable night as their stance had been insufficient even to sit down and it had been directly in the line of the snow which had poured down the gully. As a result of being cold and wet for so long, they were both suffering from frost-bite. Mike quoted his companion as saying, 'This is worse than the Eiger'! During the night Mike had climbed above the stance, with its single belaying piton, to find a better perch. Here he had dozed off. Startled from his sleep, he had found himself bouncing down the slab for 20 ft. until jerked to a halt as the rope came tight on the piton, much to Corti's consternation. For the first few pitches this morning we climbed as two ropes, James and the Italians (who had decided to join up with us) with Corti, while I, wearing crampons, led the remaining three. Despite its fierce appearance, the first pitch of the couloir only compared with a Scottish 'V. Diff.' but, without crampons, it represented a good effort on Corti's part. After these few rope lengths in the normally easy but now ice-bound couloir, we came to the foot of a big groove which swept steeply up to the North ridge. This was not the normal route but as it was clear of snow we decided to follow it and, some hours later, we arrived at the summit. After a short rest we began the descent, reaching the foot of the mountain on the Italian side by late afternoon. But our little epic was not yet over.

The Italian hut was said to be expensive, so we agreed to return to the Sciora Hut with Claudio, who had left a client there. We reached the col at sunset after a long weary plod. We understood that Claudio knew the way back so we placed ourselves in his hands. We tied ourselves on to a single rope and set off down the glacier on the far side at break-neck speed. It was dark by the time we reached a steep rounded ridge which disappeared into the gloom. We had only two ice-axes between us (which Geoff and I had brought despite Corti's assurance that such aids were unnecessary) and I had my crampons. I was stationed at the rear to safeguard, while Corti led the way, using the second axe. The ridge soon steepened and someone slipped, starting a chain reaction which I was only able to hold with difficulty.

But this was only the beginning; the ridge continued endlessly, down, down, down into the blackness. The snow became harder until finally I was only able to use the pick of my axe to safeguard the others. Corti never hesitated but kept straight on, apparently unaware of the tense situation. I would belay the rest of the party until the rope came tight, then move rapidly down on the front points of my crampons to secure the others once more. But what if someone should slip while I was moving down? What chance was there of holding five people on one ice-pick belay anyway? There was no need to speak as the others were all aware of the position; no one must slip. They clawed at the ice with their hands and crashed their toes hard into the slope to gain what purchase they could on the tough, slippery surface. There were daubs of blood on the ice where torn fingers had been scratching for a hold. Claudio seemed oblivious to all this, pressing on relentlessly. Indeed, it was only the use of some abusive language which induced him to slow down occasionally. Our nerves were now almost at breaking point and our calf muscles screamed out from weariness. Yet a mistake by any one of us could mean disaster for all. After what seemed an eternity we arrived at the base of the ridge only to be confronted by towering séracs and great yawning crevasses, a veritable chaos of tormented ice. Here, though the small circle of light cast by his torch only penetrated the blackness for a few feet, Corti demonstrated a remarkable piece of route-finding and, by balancing precariously over narrow ribbons of ice and leaping across bottomless black voids, we found our way out on to the gentle lower slopes. Now that the tension was gone it was only by a great effort that we forced ourselves to continue but eventually, after more hours of purgatory, we found the hut, ate our first meal in forty-eight hours and fell into a deep sleep. We learned, next day, the reason for the difficulties of our descent—the crossing is normally made by the Passo Bondo but we had unwittingly come over the Falso Passo which our guidebook stated ‘must on no account be taken’!

CHAMONIX—PRELUDE TO THE PILLAR

A few days later we arrived in Chamonix. Everyone else was finished as far as climbing was concerned, due either to frost-bite or not having any skin on their finger tips (this last as a result of regularly inserting fingers in Corti's axe holes to obtain some sort of security on the nightmare descent of the Falso Passo Bondo). The others now returned home.

As luck would have it, I chanced upon a party of three; two distinguished British climbers, Don Whillans and Chris Bonington, and a Pole, Jan Djugosz. They had returned from Grindelwald, where they had hoped to make the Eigerwand ascent, and were now making

plans for an attempt on the unclimbed Central Pillar of Frêney. The Frenchman Julien was asked to join their party (he had already been high on the Pillar on a previous attempt) but, when he declined, I was allowed to take his place.

The weather was fine but Bonington had made arrangements which would help the team's meagre finances. This would mean being back in Chamonix in three days and so would not give us time for an attempt on the Pillar. It would have to wait, but meanwhile we did have time for a training climb. As our Polish friend explained, 'A bird in hand is better than a canary on the rooftops!' Don and Jan were to try a new route, the South face of the Fou, while Chris and I did the West face of the Blaitière. Neither arrangement went according to plan. We decided that the 'Voie Britannique' of Brown and Whillans was perhaps rather an ambitious 'training' climb after both Chris and I had failed to make any impression on the formidable 'Fissure Brown'. We retreated, slunk furtively round to the other side of the Aiguilles, and climbed the Grépon by the traverse of the Aiguille de Roc, as a consolation. On arriving back in Chamonix we found that the other pair had been unable to resist the strong temptation to go for the Pillar while the weather was so settled. Luckily (from our point of view) Whillans had been unable to persuade the Pole to leave his bed (in the hut on the Col de la Fourche) early enough to cross the dangerous Brenva glacier and gain the Col de Peuterey before dawn. Not willing to risk a daylight crossing, Whillans had wisely ordered a retreat. Now, reunited, we could prepare for another attempt.

A couple of days later the four of us were engaged in a race for the Pillar and, after the successful completion of this climb, Bonington and Whillans returned to Grindelwald for yet another abortive attempt on the Ogre's grim wall.

THE AIGUILLES TRAVERSE

Somehow it seemed presumptuous to expect to achieve anything more this season. I had already done far more than I had dared to hope for, but another partner had now arrived from England, I still had time and money, and the weather seemed to be holding out. Under these circumstances I felt obliged to 'push my luck'. Thus it was that after having hardly any rest, Keith Sutcliffe and I set out one afternoon for the Tour Rouge bivouac hut on the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon, the starting point for the *Traverse Intégrale* of the Chamonix Aiguilles. My companion had never climbed in the Alps before and Whillans was extremely dubious about the outcome of our expedition. 'Up to the Tour Rouge and then back again' was his parting comment!

The first complete traverse (in this direction) of all the Chamonix Aiguilles was made in 1950 by Hermann Buhl and Kuno Rainer. With

typical thoroughness, Buhl had taken in almost every top on the ridge. Another formidable Austrian partnership had made the second crossing, avoiding some of the minor protuberances. The only other repeat was that of a French pair. These previous traverses had all concluded at the Aiguille du Plan, at the end of the rock climbing, yet it seemed logical to continue to the Midi, the highest of the Chamonix Aiguilles. This was what we now proposed to attempt.

We left the hut late, having overslept, and scrambled up the face making for the brèche behind the Aiguille de la République. On reaching steeper rocks we were obliged to put on the ropes. Our rucksacks were heavy with equipment: pitons, karabiners, hammers, axes, crampons, a long length of hemp from which to manufacture abseil loops, food, stove and bivouac equipment. We knew we could expect to spend two nights out and consequently our allowance of food was unusually large and, in addition to our down-filled jackets, Sutcliffe carried a sleeping bag while I had a pair of 'duvet' socks. We also had a large plastic sheet with us from which to make a lean-to tent. Despite our ponderous loads we made good progress and although we made some exciting variations on the République arête of the Grands Charmoz, we were on its summit shortly after mid-day. Some pitches on the classic traverse Charmoz-Grépon required sack-hauling operations but otherwise it went without a hitch. After these grand pitches on sound sunlit granite, we climbed the slush-covered ice of the Spencer Couloir to prepare a comfortable bivouac-site on the Blaitière. It was wonderful to be remaining there on the mountain, alone, and aloof from the capitalists of Chamonix. We had not met a soul all day and in fact it was not until the afternoon of our third day that our solitude was broken. The weather had remained fine of course but now the mists of evening closed about us to keep the night frost at bay. With our plastic sheet pegged out above us and a veritable feast devoured, we settled down to sleep. It had been a strenuous day.

The comfort of our bivouac did not invite an early start and it was 7 a.m. before we were under way. There was still a little cloud about but, as the sun did its work, it soon began to disperse, revealing the magnificence of Mont Blanc, the white queen, standing serene and stately above her savage red minions. We threaded the first twin needles in our path, the Ciseaux, and without much difficulty reached the top of the Fou. Now a long series of airy, buttock-burning abseils down the Jester's South-west ridge took us to the Col du Fou. Inevitably the rope refused to follow us down the final pitch, heave though we would, and finally I had to climb up again to free it. Under a huge boulder on the col was a superb bivouac site. If only we had known of this we could have dispensed with much of our heavy equipment and aimed to reach it the first day. A knife-edge ridge led to a blank wall

below the Pointe de Lépiney. Puzzled as to the route, we realised that we had to descend a couloir on the North face and, by a steep ascent on snow, we reached the gap between the Pointes de Lépiney and Chevalier. One had to retrace one's steps now to reach the summit of the first peak and so, not having Buhl's peak-bagging enthusiasm, we continued up a steep chimney and then, by step-cutting across ice, over the Pointe Chevalier. Like myself, Keith was becoming tired. However I had no fears that he might throw in the sponge; Whillans' final derisive remark ensured our success. 'That * * * * Whillans' was Keith's magic phrase, muttered under his breath on the crux of many a strenuous crack! Towering above us now was the Caïman, one of the major difficulties on the traverse. The ridge itself was extremely steep and smooth (it has only been climbed once, quite recently) and some hair-raising abseils were now necessary to join the route up the East face. Tea and a cigarette are the traditional English solutions to any problem and, after suitable refreshment, we proceeded on our way, relaxed and feeling that this was rather a jolly outing. This happy atmosphere did not last for very long, however, as the East face provided unexpected problems of route-finding as well as technical difficulty, and valuable time was lost as we scurried first one way and then the other anxiously seeking the only feasible way up. We eventually reached the shoulder as it was going dark. We were in cloud by now, dark and heavy, heralding the approaching storm. An abseil descent took us to a ledge where we quickly took shelter under our plastic sheet as snow began to fall. A cold and steadily increasing wind blew the bad weather towards us and soon Nature's wrath was unleashed. The thunder boomed as flashes of lightning illuminated the savage scene; the ghostly grey sweep of the steep snow and ice on the North flank of the Aiguille du Plan and, rearing above us like a predatory monster, waiting for us on the morrow, the grotesque jagged shape of the Crocodile snarled with all its sharp black teeth. The bivvy sheet, thrashing about in the wind, wrenched itself free of its anchoring pegs but we were able to hold on to it and prevent its sailing out on to the North face. We quickly wrapped ourselves up in a protective plastic cocoon. The storm passed, the mist cleared, and the gay lights of Chamonix winked up at us.

It was very cold in the morning and it was difficult to get started until we had made a hot drink of coffee in the soup-encrusted can. It was with mixed feelings that we attacked the ridge of the Crocodile as we had no idea of what difficulties to expect. Buhl had traversed across the ice-slopes on the North face but we preferred snowy rocks to the unstable snow covering the ice. In fact the climb proved most enjoyable once we had warmed up and, except for the formidably steep final tower (where we again lost the route), gave no outstanding problems but maintained a standard of Severe. With the ridge behind us we had

at last finished with the rock climbing. We were not sorry as our fingers had become painfully raw from the constant contact with the rough red rock. From the Crocodile's summit we climbed and abseiled down to the next brèche. Now only an easy snow-slope separated us from the summit of the Plan, so we sat down for a rest and a brew. At long last the concoction boiled only to cant over and spew itself into the snow. The sun was shining brightly, however, and we plodded on. On past the Plan, over a steep rock wall and along an undulating snow ridge. Then down a vile couloir full of ice and debris, over another lump of mixed rock and snow and down to the final little col. It was now well after noon and the snow was in bad shape. Keith was beginning to lose his concentration on this easy but potentially dangerous ground and I was a little worried. It was a long way down. A steep, narrow, snow arête led upwards to broaden out eventually for the final long drag up to the Aiguille du Midi. Keith insisted on leading; he had not the patience to control the ropes properly any more, he said. I noticed that he was only placing his feet in the old steps now, instead of kicking them firm, and remarked on it. Our nerves were wearing thin by now and I was not surprised to receive an angry outburst for my well-intended criticism. It was frightening (but satisfying!) to have to hold him on the rope, seconds later, as a step broke from under him and he shot down the slope. This only brought forth more angry words but a repetition shortly afterwards at last brought the point home and our progress thereafter was slow but sure. The last three days had been enough to strain even a David and Jonathan relationship, but we were friends again by the time we came to the top of the ridge, with only an easy walk between us and our final objective.

We were full of our one-up-manship when we finally arrived at the Midi. Had we not improved on a Hermann Buhl route? What a climb! What a magnificent achievement! What hard men we were! We jumped on the cable-car and began our descent to Chamonix.